

To What Extent Do We ‘Occupy a World of Our Own Making’?

Written by Grace-Anne Marius

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GRACE-ANNE MARIUS, JUL 27 2011

Nicholas Onuf’s championing of the idea that the world is “of our making” quickly became a point of contention in the international realm, where realists and liberals had long since debated the intrinsic nature of materialism. The Constructivist focus on the import of socio-historical factors, presented an alternate way of interpreting the actions of both states and structures; taking theorists away from the archetypal view of states having fixed interests and introducing the idea that the culture, history and social dimensions[1] of a state are the true basis for state behaviour, including their interactions and interests. This essay will critically assess the normative and empirical elements of society, primarily on the international level, which lend themselves to the constructivist brand of theory, focusing largely on the impact of the socio-historical and socio-cultural on state behaviour. It will also address the importance placed on power by Realists and others holding the classical world view, in order to illuminate any fundamental social elements, which may underpin this concept. Finally, the essay will consider the significance of words and actions on the international community, in an attempt to ascertain whether the world is in fact a social construction.

Analysing the state is intrinsic in attempting to determine whether the world is a social construction. This is evidenced by the fact that, regardless of whether theorists are arguing for or against the importance of the state within a more globalised era, it is clearly a crucial factor in all strands of international theory and could aid in an understanding of the international community as a whole. For instance, while Realists argue the importance of power between states, Constructivists stress the importance of the socio-cultural and historical factors within states[2]. Therefore in an attempt to determine whether the Constructivist perspective is viable, the domestic habits of states will be the first point of analysis.

The socio-cultural impact on states at the domestic level is both prominent and significant when looking at state behaviour from the Constructivist perspective. While those heralding the classical world view might see that power is what makes states act in particular ways, for instance, determining who their allies and enemies are, further exploration of this idea illuminates the fact that a realist notion of state interaction is not necessarily complete. In the international arena, the US regards states such as the UK and France as allies and countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan as enemies, or rogue states within an organised system. While this seems befitting from a perspective heavily influenced by the globalised world in which these circumstances arise, if viewed from a purely materialistic level, it becomes necessary to question why a state with greater military capabilities and a stronger political and economic landscape apparently poses less of a threat than a comparably weaker state, in almost every respect. This dispels much of the Realist belief that states act on a purely material basis, namely for the sake of power[3], and lends strongly to the idea of their being an underlying element to state actions. This idea that state interests are not static[4], and power is not the only influential factor determining their behaviour, does widen the scope for the socio-cultural and historical to be seen as an increasingly impacting force on state behaviour, both domestically and within the international realm. This in turn makes Constructivist claims, that the world is a social construction[5] informed in part by the socio-cultural and socio-historical, more credible.

The Constructivist notion, to look past the purely material elements to what else may affect states behaviour is also rather instructive, when attempting to ascertain whether the world is a social construction. As previously explained, want of power cannot be attributed to all of state behaviour. It is evident that beyond mere materialism, states assign

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the title of 'ally' and 'enemy' according to a sense of commonalities. The UK and the US, for instance both possess Western ideals, such as their liberal democratic policies and liberal economies, alongside similar belief systems and popular culture. These commonalities, which lay at the foundation of state interactions with one another and which within a state, help create a sense of nationality[6], can be viewed as norms. These norms form the foundation of much of Constructivist thinking and play a significant part in what Constructivist thinkers believe state actions and their interactions in the international sphere are informed by.

It could be argued that Constructivists place the same importance on norms as Realists do power. Social issues, the socio-cultural and to a certain extent, the socio-historical, inform nationality within states and commonalities between states, as previously addressed. These form norms, which define what is seen as acceptable, acceptance arguably informs what is viewed as legitimate and with most successful states needing legitimacy[7] in order to maintain power, authority and influence, norms evidently play an intrinsic position in governing state behaviour domestically. Further from this point, norms also have an impact on the international spectrum as well; with the Constructivist definition of norms as "collective understandings that make behavioural claims on actors"[8], clearly being applicable to the international realm. Shared faith for instance, within certain parts of the Middle-East, Asia and Africa has led to a greater sense of community, which can even be said to transcend traditional state boundaries, especially in a globalised world in which migration has led to the fragmentation of states and cultures. Similarly, fundamental religious differences within more localised areas, such as those between Israel and Palestine, have led to continued strife and animosity between the states. The socio-cultural has become so embedded within their nations that it can easily be interpreted that current political issues are a direct reflection of these religious differences. That it could perhaps be argued that governance in both Israel and Palestine is significantly influenced by policies, which directly pertain to action against the rival nation. This encompasses the Constructivist argument that the state is impacted by the socio-cultural and historical. In this respect, norms can be viewed as a significant factor affecting state governance, as they clearly have an influence on state interests and therefore behaviour. If the socio-cultural and historical directly impact norms and interests, and these in turn affect states' actions within the international system, then the belief that the world is a social construction can again be seen as a viable claim.

