Topic 9 Constructivism

In 1992, Alexander Wendt, considered the most influential constructivist scholar, launched a scathing attack on neo-realism in his seminal work “Anarchy is what States Make of It: the Social Construction of Power Politics”. Later, in 1999 in his book “Social Theory of International Politics”, he would emphasize that ideas, norms and culture rather than material factors are critical to analyzing world politics. Together with other constructivists like Peter Katzenstein, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, he would challenge the core premises of Waltz’s structural realism. In this session, we explore this challenge noting also that language and rhetoric are salient elements of constructivism.
ab1234.yolasite.com
Course content

- The History and Evolution of the International System
- Levels of Analysis and Foreign Policy

**POSITIVIST THEORIES**

**MAINSTREAM APPROACHES**
- Liberalism
- Realism
- Neorealism
- Neoliberalism

**STRUCTURALIST APPROACHES**
- Classical Marxism
- Dependency Theory
- Structural Imperialism
- Worlds System Theory

- International Society Theory (The English School)

**POST-POSITIVIST THEORIES**
- Constructivism
- Postmodernism
- Critical Theory
- Feminism
Readings:

6. Jackson, Robert & Sorenson. Introduction to International Relations. Chapter 7
7. Kegley & Wittkopf. Chapter 2

At the Caspian Sea University:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B1_Z5ACd6MBPNGJDSUJLX2t4ZG8?usp=sharing


Dune, the 1965 science fiction novel by Frank Herbert
# The IR Great Debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative names</th>
<th>Contenders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First IR Great Debate</td>
<td>Realism - Utopian Liberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second IR Great Debate</td>
<td>Traditionalism - Behaviouralism (=hard sciences-inspired)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Intra-Paradigm Debate (Therefore, <strong>not a great debate</strong>) or The Inter-Paradigm Debate = The Third IR Great Debate or</td>
<td>Neorealism - Neoliberalism (share the same paradigm) or Neorealism - Neoliberalism - Radical Theories (=Neo-Marxism) (Neo-Marxism is based on a different paradigm than Neorealism and Neoliberalism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The first stage of the Third Great Debate (a compromise)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Third IR Great Debate (if neo-neo is not considered a great debate) The Fourth IR Great Debate (if neo-neo is considered a great debate) The second stage of the Third Great Debate (a compromise solution)</td>
<td>Positivism - Post-Positivism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. The First IR Great Debate: Realism - Liberalism

2. The Second IR Great Debate: Traditionalism - Behaviouralism

3. The Neorealism - Neoliberalism Debate (and/or Synthesis?)
The Third or second stage of the Third or the Fourth Great Debate: Positivism - Post-Positivism

Is scientific knowledge objective?

Epistemology = the theory of knowledge ("how we can study the world")
the ways and means by which we come to know something about the world

The epistemology issue is raised by the following question: in what way can we obtain knowledge about the world?

• At one extreme is the notion of scientifically explaining the world. The task is to build a valid social science on a foundation of verifiable empirical propositions.

• At the other extreme is the notion of understanding the world, that is, to comprehend and interpret the substantive topic under study. According to this view, historical, legal, or moral problems of world politics cannot be translated into terms of [hard] science without misunderstanding them.

(Jackson and Sørensen)
"The social fact is a thing".

Émile Durkheim

POSITIVISM:
There is no epistemological difference between a mountain and a war, or between IR and Chemistry.
Previous theories → "objective laws"
The reality of IR can be known with means inspired by hard sciences
Future behaviour can be predicted
Interests and identities = fixed

↓

POSITIVIST or RATIONALIST theories


- causal explanations

↓

Positivism

And yet...
The 'axis of evil'...
...or the 'axis of resistance'?
"One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter"

IR Theory vs. Political Ideology

Should you keep them apart?
"One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter"

IR Theory vs. Political Ideology

Can you keep them apart?
"One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter"

IR Theory vs. Political Ideology

Can you keep them apart?

