

The Case for a New Constructivism in International Relations Theory

Written by David M. McCourt

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DAVID M. MCCOURT, APR 19 2022

As the old saying goes, you will receive as many answers to the question of what Constructivism is as constructivists to whom you ask this question—or, more appropriately, the number of textbooks you read. Everyone seems to have a say on the nature of Constructivism, generating voluminous scholarship throughout its time as an approach in International Relations—roughly from the late 1980s until today (see, among others, Adler 1997; Bertucci, Hayes, and James 2018; Finnemore and Sikkink 2000; Guzzini 2000; Hayes 2017; Klotz and Lynch 2007; Ruggie 1998; Subotic 2017; Wendt 1998; Zehfuss 2002). Constructivism remains a matter of controversy, and this book will surely not settle matters.

Nonetheless, this book is about Constructivism as an approach in International Relations (IR) theory. The book defends the claim that recent developments in constructivist theorizing—recent meaning the last ten years or so, so recent in the slow pace of the academy—add up to a qualitatively new approach, which should be labelled as such: the *New Constructivism*. Central to the New Constructivism are new theoretical perspectives and vocabularies, like practice theory, relationalism, and actor-network theory, new empirical interests, like affect and emotions, and methodological innovations like network analysis and multiple correspondence analysis. While many of the promoters of these approaches have downplayed or denied their links to Constructivism, in this book I seek to set the record straight—showing how they are principally developments *within* Constructivism, rather than outside it. Written to appeal to a wide readership, from advanced undergraduates and graduate students casting around for theoretical moorings to practicing constructivists, the book presents a manifesto for this New Constructivism via a tour of the contemporary constructivist landscape.

Constructivisms Old and New

The tour begins with classic constructivist work on culture, norms, and identity in world politics. Flying in the face of the neorealist-neo-institutionalist synthesis, the first empirical constructivists showed that anarchy was not a given—that the structure of the international system could be changed through agency of individual decision-makers. Agents and structures were co-constituted, in a new phrase offered to the field (Wendt 1987, 1992). Early empirical applications showed, crucially, that these concepts were not fancy buzzwords from—“presumably Parisian”—social theory (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996: 34)); constructivists demonstrated how concrete outcomes *really* were affected by norms (Klotz 1995; Carpenter 2003; see also Tannenwald 2008), collective and state identity (Bukovansky 2002), transnational networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998), and political culture (Katzenstein 1996), in ways then-leading theories could not incorporate.

However, I show that over time this classical or ‘Old’ Constructivism narrowed its field of conceptual vision, such that practice theory, relationalism, and the other components of the New Constructivism seemed to stand outside it, ripe for ‘bringing in,’ to adopt a tired if seemingly-ever-useful political science cliché. In other words, Constructivism *became* a theoretical approach almost solely focused on the role of norms, identity, and culture in world politics. Crucially, norms, identity, and culture came to be viewed within this new approach as relatively fixed things, things that could even be ‘tested’ alongside other ‘factors’ in foreign policy-making, like material interests. The effect was to downplay precisely the *constructing* of world politics, the attempt to create, modify, or break norms, identities, and

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culture, in international affairs.

The New Constructivism, and those concepts, perspectives, and methods, has emerged specifically from two recent “turns” in IR theory: the turn to practices and relations (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Jackson and Nexon 2020). Practice theory draws attention to everyday logics in world politics, and asserts that actors are driven less by abstract forces such as the national interest, preferences, or social norms, than by practical imperatives, habits and embodied dispositions (Pouliot 2011; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014; Bueger and Gadinger 2018. See also Raymond 2019). Relationalism meanwhile rejects the idea that entities—whether states, international organizations, norms or identities—are the basic units of world politics, replacing them with ongoing processes (see, among others, Jackson 2007; Nexon 2009; McCourt 2014; Solomon 2015; Srivastava 2022; Zarakol 2011). Driven by the same anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism, I here consider the turns to practice theory and relationalism a twin development, two sides of the same coin. They are joined by other anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist approaches, like social network analysis and actor-network theory.

