The International System as Social Construct

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How much of the international system is 'socially constructed'? To what extent does the theory of social constructivism offer the best explanation for the reasons why?

Introduction

In his seminal work *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz points to the international system as the prime determinant of international relations. Thus, the number of great powers and their configuration within an anarchic structure provides all states with a similar set of interests (Waltz, 1979). Over the last three decades, Waltz' Neorealist approach to International Relations has been the dominant way many scholars and students study the subject. Yet, this Neorealist approach has come under increasing attacks. One such attack comes from the Constructivist school, which argues that while there may be an international system, it is socially constructed and therefore has features different from those promulgated by Neorealist theorists.

What do we mean by social construction, and, if there is such a thing, how does it impinge on the practice and study of international relations? This essay will assess the extent to which it can be said that the international system is indeed socially constructed. In order to go about answering this question, it will be outlined briefly what is conventionally understood by the term international system in the Neorealist sense. Subsequently, the essay will illustrate what social construction as a concept entails and how the international system may be understood as a socially constructed entity. Lastly, Social Constructivism as a theory of International Relations will be contrasted with Neo-Gramscian theories as an alternative way to explain the social construction of the international system. The essay will conclude that the international system is fundamentally a socially constructed entity which can be best approached by theories of Social Constructivism.

The International System

In *Man, the State, and War*, Kenneth Waltz distinguishes three levels of analysis to explain the occurrence of conflict; individual agents, nation states, and the international system (Waltz, 1959). In further redefining Realist theory in the 1970s and 1980s, the international system came to be the focal point of a Neorealist analysis of international politics. According to Neorealists, the system is fundamentally characterized by the absence of centralized order. There is no sovereign to keep nation states from doing what they must in order to realize their national interests. Subsequently, this feature of the international system conditions the behavior of states as they see themselves confronted with the state of anarchy.

Thus, for Neorealists – and others including Neoliberal Institutionalists and many Marxist theorists – the international system is a more or less fixed entity which arises due to the fundamental properties of the world we inhabit. While the number and configuration of nation states within the system may be subject to change, anarchy as a defining feature remains immutable and informs states' actions. States' interests are dictated by their position within the system and the capabilities they possess. Yet, this definition of the international system can be challenged from a multitude of perspectives. Material structures do not necessarily dictate outcomes, and social identities play a role in shaping an intersubjective world. These notions build on a conception of social construction.

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What is Social Construction?

In contrast to the materialist conception of the international system offered most prominently by Neorealists, there are other approaches which emphasize that the system should not be taken as a given. Rather, the system is socially constructed not only by the agents which inhabit it, but also by the interplay between agents and system. Wendt offers a two-part definition of what social construction refers to. For one, it reflects that 'the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material' (1995: 71). Secondly, it conveys that structures not only shape behavior, but fundamentally define actors' identities and interests (1995: 71-2). Crucially, the concept of structuration as developed by Giddens (1979: 5) plays a central role with regard to how agents and structures are interrelated and condition each other. Thus, agents are neither completely independent from the environment in which they have been socialized, nor entirely determined by it. The corollary is that the mutual relationship between agents and structures is an ongoing process rather than a rigid straight jacket.

Hence, agents help to shape structure and reproduce that very structure continuously. Structure is not exogenous, but only makes sense to agents given a particular context. Therefore, structure can take on different meanings at different times. In this context, the concept of intersubjectivity is crucial in understanding what social construction means. Hopf maintains that 'meaningful behavior, or action, is possible only within an intersubjective social context' (1998: 173). To understand what intersubjectivity refers to, it is helpful to employ Karl Popper's conceptualization of the three worlds. Whereas worlds one and two are the physical and subjective worlds, respectively, world three is the world that is created through language and cultural practices (Popper, 1982: 118) Thus, against the backdrop of the physical and the subjective worlds, there is an intersubjective world that is characterized by the fact that it exists by virtue of collective agreement. This notion builds on the work of Habermas in the sense that 'social reality is not an objective category, but relies on conventions that are widely accepted' (Steans et al., 2004: 188).

Intersubjectivity leads to the establishment of what are called social facts. Searle points out that 'there are portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement' (1995: 1). For instance, it can be argued that the anarchic character of the international system exists because we all agree that this is the case. Whereas Neorealists and others maintain that anarchy exists independently of the particular agents and their interactions, those arguing that the international system is socially constructed point out that anarchy is not necessarily monolithic. Wendt famously proclaims that 'anarchy is what states make of it' (1992: 395), while Milner highlights that it is not always clear what anarchy refers to and that it may change subject to different contexts (1991). Thus, in contrast to the argument that anarchy follows some sort of logic, it is rather a constructed institution which emerges due to agents giving it a particular meaning.

