

North-South relations and the promises of constructivism

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MARCO MARILLI, MAR 11 2011

What is the promise of constructivism in international theory, particularly with respect to North-South relations?

Constructivism, which has widened its significance since the 1980s, is an approach in the study of International Relations that is concerned with how world politics is 'socially constructed'. Constructivism seeks to collaborate with other approaches, rather than claiming primacy as a theory of International Relations.[1] It offers alternative understandings of several central themes in international relations theory, primarily concentrating on issues of identity in global politics. Since actors have multiple identities, which implies dissimilar interests and actions, they will behave differently with regard to disparate situations and agents. In particular, North-South relations, in the constructivist rationale, are affected by states' pluralistic identities through many issues that this theoretical branch promises to treat.

In the first chapter, a brief introduction to constructivism and its basic principles will be portrayed. In the following chapter, some of the major constructivist promises will be introduced, and an attempt to deduce their direct implications in North-South relations will be reported. The third chapter will deepen the constructivists' interest in community-regions, which will lead to the conclusive argument that, possibly, the expansion of security communities represents the foundation of the constructivist promise with respect to North-South relations.

1. Constructivism

Constructivists, whether modernist or postmodernist, have grounded their analysis on three primal ontological propositions.

Firstly, they claim the importance of normative structures as well as material structures. Neorealism and neoliberalism assume that the preeminent source of influence and authority in international politics is material power (whether military, economic, or both).[2] Constructivists rather emphasize the importance of both material and discursive power, the latter thought *in primis* as shared knowledge, language, ideology and practices.[3] As A. Wendt puts it, 'the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material (a claim that opposes materialism)' and 'material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded'.[4]

Secondly, identities 'constitute actors' interests and shape their actions'.[5] Identities are necessary in order to prevent the creation of a world of permeating uncertainty. Whether neorealists treat interests as exogenously determined, existing regardless of the social interaction, constructivists focus on explaining the constitution of a state's interest. In order to achieve this goal, they stress the analysis of a state's identity.[6] Yet, while neorealists assume that these states' preferences are *a priori* the same, being the self-interest the only states' identity, constructivists deny a pre-given homogenized nature of interests, basing on the assumption that identities are

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multiple.[7]

The last proposition claims that actors and structures are mutually constituted. Constructivists stress the role of normative structures in defining the identity of the individual actor, but they insist that structures do not exist independently of norms and practices of social agents. Wendt argues that 'it is through reciprocal interaction that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests'.[8] Beginning from the structuralists' assertion that social structures are 'routinized discursive and physical practices that persist over an extended temporal and spatial domain',[9] constructivists seek to enrich their understanding of state agency and the dynamic conception of international systemic structures.[10]

2. The promise of constructivism and its effect on North-South relations

The constructivist research program pivots on a deep understanding of how identities are constructed, what norms and practices accompany their reproduction, and how these identities construct each other.[11] Many of the constructivist promises directly relate to how the North-South relations are conceived. In this chapter there will be an attempt to elicit the effects that the constructivists' promises would cause in the North-South relations.

Firstly, constructivism promises to deal with issues which do not receive attention in mainstream international relations theory. Nationalism, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and religion create a variety of identities which will potentially establish the practices of a state and therefore produce its actions domestically and internationally.[12] This, as J. Ann Tickner observes, directly influences the relations between the North and the South of the world. She argues that the contemporary West[13] is creating a masculine understanding of itself which is leading it to portray the South with a feminine character of emotionalism and unpredictability.[14] The constructivists' promise to engage with such issues, by seeking to fully determine a state's identity and anticipate its actions, will affect the North-South relations.

Secondly, from the point of view of modernist constructivism, theorists promise to return culture and domestic politics to international relations theory. This holistic approach aims to uncover those characteristics of domestic society and politics that could 'matter to state identity and state action in global politics'.[15] Identity politics domestically constrain state identity, interests, and, ultimately, actions, abroad.[16] While conventional accounts explain colonialism and imperialism relying on disparities in material power, constructivists focus on the creation of imperial identities both at home and with regard to the subordinated land abroad.[17] Furthermore, scholars such as J. G. Ruggie and F. Kratochwil are concerned with the dynamics of international change, and treat both the domestic and the international structure as two faces of a single social order. Both theorists focus on 'how domestic and international social phenomena interact to determine the rules that structure international orders, employing this holistic constructivist perspective to explain both systems and systemic change'.[18] Potentially, holistic constructivism, with its features of concreteness and historicism, could not only attempt to understand former North-South dominion-based relations, but rather promise to explain how actions, shaped on domestic identities, influence the actual global relations.