While identifying the New Constructivism, I do not seek to excoriate what we might call the ‘first generation’ of empirical constructivist scholarship, the work that first brought norms, culture, and identity in to a discipline dominated by the supposedly ‘hard’ matters of economic and military might. Constructivist work absolutely *can* continue to make insightful arguments about how social factors like culture and norms shape the identities of states as they interact in world politics. Against rationalist and realist accounts especially, such arguments remain extremely useful, as I try to emphasize in the book. But Constructivism as also moved on. Deepening our understanding of how things like norms, culture, and identity ‘matter’ in world politics, as well as expanding its field of vision, adding new and exciting dimensions not only concerned with the mutual constitution of state identities. After reading this book, my hope is that IR scholars Constructivist and Non-Constructivist alike will recognize the New Constructivism. At least that is my hope.

Why Bother?

Why do new developments *have* to be viewed as internal to Constructivism? As well as witnessing the rise of the New Constructivism (e.g. Zarakol 2022; Pratt 2022; Shirk 2022)—as I will contend—the last ten years has also witnessed a turn away from paradigms in general. For leading IR theorist David Lake (2011), for instance, the ‘isms’ are more of hindrance to knowledge construction than a help. By organizing our work into academic ‘sects,’ and privileging intramural debate—of which this book is undeniably an example—over cross-paradigm testing of theory in search of policy relevance, ‘we are not giving society what it deserves even in terms of basic theoretical and empirical knowledge about world politics, a domain that we as scholars claim as our own.’ (Lake 2011: 465). This book therefore seems to fly in the face of two common senses: what Constructivism is, and that paradigm-centric debate is, or at least should be, a thing of the past.

Identifying the New Constructivism, however, is imperative for three related reasons, which I defend further in the following Introduction: empirical pay-off, intellectual consistency, and the formation of groups of scholars who share a perspective on international politics and how it should be studied, however broad those groups may be.

Empirical pay-off must be front and center. On that, I am in full agreement with Lake. Constructivism, like all theories and frameworks, is ultimately an aid to interpretation, a device we use to help us tell better, more accurate, convincing, and insightful stories about world politics. Theories are thinking and communication aids. But different types of scholars find different types of stories convincing. As a constructivist, someone can tell me until they are blue in the face about the effects of differentials in power on national interest formation, which realism foregrounds. But I will still want to know how those factors influence how real individuals and groups interpret purported reality. How does someone *know* what is in the national interest? Contra rationalists, I will doggedly defend the notion that a thick description of the constitutive rules underpinning a particular bargaining scenario are as scientifically valid and important as a formalized and solved model of the game itself. Contrary to the narrowed vision of Constructivism that developed over time, in both cases a full analysis might require sensitivity to the practical, taken-for-granted knowledge in a foreign ministry, or the scholarly community of national security experts in a given capital—aspects key to the New Constructivism.

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The arguments of Lake and others aside, therefore, whether they recognize the fact or not, constructivists—Old and New—are the social group interested in New Constructivist arguments. We are the ones who will find New Constructivist arguments convincing in terms of empirical pay-off. In telling the story of Constructivism in IR, of how it narrowed and had to be re-born, I am not, therefore, defending paradigms for no reason. I am trying to get constructivists of every stripe on the same page, to get down to the real work of telling good stories about world politics.

Intellectual consistency, group identity, and empirical pay-off are thus all intimately related. Hence it matters that, with a few important recent exceptions, most assessments Constructivism—of what it *is*, and what objects and method of analysis are constructivist—fail to remain true to the central tenets of Constructivism, failing to remain grounded in historically, geographically, and institutionally-specific dynamics. As I explore in greater detail in the following chapter, the starting point for any definition of Constructivism should not be ‘Constructivism is...’ but ‘constructivism does...’, and ‘what do people do with and through ‘Constructivism?’” Thought of in this way, Constructivism does not refer to a narrow set of concepts, but as a space within IR—viewed itself in social and cultural terms—for bringing in from cognate fields like sociology, history, and psychology, insights into the processes by which international political reality is made. The New Constructivism is the result of a new generation of scholars *doing* that importation.

