

# Constructivism's Relevance to Understanding Brexit

Written by Laura Katharina Albinger

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The current rise of populism in Europe and the growing anti-European sentiment in many of the EU member-states' internal politics is contrasting the development of a common European identity. It first evolved after the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War first with the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECC) and grew ever since in number of member states as well as issue areas targeted by the EU policies. Brexit – Great Britain (UK) deciding to leave the European Union in a still ongoing procedure after a 52% majority voted to leave the EU on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016 (Frere, et al., 2019) – represents currently the most complex, well-known example for this development and is hence requiring the use of International Relations' theories to better explain main reasons for Brexit as well as central parts of the Brexit developments. Focusing on identity, power and legitimacy, and norms as central aspects influencing the Brexit procedure Constructivism promotes a greater understanding of the UK ending its EU membership. To apply this theory, an overview of Constructivism's intellectual, meta-theoretical background and a brief analysis of the aforementioned concepts is necessary to understand the Brexit related issues: the British identity and national interest in contrast to the idea of a European identity, the internal legitimacy dispute in the British parliament during the Brexit deal negotiations and the normative structure on which the procedure is based.

### Constructivism

Constructivism as an IR theory emerged as a critique of the two conventional IR theories Liberalism and Realism with the term "Constructivism" being introduced into International Relations in 1989 by Nicholas Onuf who referred to the variety of postpositivist approaches (Fierke, 2016, p. 161). Historical events in international politics like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Soviet Union and the continuing existence of NATO, could not be sufficiently explained by the two mainstream IR theories. However, through integrating sociological and philosophical aspects into the analysis Constructivism could promote a greater understanding and thus became increasingly influential in the mid-1990s (Owens, et al., 2017, p. 5). "If the United States and Soviet Union decide they are no longer enemies, the cold war is over" (Weber, 1992). This quote of Alexander Wendt, the central constructivist scholar, underlines the importance of change and human agency as central ideas of Constructivism and presents the theories added-value in the discipline of international relations (Barnett, 2017, p. 146). After first being only an approach within the two main theories Liberalism and Realism, the constructivist approach developed into a theory through the consideration of human consciousness and a social constructed world (Owens, et al., 2017, p. 6).

Constructivism is based on a distinct philosophy of science including the principles of holism, mutual constitution, a critique of rationalism and structures-agent differentiations. Constructivism follows a holist approach in its analysis, observing the system as a whole and discouraging a unit-based differentiation, as the international system is social and interconnected (Barnett, 2017, p. 147). The actors in the international political system are constrained by the system whilst their identity is constituted by it, thus a structure-agent differentiation is utilized in order to analyze the construction of the international political system (Fierke, 2016). Thus, being constrained by the structures, the various agents mutually construct the others and themselves, through interaction and influence.

Seeing the world as socially constructed with norms, actors, structures and institutions in a social constitutive framework, the rationalist individualist ontology cannot be applied and a social ontology based on the meaning-providing social context is essential for the theory (Fierke, 2016, p. 168).

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Within the constructivist philosophy of science exists a debate about the nature of the theory's epistemology, as the theory first adapted a positivist epistemology claiming that all knowledge originated from a single truth through which it gained a greater legitimacy in the social scientific field and allowed the use of common scientific methods, such as hypothesis testing (Fierke, 2016, p. 170). With a growing importance of language and interpretations for analyzing international politics, the connection between a social ontology and a positivist epistemology were perceived as inconsistent, leading to the development of a "consistent constructivism" with a social epistemology and ontology (Fierke, 2016, p. 170).

Like other IR theories Constructivism mostly focuses on a system-level of analysis, seeking to explain the interactions and mutual constitution of actors on an international scale, however through the foreign policy analysis approach of Constructivism, the theory also includes state-level considerations (Fierke, 2016). To apply Constructivism to the empirical case of Brexit, a mostly state-level analysis of national British identity and collective European identity linked to a divergence of interests, legitimacy considerations and norm-following behavior is required.

## Central concepts of Constructivism

Due to Constructivism's social ontology and focus on the actor-agency structure the constitution and role of identity in international relations is a central concept for the theory. In an interconnected social world, identities are mutually constituted through a deeper understanding and differentiation between self and other, thus allowing for the identity to exist only within a specific "socially constructed world" (Barnett, 2017, p. 148). This social identity provides a base for the actions taken on a domestic but mostly international level as well as the actors interests, relations and interactions with other actors. Therefore, the social-beings cannot be separated from their "context of normative meaning" (Fierke, 2016, p. 164) as individuals, states and other actors simultaneously influence and get influenced by their environment. Like relations, identities are hence subject to change as they are a product of historical processes and interaction, and shaped by cultural, political, and material circumstances (Fierke, 2016, p. 165).

Thus identities of communities are constructed through the unification of a common perception of culture, history, politics and are often linked to certain community symbols. Within a community identity a distinction between civic, ethnic and cultural identity provides a useful distinction as civic and cultural identities allow the people to have multiple identities as their community membership is norm- based, whilst an ethnic identity is based on "common language, tradition and religion but also stresses the importance of being a member of the nation's dominant ethnic or racial group" (Nielsen, 2019, p. 9).