↓

Is scientific knowledge objective?
Max Weber
‘verstehen’ (interpretive understanding)

Max Weber emphasized that the social world is fundamentally different from the natural world of physical phenomena. Human beings rely on ‘understanding’ of each other’s actions and assigning ‘meaning’ to them. In order to comprehend human interaction, we cannot merely describe it in the way we describe physical phenomena, such as a boulder falling off a cliff; we need a different kind of interpretive understanding, or ‘verstehen’. Is the pat of another person’s face a punishment or a caress? We cannot know until we assign meaning to the act. Weber concluded that ‘subjective understanding is the specific characteristic of sociological knowledge’.

(Jackson and Sørensen)
Jürgen Habermas (of the 'Frankfurt School')
Jürgen Habermas:

If capitalism changes – as Marx himself wrote – according to ‘iron laws’ which have all the determinism of laws of natural science, where is there any room for the active interaction of human beings in their own fate? Why should anyone bother to become a Marxist at all? For if human behaviour is governed by ineluctable laws, there is nothing we can do to shape our own history by actively intervening in it. When understood as a science, Marxism ignores what Habermas calls the ‘self-reflection’, or ‘reflexivity’ of human agents. That is to say, it cannot cope with one of the defining features which make us human. This is the fact that we are capable of reflecting upon our own history, as individuals and as members of larger societies; and of using precisely that reflection to change the course of history.

"Theory is always for someone and for some purpose."

Knowledge is not neutral. It reflects the interests of the observer.

Robert Cox (founder of the Critical School of IR)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positivism</th>
<th>Post-Positivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Previous theories → &quot;objective laws&quot;</td>
<td>POST-POSITIVIST, REFLECTIVIST or COGNITIVIST theories → the importance of human reflexion for international politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reality of IR can be known with means inspired by hard sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future behaviour can be predicted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests and identities = fixed</td>
<td>Habermas / Frankfurt school: we can reflect on our history and use this to change the course of history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSITIVIST or RATIONALIST theories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no epistemological difference between a mountain and a war, or between IR and Chemistry.</td>
<td>Epistemologically, a mountain and a war are completely different. So are IR and Chemistry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective knowledge. Absolute truth. Uses the methods of natural sciences.</td>
<td>No objective knowledge. No absolute truth. The social world cannot be studied in an objective and value-free way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- causal explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- constitutive questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First half of the 1990s:
The Positivism - Post-positivism debate

First half of the 1990s:
The Positivism - Post-positivism debate

Neo-Realism + Neo-Liberalism

# EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positivism</th>
<th>Post-positivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foundationalism</strong></td>
<td>Anti-foundationalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all truth claims can be judged <strong>true</strong> or <strong>false</strong>; usually <strong>against empirical facts</strong></td>
<td>each theory poses different questions; hence what counts as 'facts' and 'truths' differs from theory to theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanatory theory</strong></td>
<td><strong>Constitutive theory</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makes <strong>causal statement</strong> about relations between dependent and independent variables</td>
<td>theorizes the relationship between 'variables' as <strong>mutually constituting</strong> each other; hence 'variables' cannot be said to stand in causal relationship to one another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. Waltz: Anarchy → State behaviour</td>
<td>e.g. Wendt: Anarchy ↔ State behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ontology = how we see or understand the world ("what is in the world")
ex.: Marxist ontology → exploitation

subjective - objective

The ontology issue is raised by the following question: is there an objective reality ‘out there’ or is the world one of experience only, i.e., a subjective creation of people? The extreme objectivist position is purely naturalist and materialist: i.e., international relations are basically a thing, an object, out there. The extreme subjectivist position is purely idealist: i.e., international relations are basically an idea or concept that people share about how they should organize themselves and relate to each other politically; it is constituted exclusively by language, ideas, and concepts.

(Jackson and Sørensen)
(Jackson and Sorensen)
Constructivism
("Social Constructivism")

- The main post-positivist theory.
- The most 'moderate' post-positivist theory.