Mutually constitutive is a term, which almost completely characterises the Constructivist differences from Classical World View theorists; that neither the agent nor structure is reduced to the other. The agent (the state in most instances) and the structure (the International system and institutions such as the UN) both influence and are influenced by one another. This idea however, does bring into question the different levels on which they influence and where this influence stems from, whether it is material factors or zeitgeist and the social atmosphere of the state. The four key levels of analysis

Essential to the Constructivist argument, besides the socio-cultural and historical, is the belief that neither state nor structure is ontologically primitive[9] to the other, and while the state holds significance and importance in influencing state behaviour in the international realm, the international realm itself also works to influence the state's behaviour. Previous argument has demonstrated that "IR does not exist independently of human meaning and action[10]", unlike much of Realist thought that "ideas change, norms evolve, and culture transforms, but these seem to move independently of human will, choice or action[11]". It is essential to bear in mind that, as the world has always existed, we can only attempt to observe it from the middle[12], and in this globalised climate, where it is almost impossible to identify where the domestic and the international sphere became interlinked and therefore even more difficult to attempt to observe them independently of each other, the two should be seen as mutually constitutive[13]. This is another point at which the Constructivist departure, from those holding a more classical world view, is demonstrated.

Immanuel Kant's 'Democratic Peace Theory', which coincides well with western liberal ideals, seems to dominate much of the international institutions. If the United Nations (UN) is broken down into some of its sub-organisations and NGOs, such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a prominent strand of liberal democratic ideas is present throughout their policies. For instance, conditions of securing financial assistance from the IMF appear highly dependent on the adoption of more neo-liberal ideas and policies, such as the focus on creating an investor friendly environment through policies like deregulation and flexible labour markets. While it may be argued that the UN is dominated by Western states, and therefore Western ideals would naturally dominate the

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international organisations such as the UN, it could be suggested that already established norms within the international arena in fact inform what is viewed as acceptable and therefore determine how states act and interact within said arena. If both the European Union (EU) and the UN are observed, since their creation, a more established notion of human rights within the institutions has filtered down into states and led to the development of a more solidified idea of when states are violation of them. This can be seen to have had a definite impact on states' actions. The US was greatly chastised for their use of torture techniques directly in the post-9/11 period. Despite recent claims that this was all in the course of duty and which allowed them to deter other terrorist plots[14], the US, who is often seen as the most powerful state in the post-Cold War era, still lost much credibility and more importantly their legitimacy was seriously questioned. This illustrates the importance that norms and legitimacy also have within the international realm and in turn the impact this has on state behaviour domestically.

As previously addressed, power cannot be viewed as the only influential factor within both the international sphere and on the state level, if we are to adhere to the idea of them being mutually constitutive. As power clearly remains a catalyst for action however, its significance cannot be entirely dismissed. This brings to the forefront the idea that power may be a social conception[15] and serve somewhat more of an instrumental purpose than previously imagined.