Thirdly, a direct by-product of this interest in identity politics is the return of differences among states.[19] Constructivists argue that a state is many different actors in global politics and dissimilar states behave differently towards other countries. Understanding a state as an identity rather than another, influences the potential actions of both.[20] Contra the neorealist assumption of states' balance of power, which for constructivists relies on a single identity being ascribed to a certain country, constructivism sustains the multiple nature of a state's identity, making neorealism even less explanatory. By hypothesizing differences among states, constructivists promise to move beyond the typical binary characterizations of mainstream international relations: axes of analysis such as democratic-nondemocratic, North-South, etc., notwithstanding their relevance, are intended to be outclassed by other meaningful communities of identity. Wendt divides the process of identity formation into two sub-processes: imitation and social learning. The former implies that states will imitate other states that they perceive as successful. The latter is a more promising source of identity which, according to Wendt, is grounded on the basic idea that 'identities and their corresponding interests are learned and then reinforced in response to how actors are treated by significant Others'.[21] The importance of this premise for this paper is shown in S. Suzuki's article about how non-European

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states were socialized into the European International Society.[22] In his piece, Suzuki examines the case of Japan, underlining how it sought to re-create its own identity and a domestic society where Japanese civilization was on a par that of the European countries. Besides, this deep conformation with Western models, not recognized by realist accounts, is projected in the coercive behavior of Japan after its encounter with the European International Society.[23] As Suzuki argues, Japan, adhering to the Western model, was engaged not only with the European-style diplomacy and international law, but with coercive policies towards the 'uncivilized' states as well.[24] Suzuki's claim for a more 'historically sensitive [and] agent-centred' study of the expansion of European International Society,[25] reflects the constructivist assertion that a widened definition of the Northern society is needed in order to capture the nuanced nature of the South's socialization into this society.

Lastly, during the last few centuries, the nation-state has been recognized as the place people feel comfortable calling 'home'. [26] B. Anderson calls national homes as 'imagined communities', and many theorists, such as J. Ruggie and E. Adler, deepen this concept to 'community-regions', composed of states with common identities and interests.[27]

3. (Security) Community-Regions

In order to clearly depict an adequate outline of what constructivists promise regarding North-South relations, it is useful to introduce the concept of community-regions, its current applicability, and, potentially, its worldwide expansion which would ultimately affect the nature of international relations. According to Adler, community-regions are

regional systems of meanings [...], and are not limited to a specific geographic place. They are made up of people whose common identities and interests are constituted by shared understandings and normative principles other than territorial sovereignty and (a) who actively communicate and interact across state borders, (b) who are actively involved in the political life of an (international and transnational) region and engaged in the pursuit of regional purposes, and (c) who, as citizens of states, impel the constituent states of the community-regions to act as agents of regional good [...]. [28]

Instead of being merely a physical place, community-regions are also cognitive regions that help constitute the preferences and actions of their members, whose shared understandings and identities help forming such regions.[29] Furthermore, within a certain community-region people may be able to exploit the mutual confidence in order to develop a system of governance which minimize the threat of war within that same community. Thus these community-regions are called security communities, which develop when their members possess compatible core values derived from mutual identity and loyalty, responsiveness, and common institutions.[30] Coercive actions are excluded among members of a security community, who would rather settle their disputes through pacific means. The perception of shared norms and values of other states makes difficult the process of enemy image-building.[31]

Accordingly, constructivists argue, being security communities socially constructed on shared practical knowledge of the peaceful resolution of conflicts, it is explicative why 'the majority of existing security communities developed out of liberal community-regions' (the *European Union* and the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* are the best example of security communities so far; the *North American Free Trade Agreement*, the *Organization of American States* or the newest *Union for the Mediterranean* can be seen as security communities at their beginning).[32] In liberal democracies this shared knowledge is 'institutionalized' in a 'civic culture', which guide the behavior of the members of a security community, while non-democracies lack shared understandings.[33] Nevertheless, since security communities are socially constructed, non-liberal regions may develop into security communities if either international liberal institutions diffuse liberal practices to non-liberal communities, or non-liberal ideologies promote a project characterized by increasing interdependence and common institutions, which could eventually create a shared identity and mutual expectations of peaceful change (an example of non-liberal security community is the *Association of Southeast Asian Nations*).

Therefore, constructivists promise that international and transnational institutions (as well as non-governmental organizations) will play an important role in promoting and diffusing shared normative beliefs of a liberal civic culture

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to non-liberal community-regions. Yet, constructivists see institutions as 'potential catalysts of political self-examination that may change states' perception of their interests'.^[34] They stress the circumstances and means by which international institutions may play a transformative role in altering state perceptions and behavior. Constructivism assigns an extensive autonomy to international and transnational actors, which are severed from state interests, and are the major agents of change, through norms diffusion.^[35]

Furthermore, Adler argues, in this process material and technological resources are also needed in order to induce some states to internalize the normative core of other actors. Material structures empower a community since they help creating a positive image that is then associated with success or power. Adler goes as far as stating that Northern states do not create security communities *per se*, rather security communities develop around them due to their positive image (is the case of former Communist states that ask to join the European Union rather than being invited).^[36]

The constructivist approach is limited to liberal norms because they represent positive progress at the international level. L. K. Landolt argues that constructivists emphasize social factor rather than material ones in norm diffusions, due to their desire to present norm diffusion as unbound from material coercion. She states that the effect is the implication that the North only promotes liberal or progressive norms, while eliminating material factors. Constructivist analyses of norm diffusion among northern states, Landolt argues, suppose that material factors are constant. Nevertheless, in norm diffusion from North to South, they cannot be held constant, and material inequality might be an important factor.^[37] By downplaying material elements from structural analysis they 'diminish their capacity to perceive and analyse relationships of power'.^[38]