AN EXAMPLE OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIZATION:

Effects of **International Socialization** under the influence of the European Union in Central and Eastern Europe, 1992-1998:

Perception of threats from ethnic groups and minorities and perception of threats from neighboring countries (1992-1998)

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of threats from ethnic groups and minorities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of threats from neighboring countries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results of Slovak **nationalist parties** in parliamentary elections, 1992-2002

<table>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>45.19%</td>
<td>40.37%</td>
<td>36.07%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Romania - Vote for **neo-communist parties** in legislative elections (Chamber ofDeputies), 1992-1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>66.31%</td>
<td>30.75%</td>
<td>21.52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bulgaria - **Preference** for an **authoritarian** leader, 1992-96

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<thead>
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<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Freedom House Political Rights and Civil Liberties average scores for ten CEE states, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria (1990-2007)

The change due to international socialization of the systems of values shared by the three countries allowed them to join the EU in 2004 (Slovakia) and 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria).
The identities and interests of states change due to **international socialization:**

- states are changed by the international environment and
- states change the international environment

\[ \downarrow \uparrow \]

**IR = based on ideas, knowledge**

= the main idea of Constructivism
Constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international life (John Ruggie).

Constructivism is the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world (Emanuel Adler).

A theoretical approach which sees selfinterested states as the key actors in world politics; their actions are determined not by anarchy but by the ways states socially “construct” accepted images of reality and then respond to the meanings they give to power politics, so as their definitions change, cooperative practices can evolve.

**FOUR FEATURES** (Carlsnaes, Risse and Simmons, *Handbook of International Relations*, 2002, pp.57-8)

1. centrally concerned with the role of ideas in constructing social life
2. concerned with showing the socially constructed nature of agents or subjects
3. based on a research strategy of methodological holism rather than methodological individualism
   
   (holism = use the system level of analysis; system/structure are decisive factors; individualism = use the state level of analysis)
4. concerned with constitutive as opposed to just causal explanations
According to constructivist philosophy, the social world is not a given: it is not something ‘out there’ that exists independent of the thoughts and ideas of the people involved in it. It is not an external reality whose laws can be discovered by scientific research and explained by scientific theory as positivists and behaviouralists argue.

The social and political world is not part of nature. There are no natural laws of society or economics or politics. History is not an evolving external process that is independent of human thought and ideas. That means that sociology or economics or political science or the study of history cannot be objective ‘sciences’ in the strict positivist sense of the word.

- **social facts** (e.g. sovereignty and human rights) exist because of human agreement
- **brute facts** (e.g. mountains) are independent of such agreements

### Video: Theory in Action: Constructivism (5min19)
Professor Caleb Gallemore tells us about Constructivism and why it's like Neo in The Matrix.  
[https://youtu.be/kYU9UfkV_XI?list=PLWsNEo6X1UO4liBvJmOmJ_xMQ8ydVdxBh](https://youtu.be/kYU9UfkV_XI?list=PLWsNEo6X1UO4liBvJmOmJ_xMQ8ydVdxBh)
Constructivism = emphasizes the **social construction of reality**
International system = constituted by ideas, not by material forces

Ideas = mental constructs held by individuals, sets of distinctive **beliefs, principles and attitudes** that provide **broad orientations** for behaviour and policy
Four major types of ideas:
- ideologies or shared belief systems,
- normative beliefs,
- cause-effect beliefs,
- policy prescriptions

FORERUNNERS

**Giambattista Vico** (18th-century Italian philosopher)
History ≠ unfolding or evolving process external to human affairs.
Men and women make
- their own history
- states = historical constructs = artificial creations
The state system = artificial = made by men and women who can change it and develop it

**Immanuel Kant**
Knowledge about the world = **subjective** = filtered through human consciousness
Max Weber
‘verstehen’ (interpretive understanding) <see above>

Max Weber emphasized that the social world is fundamentally different from the natural world of physical phenomena. Human beings rely on ‘understanding’ of each other’s actions and assigning ‘meaning’ to them. In order to comprehend human interaction, we cannot merely describe it in the way we describe physical phenomena, such as a boulder falling off a cliff; we need a different kind of interpretive understanding, or ‘verstehen’. Is the pat of another person’s face a punishment or a caress? We cannot know until we assign meaning to the act. Weber concluded that ‘subjective understanding is the specific characteristic of sociological knowledge’.