Power may be viewed as a social conception in the same way Hobbes viewed influence in his 'Leviathan'. While some states may be perceived as having power, what does this really mean? On a material level, power is determined through certain military and economic requirements; however, while having the largest economy and the greatest military capabilities may have been the mark of power in the pre- Cold War era, the US proves that this cannot be seen as the case. Due to the Western defeat of Communism in the post-CW era, with the US leading the rivalry between Democracy and Communism, they quickly became seen as the hegemonic state within the international sphere. From a classical perspective, it may be perceived that the US would be able to act without regard within the international spectrum, as the international world is anarchical[16] and its hegemony would mean that it could dominate with ease. However, this is clearly not the case as the US has come under scrutiny for actions within the international arena, such as the torture, as previously addressed, and the invasion of Iraq. This lends itself to the idea that the idea of power itself is frequently based on a more Realist conception of the term. The idea of legitimacy plays quite strongly into conceptions of power, as although a state may feel it has the power to act in a particular manner, questions regarding the legitimacy of its actions are what tends to restrict it. This is clearly applicable to the cases regarding the US who, although may have had the perceived power to act, the lack of legitimacy put their actions under much scrutiny. As previously discussed, legitimacy is acquired through norms, which can in many respects be regarded as a political manifestation of zeitgeist. This is seen most explicitly in modern policy formulation. In the post-9/11 era, legislation on the issues surrounding terrorism appeared to give in solely to zeitgeist, which was at the time, guided in great part by fear. In the UK for instance, detention of suspected terrorists was increased to 28 days without charge, with calls for it to be increased further to 90 days[17]. The relative ease and speed with which such important legislation pertaining to human rights was passed due primarily to widespread panic is a clear illustration of how ideas surrounding normative ideals can alter according to zeitgeist, and in the process severely change the face of society on both the domestic and international level. The speed with which terrorism altered the political landscape was triumphed only by the rapidity with which fear changed legitimacy and in turn what could now be deemed as acceptable, which fifty years previously may have spawned outrage. This supports the Constructivist view that the both state and structure are evolutionary and not static[18] despite views of many classical thinkers, who are "wedded to the idea that nothing of substance ever changes[19]".

This brings to the forefront the idea that power is also constituted by non-material factors, as states such as the US, who are seen as having the material preponderance, have evidently struggled to translate this to sustained political influence[20]. This again highlights that legitimacy is of vital importance, and as previously seen, this concept in itself has clear normative aspects, indicating that power can be seen as somewhat of a social conception, and not purely material, with clear strands of normative significance throughout it.

The final point of analysis in determining whether the world can be viewed as a social construction is the importance of words and actions in Constructivist theory. As previously discussed, Realists and others holding classical world views thoroughly embrace the idea that the international system is fundamentally anarchical[21]; however, it has

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been claimed by some of a more Constructivist persuasion that “states decide what anarchy will be[22]”. It can be argued that the order in which things are prioritised on the global-political agenda, dictates its level of importance and in some instances the level of threat posed; however, the agenda itself can be argued to be controlled by those states that are perceived to be the most prominent and powerful within the international community. In this instance, it could therefore be argued that states do, to some extent, control what is seen as a threat in the international sphere; therefore states do decide what anarchy will be, through their determination of what order ought to be.

Anarchy was also given new direction by Bush in the post-9/11 period through his use of three simple words, which altered the face of warfare; the international community had entered a “war on terror”[23]. This statement changed the scope, scale and capabilities of war. As discussed previously, 9/11 and 7/7 made fear endemic throughout the international sphere and what previously may have been viewed as human atrocities, was justified in the name of international security. The implications of Bush’s statement also fundamentally changed the ancient art form that was war. What previously had a more finite ending and a more explicit cause, become relatively open-ended and rather ambiguous in aims, just through the amalgamation of these two concepts. The importance of words on the international community is made highly apparent through this example. As Maja Zehfuss argues, “if successful, [words] not only describe a state of affairs, but make the addressee accept that it exists”[24], Bush’s words evidently succeeded in this aim, while simultaneously illustrating the significance that words play in constructing the world.

The view that the world is ‘of our own making’ has clear strands of credibility, even in an arena predominantly dominated by theorists of a more classical persuasion. From numerous points of analysis, social construction can be seen as underpinning concepts usually deemed to have purely material aims. The Constructivist brand of theory attempts to uncover elements of the social in a realm which the Realists have thrived in for decades. Power itself can be scrutinised as having more of an instrumental purpose; in the fulfilment of more socialist aims. Concurrently, in formulating theories, is it not fair to argue that the aim is to inform policies, leaders and in shape both state and structure. Ultimately, Constructivism appears to highlight elements of social construction within numerous areas of the international community, illuminating the fact that the world is not governed by the purely material. Therefore making the foundation upon which these Realists, or more classical beliefs are built, appear to be dictated by the socio-cultural, the historical and finally, words.

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Written by: Grace-Anne Marius Written at: University of Leicester Written for: Dr Kelly Staples Date written: December 2010