

# Constructivism

Written by Stephen McGlinchey and Dana Gold

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/05/20/constructivism/>

STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY AND DANA GOLD, MAY 20 2022

**This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.**

Constructivists highlight the importance of values and shared interests between individuals who interact on the global stage, as well as social norms that bring them together. Additionally, constructivists are interested in emphasising the agency of individuals, which in other words refers to people's ability to seek and implement change. Constructivists examine the process of how new ideas emerge from within the policy-making machines of states, and also sometimes from individuals that they call 'norm entrepreneurs'. Then they track when and how these ideas become adopted – or when they do not.

Alexander Wendt, a prominent constructivist, described the relationship between agents (individuals) and structures (such as the state) as one in which structures not only constrain agents but also construct their identities and interests. His phrase 'anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992) sums this up well and helps to advance some of the points made by English school theorists. Another way to explain this, and to explain the core of constructivism, is that the essence of international relations exists in the interactions between individuals. After all, states do not interact; it is *agents* of those states – such as politicians and diplomats – who interact, leading to a greater likelihood of mutual cooperation. Since those interacting on the world stage have accepted international anarchy as its defining principle, it has become part of our reality. However, if anarchy is what we make of it, then states and their agents can perceive anarchy differently and the qualities of anarchy can change over time. International anarchy could even be replaced by a different system if an influential group of individuals (and by proxy the states they represent) accepted the idea.

To understand constructivism is to understand that certain ideas, or 'norms' as they are often called once those ideas become expected behaviours, have power. As such, constructivists seek to study the process by which existing norms emerge, and then are challenged and potentially replaced with new norms. So, if aspects of the global order are flawed or troubling, they are not fixed in place or inevitable – they can be remade.

Text adapted from McGlinchey, Stephen (2022) *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

For much more on constructivism and other theories, you can download the free textbook, *International Relations Theory*.

**Below is a collection of freely accessible multimedia and textual resources that help unpack, and explain the importance of constructivism to International Relations.**

Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory – article

Theory Talk with Alexander Wendt – article

Theory Talk with Nicholas Onuf – article

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Theory Talk with Peter Katzenstein – article

World politics 2010: Constructivism – podcast

Whisky and IR Theory on Constructivism (part one / part two) – podcast

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### **About the author:**

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