Moreover, critical constructivists do not take for granted the positiveness of liberal values. D. Chandler, for example, stresses the intimation of new hierarchies of power in the expansion of the Northern influence over the less developed South through the transformation of international institutions' agenda to humanitarian aid and human rights protection. Interest in human rights, he states, is part of an (un)willing attempt to 'colonise the political through law and ethics'.^[39]

Conclusion

Constructivist assumptions have depicted a broad picture of study interests. By engaging with issues usually discarded by other international theories, constructivists seek to clearly detect an agent's identity and anticipate its actions. Through the creation of different, more appropriate identities for states, they promise to alter the way North-South relations are constructed. Moreover, holistic approaches in constructivism promise to focus on the role domestic identities play in international relations and in the creation of actions abroad, influencing global relations. Yet, constructivists focus on the process of identity-creation, particularly with regard to how non-liberal states socialize into the Northern society. Nevertheless, given the existence of several identities within a single state, they also claim the necessity to create new communities of identities, moving beyond the typical binary characterizations of mainstream international relations. It is in this light that social relations between the North and the South should be better depicted by the interaction of security communities.

Constructivists presume we should be looking for communities of inter-subjectivity, regions within which actors share common understandings and liberal values, establishing predictable patterns of action.^[40] International and transnational institutions, rather than states, should commit to promote and diffuse normative beliefs of a liberal civic culture, aimed to the creation of security communities among non-liberal states. Thus, North-South relations would be represented not through the distinction between liberal and non-liberal states, but through the interaction of community-regions which possibly share not only their identities and interests, but also a knowledge of the peaceful resolutions of conflicts. Nevertheless, as many critics suggest, constructivists should not downplay the role of material factors, especially in norms diffusion from North to South.

In conclusion, constructivism rejects the mainstream presumption that world politics is homogenous but rather claims that no universally valid generalization is expectable. However, it promises to offer an approach which, concentrating on shared knowledge, practices and identities, will lead to restore partial order and predictability to a global politics

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where interaction among community-regions will better represent the North-South dichotomy.

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[1] Hopf, Ted (1998), 'The promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security*, 23(1): p. 196.

[2] *Ivi*, p. 177.

[3] *Ibidem*.

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- [4] Wendt, Alexander (1995), 'Constructing International Politics', *International Security*, 20(1): pp. 71-73.
- [5] Price, Richard and Christian Reus-Smit (1998), 'Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4(3): p. 266.
- [6] *Ivi*, p. 267.
- [7] Hopf, p. 176.
- [8] Wendt, Alexander (1992), 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 46(2): p. 406.
- [9] Price and Reus-Smit, p. 267.
- [10] *Ibidem*.
- [11] Hopf, p. 192.
- [12] *Ivi*, p. 193.
- [13] From now on words such as the 'West' and 'Liberal countries' will refer to the North; 'non-liberal countries' will be used to refer to the South.
- [14] Tickner, J. Ann cited in Hopf, p. 193.
- [15] Hopf, p.195.
- [16] *Ibidem*.
- [17] *Ibidem*.
- [18] Price and Reus-Smit, p. 269.
- [19] Hopf, p. 193.
- [20] *Ibidem*.
- [21] Wendt, Alexander, cited in Kowert, Paul A. (2001), 'The Peril and Promise of constructivist Theory' *Ritsumeikan Journal of International Studies*, 13(3): p. 161.
- [22] European International Society includes the U.S. and can be read as the North. Non-European countries are ascribable to the South of the world.
- [23] Suzuki, Shogo (2005), 'Japan's Socialization into Janus-Faced European International Society', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11(1): p. 153.
- [24] Suzuki, p. 139. On the role of identity in Western Imperialism see Hobson, John M. and J.C. Sharman (2005), 'The Enduring Place of Hierarchy in World Politics: Tracing the Social logics of Hierarchy and Political Change', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11(1): pp. 87-88.
- [25] Suzuki, p. 139.
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Millennium, 26(2): p. 249.

[27] *Ivi*, pp. 249-250.

[28] *Ivi*, p. 253.

[29] *Ivi*, p. 254.

[30] *Ivi*, p. 255.

[31] Meyer, Christoph O. (2005), 'Convergence Toward a European Strategic Culture? A Constructivist Framework for Explaining Changing Norms', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11(4): p. 533.

[32] Adler, Emanuel (2008), 'The spread of Security Communities: Communities of Practice, Self-Restraint, and NATO's Post-Cold War Transformation', *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(2): p. 205.

[33] *Ivi*, p. 259.

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[35] Landolt, Laura K. (2004), '(Mis)constructing the Third World? Constructivist analysis of norm diffusion', *Third World Quarterly*, 25(3): p. 580.

[36] Adler, p. 262.

[37] Landolt, p. 585.

[38] *Ivi*, p. 581.

[39] Chandler, David (2003), 'Expanding the Research Agenda of Human Rights: A reply to Bellamy', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 7(1): p. 131.

[40] Hopf, p. 199.

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