Anthony Giddens
"structuration"

Structures (rules and conditions that guide social action) do not determine what actors do in any mechanical way

The relationship between structures and actors involves intersubjective understanding and meaning:
- structures constrain actors
- actors can transform structures by thinking about them and acting on them in new ways.

(Jackson and Sørensen)
| Main authors | Nicholas Onuf  
|             | Friedrich Kratochwil  
|             | John Ruggie  
|             | Martha Finnemore  
|             | Alexander Wendt |
| Main element | The **social character** of IR.  
|             | "Homo sociologicus" (instead of neorealists' and neoliberals' homo economicus) |
| Premises | There are several constructivist branches. Most try to find a *via media* (middle way) between radical post-positivists (e.g. postmodernists) and positivists:  
|           | - **knowledge** of the social world = possible (see below)  
|           | - ideas, **knowledge** = important role in IR  
|           | - interest and identity = evolve, not fixed |
|           | **Norms** = major role in the evolution of the international system  
|           | States **interact** and learn → **change their identity**  
|           | This **changes** the international **environment** |
All post-positivists | social sciences = **no objective truth**, true across time and place

Constructivists | no objective truth, true across time and place *but* they do make "truth claims" that are always **contingent and partial** interpretations of a complex world *(e.g. all wars cannot be considered similar across time and place and studied as such; but a specific war can be studied as positivists do)*

Other post-positivist ("critical") schools | even "truth claims" are not possible truth is always connected to dominant ways of thinking truth and power cannot be separated main task = unmask the core relationship between truth and power, criticize dominant versions of thinking that claim to be true
**Agent / Structure** ("Individualism / Holism")
the structure of the international system is important = holist or structuralist approach
but
socialization → states interact → learn → change their identity → modify the international environment
= agent and structure influence each other

**Idealism / Materialism**

| ideas define identities which impart meaning to material capabilities and behaviour of actors | however, constructivists believe in the existence of the material world |
| material conditions acquire meaning for human action only through the shared knowledge that ideas ascribe to them |

Materialists: power and national interest are the driving forces in international politics.

Constructivism = idealism + "some form of structuralism"
but
close to the borders of materialism and individualism
The Ontological Position of Constructivism

Alexander Wendt’s Map of International Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holism</th>
<th>Individualism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World Systems Theory</td>
<td>Classical Realism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Materialism</td>
<td>Neorealism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gramscian Marxism</td>
<td>Domestic Liberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English School</td>
<td>Neoliberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Society</td>
<td>Ideas Liberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism</td>
<td>Constructivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructivism</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Alexander Wendt
- 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: the Social Construction of Power Politics' (article, 1992)
- *Social Theory of International Politics* (book, 1999)

- Alexander Wendt laid the theoretical groundwork for **challenging** what he considered to be a flaw shared by both neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists, namely, a commitment to a **(crude) form of materialism**.

- By attempting to show that even such a core realist concept as "**power politics" is socially constructed" - that is, not given by nature and hence, capable of being transformed by human practice - Wendt opened the way for a generation of international relations scholars to pursue work in a wide range of issues from a constructivist perspective.
"ideas and norms might not only constrain but also **construct** how states define their national interests"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>states are important</th>
<th>&quot;state-society complex&quot;: state + <strong>society</strong> are IR relevant</th>
<th>&quot;states are people too&quot;: states <strong>learn</strong> from their interaction (<strong>socialization</strong>)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Social structures = 3 elements:
- shared knowledge
- material resources
- practices

| Shared understandings, expectations, or knowledge ↓ define (in part*) social structures ↓ CONSTITUTE:  
| • the actors in a situation  
| • the nature of their relationships (cooperative or conflictual) |

