

How important is an actor's identity in understanding global politics today?

Written by Michael Bolt

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

How important is an actor's identity in understanding global politics today?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/11/how-important-is-an-actor%e2%80%99s-identity-in-understanding-global-politics-today/>

MICHAEL BOLT, SEP 11 2011

An actor's identity can be useful in helping to understand both its actions as well as its motives behind them. Different theoretical perspectives of International Relations place different degrees of importance on an actor's identity with several of the more 'critical' theories, like constructivism for example, placing identity at their very core. This essay will argue that an actor's identity is *integral* in understanding global politics today, with identity helping to shape and drive an actor's interests as well as their interpretation and response to events. Moreover, identity is critical to how other actors respond to them and their actions. Ruggie stresses the importance of identity suggesting that the post Second World War international order was a product of the leading states identities, which in turn affected their wider definition of interests, not just how powerful they were or their material interests at the time (Ruggie 1998a:14). This essay will outline and highlight several different theoretical perspectives to reinforce the importance of identity to understanding global politics. Constructivism and post structuralism will be explored to support the notion of the importance of identity. Neorealism will also be outlined to demonstrate the limitations of theories which ignore and omit the concept of identity from their understanding. This question can be considered interesting in the context of recent uprisings and revolutions in several North African states like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya for example. Identity has been a crucial element of these movements.

The rise of the constructivist approach can be traced back to the late 1980s/early 1990s with the end of the Cold War. Political actors in the late 1980s were often challenging the assumptions and expectations of the Cold War period (Fierke 2010:178) with Mikhail Gorbachev implementing his glasnost and perestroika, openness and restructuring, policies in the USSR for example. Often challenging their archetypal, predetermined identity. This period provided the backdrop to the challenges facing International Relations with questions being asked of its existing theories, scientific methods and their significance in the production of international power (ibid). The shift towards constructivism, in addition to other critical theories of IR, was facilitated by the end of the Cold War and the failure of IR scholars to have foreseen its end (ibid). Constructivism can be considered radically different from the traditional theories of IR such as Realism and Liberalism, as well as their neo variants. Although there are numerous forms of constructivism, there is common ground between them, with common emphasis on the importance of ideas and how these ideas come to define the international structure (Barnett 2008:162). In addition to a concern for the implications of this structure and how it comes to construct and affect the identities and interests of states. This structure is then turn reproduced and changed by both state and non state actors (ibid).

Alexander Wendt, a leading figure within the constructivist school, outlines two increasingly common characteristic tenets of constructivism. The first "that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces" and the second "that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature" (1999:1). The international system presents challenges to constructivism however, according to Wendt, as self interest and coercion are dominant in international politics, unlike in domestic politics. Moreover, despite the existence of international law and institutions the ability of these bodies to counter the material base of power is restricted (1999:2). These factors combine to give the appearance that the international system is not very 'social' at all (ibid). He suggests that some states are so reclusive and interact so little with the system, like Albania and Burma, that they could be deemed 'autistic' (ibid). This lack of interaction with others inevitably begins to define their very identity itself as well as other actor's perceptions of them

How important is an actor's identity in understanding global politics today?

Written by Michael Bolt

within the international system. Burma's identity as an isolationist, pariah state controlled by a military junta with little regards for human rights dictates its relations with other states. Numerous states have placed sanctions on Burma such as the USA for example which has banned imports from the country, amongst other measures (BBC 2009). Clearly Burma's identity is imperative to understanding its place in global politics today and consequently the way other states respond to them as a result. An actor's circumstances are not without restriction, but they have control over choices whilst interacting with others (Fierke 2010:180). Burma could try and cooperate with others to change their perceptions but it does not.

