Can Constructivism Explain the Arab Spring?

Written by Susanne Hartmann

Can Constructivism Explain the Arab Spring?

Does Social Constructivism Explain Contemporary Events in the Current International System?

Regimes have fallen; the Arab world's first presidents have been removed from office and even put on trial by popular will. If the international system were solely based on, for example, realist perspectives, where changes in the system depend on the egoist states and their utilitarian policies, the act of desperation by Mohamed Bouazizi in the winter of 2010 (The Economist, 2011a) would probably either have never happened or not have become a catalyst for the series of uprisings in the Middle East, collectively called the Arab Spring. The idea that social forces such as ideas, norms and rules influence states' identities and interests has gained increased acknowledgement in the study of the current international system, as mainstream international relations theories seem to offer only limited applications to contemporary events. As Nicholas Onuf argues, international politics is "a world of our making"; there is a process of interaction between agency and structure and the international system is constituted by ideas, not material forces (Onuf, 1989:341). Using the Arab Spring as a case study throughout this essay, it will be argued that social constructivism can explain events in the international system due to its ontological position that emphasizes that "structures not only constrain; they also constitute the identity of actors" (Fierke in Dunne, 2010:181). The aim of this essay is to investigate in what ways social constructivism can explain the Arab Spring as a response to social forces and a globalization of norms. Following an overview of social constructivism, this essay will explore in what ways the theory can explain some of the causes of the Arab Spring, examining its flexibility due to its ontological position and its stance in the structure and agency debate. The essay will then look at how social constructivism can explain the spread of the Arab Spring to other countries to show that the theory can explain different events, followed by an outline of criticisms regarding the extent of its success as a tool of explaining contemporary events in the current international system.

Many of the mainstream international relations theories assume that all states concerned have a level of similarity resulting in fixed "generalization and theory construction" (Fierke in Dunne, 2010:179). However, despite the 'generalization', these theories failed to predict and explain international politics in times such as the outbreak of the Cold War, post-Cold War events, and recently the Arab Spring. Social constructivism, on the other hand, differs from these 'generalizations' as it emphasizes the importance of social dimensions and gives more meaning to norms, language, rules and identities (Barnett, 2011:151-153). These make the international system a constant process of construction and interaction, where structures are shaped by agency and vice versa and are not fixed through 'generalizations'. As Alexander Wendt wrote: "Anarchy is what states make of it"; unlike the rationalists, who emphasize that structures constrain, norms and identity have constitutive roles in relation to the relationship between agency and structure (Wendt, 1992). Therefore, constructivists see knowledge as constructed as opposed to created. Epistemologically, social constructivism is in-between positivist and post-positivist perspectives, making it adaptive, organized and constrained at the same time. Constraints happen because, as John Gerard Ruggie wrote:

"… epistemology contradicts ontology. In many (…) puzzling instances, actor *behavior* has failed adequately to convey intersubjective *meaning.* (…) In the simulated world, actors cannot communicate *and* engage in behavior; they are condemned to communicate *through* behavior. In the real world, the situation of course differs fundamentally." (Ruggie, 1998:95-96).

One of the interpretations of the origins of the Arab Spring is that it erupted in Tunisia, a small country that was more

Can Constructivism Explain the Arab Spring?

Written by Susanne Hartmann

educated than the Arab norm and with strong links to Europe (BBC, 2013). Social constructivism can explain this as the proliferation of democratic norms, largely brought about through media technologies and social networks interactions, often labeled as the concept of globalization, which led the youth in the Middle East to become the main agent and force of change during the Arab Spring. It can be argued that the Arab Spring would not have happened without social interaction, as these exchanges both on the domestic and international level mutually constituted conflict. Contrary to Samuel P. Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations" theory (Huntington, 1993), Arabs did not despise Western liberty but they instead desired it (Mogahed, 2012). Ideas of human rights, freedom, social equity and dignity flooded the Middle East and weakened the structure that had been established in the area for centuries. Even though structure clearly sets parameters in a political system, these parameters are not bound to be irreversible. Indeed, it might be because many leaders in the Middle East assumed that their set parameters were irreversible, that they believed in the durability of their political authoritarianism (El-Mahdi, 2012:13). Because they felt reassured in their supposedly safe identity and structure, the increased influx of ideas and Western norms through a process of globalization was not deemed as a threat. But the agents of political socialization were adept at influencing the people's consciousness, especially through media (El-Mahdi, 2012:63). The more frequent the social interactions became, through the help of social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and BlackBerry Messenger, the more the people were ready to reconstruct their social identities. As Toby Dodge wrote: "The demands for full citizenship, for the recognition of individual political rights, were a powerful unifying theme across the Arab revolutions" (Dodge, 2012). This human consciousness was one of the most powerful tools for the structural change, where the relationship between material forces and ideas consequently led to the people questioning the origins of what they had accepted as a fact of their lives, resulting in the idea to establish an alternative pathway, an alternative world in the Middle East (Barnett in Baylis, 2011:159).