* in part because material resources also contribute

‘500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons because the British are friends and the North Koreans are not’

Power and interest have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up.
Actors influence the structure:
The three cultures of anarchy ("anarchy is what states make of it"):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degrees of cultural interiorization:</th>
<th>EU; the Western defence community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd - legitimacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd - price</td>
<td>EEC; US-Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st - force</td>
<td>WWII; US-USSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within the EU, Germany compels Greece to adopt austerity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hobbes</th>
<th>Locke</th>
<th>Kant</th>
<th>← international culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>enemy</td>
<td>rival</td>
<td>friend</td>
<td>← degree of cooperation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frequency of wars depends on the type of culture.
Groups of states can evolve toward a Kantian community

the Western security community

Security can be improved if ways of thinking change.
The Importance of International Norms

**Martha Finnemore:**
International norms promoted by international organizations can decisively influence national guidelines by pushing states to adopt these norms in their national policies.

> Importance of
> • norms
> • international organizations
>   ↓
> - diffusion
> - internationalization
> - institutionalization
> of norms
>   ↓
> socialization of states
### International Regime Theory - Neoliberal vs. Constructivist views

| The hegemon creates the regime | → cooperation within the international regime (under hegemony); states realize the **mutual benefits of cooperation** | → the regime survives even when the hegemon ceases to exist |

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**Weak cognitivist regimes theory** = based on **interest**

*(including Neoliberalism)*
Strong cognitivist regimes theory = based on legitimacy and internalization (including Constructivism)
Examples:

**The importance of international norms:**
- the progressive international rejection of apartheid = creation, diffusion, internationalization, institutionalization and respect of a new international norm;

**International socialization:**
- the transformation of the interests and identity of former communist states that democratized and became 'normal' actors of the international system:
### CONTRIBUTIONS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

- A return to a more sociological, historical and practice-oriented form of IR scholarship
- The awareness of the influence of socially constructed sets of collective images of world affairs, their inherent subjectivity and their inability to fully capture global realities contributes to appreciation of the **limits of valid theoretical interpretation** and accurate representation of the subject matter
- Constructivism cautions us to be **sceptical about all claims of truth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Realism</th>
<th>Liberalism</th>
<th>Constructivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core concern</td>
<td>War and security</td>
<td>Institutionalized peace</td>
<td>Social groups’ shared meanings and images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How vulnerable, self-interested states survive in an environment where they are uncertain about the intentions and capabilities of others</td>
<td>How self-serving actors learn to see benefits to coordinating behavior through rules and organizations in order to achieve collective gains</td>
<td>How ideas, images and identities develop, change, and shape world politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key actors</td>
<td>States</td>
<td>States, international institutions, global corporations</td>
<td>Individuals, nongovernmental organizations, transnational networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central concepts</td>
<td>Anarchy, self-help, national interest, relative gains, balance of power</td>
<td>Collective security, reciprocity, international regimes, complex interdependence, transnational relations</td>
<td>Ideas, images, shared knowledge, identities, discourses, and persuasion leading to new understandings and normative change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach to peace</td>
<td>Protect sovereign autonomy and deter rivals through military preparedness and alliances</td>
<td>Institutional reform through democratization, open markets, and international law and organization</td>
<td>Activists who promote progressive ideas and encourage states to adhere to norms for appropriate behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global outlook</td>
<td>Pessimistic: great powers locked in relentless security competition</td>
<td>Optimistic: cooperative view of human nature and a belief in progress</td>
<td>Agnostic: global prospect hinges on the content of prevailing ideas and values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CRITIQUES OF CONSTRUCTIVISM
- difficulty in establishing a general theory of IR
Neorealists:
- sceptical about the importance of international norms = routinely disregarded by powerful states
- not ready to accept that states can easily become friends due to their social interaction
- importance of deception (constructivists = that social interaction between states is always sincere)
World System Theory = the material structure of global capitalism = little room for constructivist social interaction