The Task is Pressing

Despite its prominence, Constructivism is in danger of losing its momentum as it remains stuck in detailing the effects of a narrow band of inputs to state action. As a space within IR understood as not only an intellectual enterprise, but a set of part nationally-rooted/part internationalized *professions*, Constructivism needs to be continually refreshed to carry on. Yet hostility in discussions about the nature of Constructivism reflects precisely the weakness of Constructivism and constructivists within the various social worlds they inhabit—academies and policy-making circles, at both the state and international levels. Constructivism does not fare well at the top academic departments in IR and political science where it is not technical or scientific enough. Constructivists attacking one in another, in simple terms, is the academic working class attacking itself—at least in the U.S.

In place of such internecine strife, I hope to prove that the New Constructivism is a vibrant and powerful approach to world politics. I foreground eight key features underpinning its potential. The New Constructivism is (1) anti-foundationalist; (2) rigorously anti-essentialist; (3) methodologically omnivorous; (4) conceptually pluralist; (5) reflexive; (6) necessarily historical; (7) politically agnostic; and (8) attuned to emotions and affect in human action.

The Eight Principles of the New Constructivism

The New Constructivism does not have a single core feature. But if it did, it would be, first, anti-essentialism. Again, what was wrong with the Old Constructivism was the way it narrowed to focus almost exclusively on norms, identity and culture understood as things. What was lost was the constructing process, *including naming and using concepts like norms, identity, and culture*. Nicholas Onuf puts the point best. Constructivists, new and old, stress the production in social life of what he rather whimsically terms ‘moderate-sized dry goods’: words, concepts, labels, and frames with which we navigate the world (Onuf 2018). The point is dead serious. For Onuf, ‘The way we make useful, moderate-sized social objects with material properties, the way we infuse them with value, the way we do it together through a myriad of cognitive and linguistic operations: this is exactly what seems to entrance constructivists. And only constructivists. Everyone else starts with goods already in place.’ (Onuf 2017: xvii) The point, in other words, is not that Constructivism *is* about norms, identity, and culture, and their role in international politics, nor about ‘ideas,’ ‘meaning,’ ‘consciousness.’ Rather, Constructivism centres how we make those things—*including as objects within disciplines like IR*—and how we infuse them with meaning and communicative ability, and then live our lives through, as, and within, those moderate-sized dry goods.

The New Constructivism’s rigorous or consistent anti-essentialism extends to the philosophically thorny problem of foundations. The early empirical constructivists dodged that particular epistemological bullet, and for good reason. To remain on ontological grounds means the firmer territory of ‘factors’ in observable outcomes in world politics. But as Onuf has made clear, being a constructivist means at least having an *opinion* on the issue of foundations—of the

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grounds on which claims to knowledge can be made when social life is viewed as always grasped from specific institutional, temporal, and geographical, vantage points (Onuf 2018). In other words, second, the New Constructivism is incompatible with unproblematic assertions of foundations to knowledge rooted in supposedly unchanging verities of scientific method, objectivism, or empiricism.

Constructivism's rejection of essences and foundations has too often, however, been misunderstood to imply a rejection of social science and its corollaries like measurement and objectivity. In its place is put interpretation and the study of discourse, aimed at uncovering subjective and intersubjective meaning, typically presented in prose form. Following Mills, I—third—defend a view of constructivism as methodologically promiscuous, by which I mean attuned to the most appropriate methods for the puzzle at hand. While traditional discourse analyses might be the most appropriate, constructivists should look far and wide for the best way to frame and prove their arguments. More concretely, as I explore in Chapter Five, this means not leaving new developments in computational methods to non-constructivists. Network analysis, topic modelling, and correspondence analysis, among others, each follow a logic that foregrounds relational social practices as the basis of political action. Constructivists should embrace them.

Fourth, the New Constructivism is conceptually pluralist, by which I mean it is a broad church able to house diverse conceptual categories. To be sure, as we will see, empirical work that analyses language games is distinct from analyses based on, say, embodiment and emotions, or assemblages and social fields. The concepts or theoretical languages they employ are not of a piece, and might not sit together at all well when trying to make a coherent theoretically different account of some phenomenon in world politics. But the conceptual pluralism of the New Constructivism—that scholars can and should draw on an array of conceptual categories in their work, as the problem requires—should be seen as a strength, not a weakness.