The high levels of attention and sharing of the story worldwide caused a wave of knowledge and Western ideals that spread over to many other regions in the Middle East. Arguably, the high levels of attention were brought about through the recognition by the Western world of their own norms and structures taking root in the Middle East. It started an unraveling of autocracy, as "beneath the surface stability, there was political misery and sterility" (Ajami, 2012). By widening the lens to the whole region, it becomes clear that young people who came from different backgrounds and educational systems were inspired by the same political ideas and economic opportunities, thus they responded to the happening in Tunisia and "rose up against their sclerotic masters" (Ajami, 2012). According to the Critical Theorist Jürgen Habermas, individuals who want either to retain or to recreate their lifestyles in the public sphere, which the state has structured and occupied, "turn to grassroots mobilization through new social movements" (Habermas 1989; El-Mahdi, 2012:64). The ability to mobilize through informal networking with the masses and civil society organizations connected agents throughout the Middle East and challenged state authorities and structures, influencing the changing politics in authoritarian regimes. The different countries had similar identities in relation to religious discourse and their regimes, so that the same ideas and norms encouraged people to bypass the "stagnant discourse" and "gain legitimacy for their new human rights stance" (El-Mahdi, 2012:64). The authoritarian regimes restricted the public sphere, which led the social movements to find ways to express their ideas and gain 'Western' freedom by developing new ideas and juxtaposing them against their political structure, thus producing an interactive process of structure and agency. When Western norms spread to the Middle East, people brought their habitual practices into discourse and used their forms of new knowledge to correspond to new forms of power, consequently remodeling their structure and national identity. As civil society can be seen as an arena of engagement and social exchange, it makes social constructivism a reasonable theory to explain the Arab Spring.

Although social constructivism seems to be a useful approach to explain contemporary events, such as the Arab Spring, it is important to keep in mind some of the criticisms aimed at the theory. Because of the very reason that the theory is so adaptive, due to its ontological and epistemological positions, the knowledge it creates is organized by social groups and might only relate to that one social group and not necessarily to any other. However, as was shown by the Arab Spring, one social group alone can bring a great amount of change and should therefore not be underestimated. Even though the Arab Spring was a historic moment in the politics of the Middle East, short- and long-term changes and impacts in the structure remain unpredictable. It might have been the Western powers that shaped and controlled "most aspects of power and policy across the Arab world, whether due to imperial self-interest (…) or pro-Israeli biases" (Khouri, 2011). Mainstream theories such as realism can therefore not be ignored, but cannot on their own explain the spread of the Arab Spring spirit throughout the Middle East. Moreover, it was not only

Can Constructivism Explain the Arab Spring?
Written by Susanne Hartmann

discontent about structure that led to the revolution, but it was also the want for economic competition, both domestically and internationally. This emphasizes the neo-liberal perspectives on the international system, and the crucial effects of globalization. Even Mohamed Bouazizi was partially concerned because the state had removed his competiveness in his market. However, with globalization came not only increased economic competition but also the spread of a new set of norms, reemphasizing that social constructivism remains one of the most useful theories in approaching the examination of the magnitude of the Arab Spring.

In conclusion, it can be said that common expectations led the power to shift "from the few to the many, from carefully guarded airways to open source networks" (Mogahed, 2012). Identity throughout the Middle East has changed, and as Dalia Mogahed observed so clearly in 2012:

"People used to gather in cafes to watch football (…) and now they gathered to watch parliament. Less than 24 months ago, it was the people that were nervous about being watched by the parliament."

A new generation, well educated, connected and inspired by new norms and values, has created a new reality. Structures are not fixed, but are flexible constructions that interact with the norms and identities of agents and agencies. Social constructivism is therefore an important theory that can explain some events in the current international system.

Bibliography

Ajami, F. (2012) *The Arab Spring at One*. [online] Available at: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137053/fouad-ajami/the-arab-spring-at-one?page=show [Accessed: 18 Mar 2013].

Bannerman, G. (2012) The key to understanding the 'Arab Spring'. *Reuters Opinion*, [blog] October 11, 2012, Available at: http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2012/10/11/the-key-to-understanding-the-arab-spring/ [Accessed: 18th March 2013].

Barnett, M. (2011) Social Constructivism. In: Baylis, J. and Smith, S. eds. (2011) *The Globalization of World Politics*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

BBC News (2013) *Tunisia profile*. [online] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14107241 [Accessed: 18 Mar 2013].

Dodge, T. (2012) *The Middle East after the Arab Spring*. [online] Available at: http://www2.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR011/FINAL_LSE_IDEAS__ConclusionsTheMiddleEastAfterTheArabSpring_Dodge.pdf [Accessed: 18 Mar 2013].

El-Mahdi, K. (2012) *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

Fierke, K. (2010) Constructivism. In: Dunne, T. and Kurki, M. eds. (2013)*International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Habermas, J. (1989) *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Huntingon, S. (1993) The Clash of Civilizations?. *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (3), Available at: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations [Accessed: 22 April 2013].

Khouri, R. G. (2013) *Drop the Orientalist term 'Arab Spring'*. [online] Available at: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2011/Aug-17/Drop-the-Orientalist-term-Arab-Spring.ashx#axzz2NqQ2asE2 [Accessed: 18 Mar 2013].

Can Constructivism Explain the Arab Spring?

Written by Susanne Hartmann

Mogahed, D. (2012) *Dalia Mogahed: The attitudes that sparked Arab Spring | Video on TED.com*. [online] Available at: http://www.ted.com/talks/dalia_mogahed_the_attitudes_that_sparked_arab_spring.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2013].

Onuf, N. (1989) *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and IR* , Columbia, University of South Carolina Press.

Ruggie, J. (1998) *Constructing the World Polity: Essays on international institutionalism*. New York: Routledge.

The Economist (2011a) *A golden opportunity?*. [online] Available at: http://www.economist.com/node/18486089 [Accessed: 18 Mar 2013].

The Economist (2011b) *Hope springs eternal*. [online] Available at: http://www.economist.com/node/21552996 [Accessed: 18 Mar 2013].

Wendt, A. (1992) *Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics*. [online] Available at: http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2706858?uid=3739256&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21101997688867 [Accessed: 18 Mar 2013].

—

Written by: Susanne Hartmann
Written at: University of Birmingham
Written for: Dr. Marco Vieira
Date written: March 2013