As outlined earlier in the essay, constructivism places emphasis "on the social dimensions of international relations" (Fierke 2010:178). The two key tenets of constructivism, as described by Wendt, can be embodied within a single observation termed the social construction of reality (Barnett 2008:163). The social construction of reality has several aspects, the first aspect emphasises difference. Social construction "suggests difference across concepts rather than a single objective reality" (Fierke 2010:179). This contrasts with the view of traditional theories which often assume homogeneity across states to identify trends and satisfy theories (ibid). Secondly, emphasis on the social aspects of international relations exemplifies the importance of norms, rules and language (ibid). The spread of the norms of liberal democracy and humanitarian intervention challenges realism's obsession with material interest and power (ibid). Wendt argues that "cultural phenomena are just as objective, just as constraining, just as *real* as power and interest" (1999:136). Finally, constructivists argue that international politics is not an objective reality, it is socially formed (Fierke 2010:180). Constructivists highlight processes of interaction and the importance of agency juxtaposing neo realist/liberal emphasis on structure (ibid). Constructivism's commitment to a social element of international politics reaffirms the importance of identity in helping to understand global politics today.

The essay will now address poststructuralism which came into international relations in the 1980s following discontent with traditional theory for failing to address issues regarding the construction of knowledge (Campbell 2010:16). Early poststructural study sort to critique the dominant traditional theories theoretically and their continued prominence during a time of change in global affairs (ibid). Poststructuralism has parallels with constructivism, with identity being one of its fundamental concerns for example. Campbell stresses the importance of power and knowledge, interpretation and representation to poststructuralism (ibid). He goes on to suggest that poststructuralism is not a coherent theory or model as such but an attitude, an ethos; a way of thinking about international politics (ibid). Guzzini describes poststructuralism as a "theoretical framework which combines meta-theory of intersubjective interpretivism with a moral theory of radical scepticism" (1998:228 cited in Jorgensen 2010:165). Guzzini emphasises its commitment to interpretation, a concept with links to identity. Poststructuralism appears at odds with the traditional theories of IR which often have specific actors at their core and specific ways of thinking about certain issues. In a way "it is the antithesis of rational choice approaches" (Jorgensen 2010:164) like neo realism for example due to its broad, interpretive approach. Poststructuralism is not immune from criticism however, it is often marginalised within IR and criticised by its critics who often misunderstand some of its central claims (Campbell 2010:234).

Poststructuralists would argue that identity was intrinsic in helping to understanding global politics today. Moreover, the practice of representation is also paramount with the importance of language and discourse. Identity is central to notable poststructural texts including Iver Neumann's *Uses of the other* (1999) for example. In this text Neumann examines the importance of 'the others' identity in the domain of identity formation. For example he explores the importance of Turkish identity with regards to the construction of European identity. He argues that numerous 'others' have been instrumental in European identity formation, especially 'the Turk' due to their dominant position in the history of the European state system (1999:39). Identity is clearly important to Neumann's exploration of the components of European identity, the idea of self and other is both important and commonplace within poststructuralism. In a contemporary context the issue of identity has come to affect relations between Europe and Turkey, especially with Turkish moves towards membership of the European Union. Turkey applied for membership of the then European Community (EC) in 1987 but was rejected for economic reasons (Neumann 1999:62). However on January 15th 1997, van Mierlo, a representative of the Dutch presidency of the EU at the time said in a speech to the European Parliament that it was "time to be honest" and concede "that the problem was also one of admitting a large Muslim country into the European Union" (ibid). Turkey's identity as a Muslim state arguably had adverse ramifications for its EU membership bid; its Muslim identity, culture and ideals appeared at odds with the rest of

How important is an actor's identity in understanding global politics today?

Written by Michael Bolt

Christian West-Central Europe. Perhaps Van Mierlo was making a rational, candid argument? This case study shows how important identity can be in understanding events within international politics.

Moreover, Ruggie stresses the importance of identity and identity formation with regards to supranational organisations. Ruggie paraphrases a quote from ex Czech President Vaclav Havel with regards to impending NATO membership for the Czech Republic: "In short, according to Havel, the would-be NATO members are asking for affirmation that they belong to the West – an affirmation of identity *from* which concrete interests and preferences flow" (1998b:877). This quote emphasises the importance of identity to the postcommunist states of East-Central Europe, caught between their former communist identities and their past ties with Russia and their desire to deepen integration with the West.