One of the signal differences between the Old Constructivism and the New, as I detail in Chapter Four, fifth, is that the New Constructivism is thoroughly and self-consciously reflexive. Early constructivists pushed back against their rationalist colleagues insistence on the supposedly objective laws of international affairs by demonstrating how the constitutive rules of world politics were not natural but *made* in and through human practice, at particular times and in particular places. As realism and liberalism gave way to rational choice approaches, constructivists countered again that the rules of the game of international relations are not really external to the game, and can only be modelled as such by doing violence to reality. Yet, early constructivists largely failed to take the next step: to show how scholars and scientists—IR scholars included—were *themselves* involved in the constructing process (Guzzini 2000; McCourt 2016). The New Constructivism, I show, includes both the tools and the imperative to take that extra step, both at the level of specific outcomes constructivists seek to explain and understand, and at the general level of what Bentley Allan calls global 'cosmologies.' (Allan 2019).

Sixth, the New Constructivism's reflexivity sits neatly alongside, and is informed by, another of its signal features—its essentially historical nature. The New Constructivism is not, then, simply the-space-in-IR's-varied-institutional-bases-where-classic-social-analysis-is-practiced, it is the space where *historical social analysis* is practiced. One of the most important aspects of all the classic social theorists, from Du Bois to Foucault, Marx to Norbert Elias, is the attempt to understand modernity in all of its complexity as emerging over time. Indeed, time itself is a social construct central to social and political projects—modern and otherwise—as Andrew Hom (2020) among others has expertly dissected. Much Constructivism—Old and New—adopts a historical perspective. In Chapter 6, I argue that the New Constructivism's historicity is unique: neither the history-as-data-set view common in particular among rationalists, nor the historicist view of history as linear process.

Seventh, an important feature of the New Constructivism is its political agnosticism. Defending a view of constructivism as unmoored from the desire for progressive social change enters an ongoing and lively debate. Several scholars, notably Jason Ralph, have highlighted the ways in which constructivist research can inform political debate by evaluating, and not merely charting, normative change in world politics (Ralph 2018). Drawing on pragmatism, Ralph shows that norms work when they are useful, providing a role for the constructivist analyst in determining such meaning-in-use. For others, however, in particular Samuel Barkin and Laura Sjoberg, constructivism does not have a politics—a theoretically-informed view on what counts as good versus bad social change—and should not seek an alliance with critical theory in order to adopt one (Barkin and Sjoberg 2019). I track

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closely to the latter position. While constructivism can provide the space for the sort of work Ralph suggests, it can also explain processes and change many of us would view with distaste. There is, in short, nothing inherent in its core theoretical properties preventing constructivism's misuse.

Eight, and finally, the New Constructivism is marked by several departures from the conceptual focus on norms, identity, and culture, in early constructivist research. Nowhere is this more evident than in the central place it affords to affect and emotions in the New Constructivism. The way social facts like norms, rules, and senses of self, relate to action is not completely—or often adequately—conceptualized by the common constructivist focus on understanding, sense-making, and knowing viewed in an intellectualized form. Equally important, are affects, emotions, and feelings from shame and guilt, to horror and excitement. Classic social analyst Emile Durkheim's concept of 'collective effervescence,' for example, is meant to capture how social moods effect individuals viscerally, as the 'vital energies become hyper-excited, the passions more intense, the sensations more powerful.' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 424)

Summary: An Invitation to the New Constructivism in IR Theory

The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory was inspired in part inspired by the sense that constructivists, of all the types of IR scholars, should be the ones able to see how professions and social spaces work, and hence what they do to (and with) intellectual movements, like Constructivism. Consequently, I offer this book humbly, in the knowledge that such boundary-drawing exercises are fraught with the danger of unfair exclusion based on unequal power relations. Yet, such exercises are also inevitable, and—potentially—empowering as they can create and reaffirm communities. In particular, I hope to reach junior researchers who want to 'try on' the New Constructivism in their first forays into identifying and answering puzzles about world politics, in the knowledge there is a community of like-minded and supportive colleagues ready to read and engage their work.

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