The particular meanings that are given to different features of the international system make up an important part of the argument for social construction. Conventionally, only the actors' behavior is taken as being significant. Yet, social identities represent an essential feature which determines the shape of the international system. Neufeld defines intersubjective meanings as 'the product of the collective self-interpretations and self-definitions of human communities' (1995: 77). For instance, the United States' particular self-identity as a great global power and free trading hegemon has a bearing on the international system in the sense that it defines its interests. Contrary to Waltz' assumption that all states are functionally similar (1990: 36), Hall argues that the 'social construction of identities […] is necessarily prior to more obvious conceptions of interests' (1993: 51). Identities not only affect national interests, but generate them in the first place.

In turn, social identities are essential in defining the structure of the international system. Reus-Smit has associated emergent human rights norms with the redefinition of what sovereignty meant during the period of decolonization (2001: 520). Moreover, the European Union serves as a useful example to illustrate that the social construction of an identity – being European – can radically transform states' interests. It would be hard to argue that European states are subject to the type of Hobbesian anarchy Neorealists subscribe to with regard to their mutual relations. Rather, they share a collective understanding of the idea of Europe. Therefore, Adler maintains that the EU should be understood as a security community defined by certain practices and shared meanings (1997: 345). Hence, the international system is socially constructed through the generation and reproduction of identities as well as shared or divergent collective understandings.

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Theorizing Social Construction

There are a plethora of IR theories which see the world as socially constructed. Most obviously, Social Constructivism has become the most notable challenger to Neorealist and Neoliberal theories of International Relations. However, both Postmodernism as well as Neo-Gramscian theories also feature strongly constructivist characteristics. All of these theories differ with regard to the extent that they emphasize the non-material basis of world politics. Whereas Neo-Gramscian theory pays more attention to material structure, Postmodernism focuses on the role played by language and communication. Social Constructivism is situated somewhere between these positions.

Social Constructivism focuses on how the physical world is interpreted by subjective agents, and how that interpretation is reproduced and changes over time as people interact with each other. Adler defines Constructivism as

'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' (1997: 322).

As such, Constructivism does not dismiss the reality or significance of the material world, but rather investigates in what way this material world has a bearing on people's identities and actions. As Tannenwald notes, the meaning of material power is ultimately defined by ideas (2005: 19). Therefore, while the material world – that is economic wealth, military power, population size and so on – certainly matters, it is the interpretation of it that is crucial. In this context, Wendt cautions that 'power and interest have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up' (1999: 35)

It is important to note that, as pointed out by Checkel, Constructivists do not differ from mainstream theories epistemologically, but in an ontological sense (1998: 327). Thus, while they question conventional approaches to the international system in terms of their conception of structure and material power, Constructivists acknowledge that there are truths to be uncovered and that there is space for causal explanation. In this respect, Constructivism contrasts more strongly with deliberatively interpretive postmodern approaches, some of which claim that reality 'can be nothing other than a text' (Alexander, 1995: 103). On this basis, Constructivism can offer powerful explanations as to how particular states conceive of their self-identity, how interests are shaped and how material and ideational power are interrelated.

A somewhat different approach to social construction is offered by Neo-Gramscian theories. This approach emphasizes the role played by material structure in legitimizing certain ideas over others. Thus, ideas only gain currency if supported by a 'particular configuration of social classes and ideology that gives content to a historical state' (Cox, 1987: 409). The analysis is different from a Constructivist perspective in that it seeks to distinguish which ideas succeed and which forces prevail over others. Neo-Gramscian approaches see ideas as a legitimizing force (Bieler, 2001: 97). Thus, in a sense this approach turns Constructivism on its head; ideas are vapid if not rooted in material structure. By contrast, Constructivism claims that the material world is unintelligible in the absence of intersubjective meanings.

Nevertheless, while highlighting the dialectical relationship between ideas and material structure, Neo-Gramscian approaches do not offer an explanation of social construction equivalent to Constructivist theories. Intersubjectivity, social meanings and identities are reduced to derivatives of material structures rather than powerful transformative practices. For this reason, social construction can best be approached through a Constructivist perspective which highlights how the material world is transformed through the interaction between agents and structures. It emphasizes how interests and identities are shaped by beliefs and norms that are produced and reproduced in conjunction with structure.

Conclusion

This essay has outlined how the international system is conventionally understood, to what extent it can be said to be

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socially constructed, and how theories of Constructivism and Neo-Gramscian approaches help to explain the international system as a socially constructed entity. In contrast to Neorealist framings of the international system, there are clear indications that intersubjective meanings and social identities shape the system in multiple ways. Social construction builds on a more convincing notion of structure which does not depend on a mechanical and overly deterministic view of how structure dictates actions. While Neo-Gramscian approaches offer an alternative perspective, they ultimately treat ideas as derivative of structure. Hence, Constructivism provides a framework that features both interpretive as well as explanatory dimensions.

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