Although the theories discussed earlier in the essay do consider an actor's identity to be important in understanding the state of global politics today, other older and more traditional theories do not necessarily concur with this stance, as briefly highlighted earlier. Realism and its neo variant "believe that power is the currency of international politics" (Mearshimer 2010:78). Neorealists argue that the structure or mechanics of the international system drives states to pursue power (*ibid*). Neorealists, like classical realists, recognise the anarchical nature of the international system (Mearshimer 2010:78). "The state among states, it is often said, conducts its affairs in the brooding shadow of violence (Waltz 1979:102). Neorealism can be divided into two different approaches. Kennet Waltz, a key neorealist scholar, is often characterised as a defensive realist, he argues that "the first concern of states is not to maximise power but to maintain their positions in the system" (Waltz 1979:126). This contrasts with offensive realists who argue that states should seek as much power as they can and even aspire to hegemony to ensure security (Mearshimer 2010:78). Realism and neorealism makes assumptions about actors and the international system, like the fact that it is anarchic for example, which is incompatible with the notion of critical theories and leaves little room for concepts like identity, amongst others. As the traditional theories make general claims and assumptions about international politics their scope and capacity to explain events can be restricted unlike the critical theories on the other hand.

David Campbell's critical analysis of US foreign policy in *Writing Security* (1998) makes identity its focal point. Campbell stresses the importance of identity to the Cold War period suggesting that the "the character of the Soviet Union, however, meant that conflict between the United States and Soviet Union was unavoidable (1998:24). Identity appears to have been a catalyst for the Cold War conflict with the liberal democratic identity of the US conflicting with the Communist identity of the Soviet Union. Moreover, identity continues to be pivotal in understanding global politics despite the end of the Cold War. Campbell stresses the importance of foreign policy in helping to define a state's identity. He suggests that America, like all other states, does not have a prediscursive, stable identity to display and so "it thereby relies on the regulated and stylized repetition of practices like foreign policy to contain contingency and secure the self" (1998:197). Applying this argument to recent demonstrations of American foreign policy, like the Iraq war and Afghanistan conflict, these operations acted to secure US identity as a bastion of political freedom, spreading the norms and values of liberal democracy to the undemocratic, authoritarian states in Central Asia. Although there are many different reasons for the American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, Campbell would presumably appreciate and articulate the notion that they were moves to secure and bolster US identity, amongst other reasons.

To conclude, identity is imperative in trying to understand global politics today. Despite the claims of realists and neorealist's, states are not mere power seeking, self interested individuals; different states have different identities which are in turn affected by their different interests. Identity appears to play a fundamental part in international relations. Both constructivism and poststructuralism emphasise the importance of identity in their schools of thought. Influential scholars such as Wendt and Campbell bring identity to the forefront of their analysis. Identity can be used to make sense of international relations, with Burma used as a case study earlier in the essay to support this claim. Furthermore, identity is also important in helping to understand the actions of different actors with Campbell highlighting the link between American identity and foreign policy actions for example. In a time of apparent change within international politics with the recent people's uprisings and revolutions that have taken place in several North African states, the importance of identity in helping to understand global politics is further entrenched.

How important is an actor's identity in understanding global politics today?

Written by Michael Bolt

Bibliography

Barnett M., (2008). Social Constructivism. In: Baylis J., Smith S., and Owens P., *The globalization of world politics*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p162-171

BBC. (2009). *Overview of Burma sanctions*. Available: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8195956.stm>. Last accessed 2/3/2011

Campbell D., (1998). *Writing Security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Campbell D., (2010). Poststructuralism. In: Dunne T., Kurki M., and Smith S., *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p213-237

Fierke K.M., (2010). Constructivism. In: Dunne T., Kurki M., and Smith S., *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p177-194

Guzzini S., (1998) *Realism in international relations and international political economy: The continuing story of a death foretold*. London: Routledge cited in Jorgensen K.E., (2010). *International relations theory: A new introduction*. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan

Jorgensen K.E., (2010). *International relations theory: A new introduction*. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan

Mearshimer J.J., (2010). Structural Realism. In: Dunne T., Kurki M., and Smith S *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p77-94

Neumann I.B., (1999). *Uses of the other: "the east" in European identity formation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Ruggie J.G., (1998a) *Constructing the world polity*, Great Britain: Routledge

Ruggie J.G., (1998b). What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge. *International Organization*. 52 (4), p855-885

Waltz K.N., (1979). *Theory of international politics*. USA: McGraw-Hill Inc

Wendt A., (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

—

Written by: Michael Bolt
Written at: University of Plymouth
Written for: Dr. Brieg Powel
Date written: March 2011