In a socially constructed world, recognition as an actor and legitimacy for all the actions taken are centrally linked to the power of the actor, which contrary to Realism, is defined in mostly ideational and not material terms (Barnett, 2017, p. 151). The actor's power is thus perceived as the ability to influence and affect norms as well as to establish a meaning or an interpretation, whilst this power and the actions taken are constraint by the international system (Fierke, 2016). Since the actor's identity centrally influences the national interest and thus provides a base for the actor's further actions, a main goal in international politics is to acquire recognition and legitimacy (Barnett, 2017, p. 149). This legitimacy is gained through mutual recognition of the states as such and the formal acceptance other international organizations active in specific policy areas.

Following the logic of appropriateness, the actors are not merely striving to meet their initial interests through their action as stated by the logic of consequences, but also that their rule-following action is recognized and legitimized in the international context through the logic of appropriateness (Fierke, 2016, p. 166; Barnett, 2017, p.150). Thus, actors conduct a cost-benefit analysis with the legitimacy consideration in order to act in their possible best interest in a situation, making the two logics not mutually exclusive but allowing them to be combined (Barnett, 2017, p.150).

For both the construction of identity, legitimacy and power, the normative international structure is of central importance by providing a socially developed framework of collective ideas, norms, knowledge and rules (Barnett, 2017, p. 147) to constrain and construct the actor, develop standards of action and meaning. Since the construction and linguistic expression of material reality is dependent on the normative structure, the international system is dependent, influenced and consists of the reality-based social construction of history and culture (Barnett, 2017, p.

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148). Hence social facts are a sub-concept used to describe a broadly accepted socially constructed reality found in a underlying structure of language, categories and meaning promoting human agreement on these facts (Barnett, 2017, p. 148).

The actors in international politics are faced with either regulative rules governing existing behavior or constitutive rules to set a standardized framework allowing the occurrence of certain actions (Barnett, 2017, p. 149). These regulations and norms are institutionalized on varying levels as the norm-based international system evolved over time and is subject to change due to social construction and ongoing interpretations of norms within the existing framework (Barnett, 2017, pp. 148, 149). Since these norms present a central part in international politics, actors also attempt to actively influence them to better fit their constructed interests and actions, the actor's success is largely dependent on legitimacy and power.

## Empirical case: Brexit

As identities are socially constructed through historical, political and cultural circumstances and influenced by the interaction with other actors, identities have a unifying as well as a dividing power. Due to Britain's unique historical situation, being an Empire and the leading country of the Commonwealth after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Britain had stronger ties with countries outside of Europe, thus a strong European integration and interdependence was not perceived as Britain's national interest (Nielsen, 2019). After the international influence of the UK declined, the former empire started to favor becoming a member of the then European Economic Community (EEC) for the economic benefits of a common market, however due to the fear of Americanized influence the British application was vetoed twice in 1961 and 1967 by the French Premier Minister and Britain was only able to join the EEC in 1973 (Nielsen, 2019, p. 3). After joining the EEC, a nation-wide referendum questioning whether to remain in the European Community was held in 1975, which resulted in a clear majority to continue the membership. With the further developments of interdependence, mostly a rise in the areas targeted by EU policies, the British interest and identity formed by the country's history and culture contrasted the evolving European Union, thus Britain presented the greatest opposition for further European integration (Nielsen, 2019). With anti-European sentiments on the rise, visible in the increased popularity of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) after 2010, possibly leading to David Cameron's promise to hold a referendum if winning the 2015 national elections, a similar referendum to 1975 was held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016 which allowed for a national debate on sovereignty, migration and national identity as well as European identity (Nielsen, 2019, p. 5).

This specific constructed British identity, which played a crucial role in the Brexit referendum cannot only be analyzed from a historic but also from a geopolitical perspective. Hence, Whittaker argued in his article, that the historic and present British foreign policy is based on a geographically influenced foreign policy discourse, especially being an island nation (Whittaker, 2018, p. 956). "Island identity" – a concept used to explain the policy and security considerations for the varying integration or disintegration policies of the UK into the EU – was used in a critical geopolitical context to underline the influence of identity in the Brexit debate preceding the referendum (Whittaker, 2018).

A central factor for Brexit can be therefore seen in the divergence of the perceived British national identity and a consciously constructed European identity through the unification of the imagined community by creating a collective history, culture and central concepts. This European identity isn't uniform but an addition to the member-states' national identity, hence the extent of the European integration can also be seen in terms of "the Europeanization of the national identity" varying regionally (Nielsen, 2019, p. 19). As shown in Nielsen's analysis, people's perception of their identity in relation to a Europeanized identity is reflected in the British peoples voting patterns, as people with a special focus on their national identity mostly voted to leave the EU whilst people with a perceived dual national identity of seeing themselves as both British and European were essentially remain-voters.

After voting to leave the European Union, the British government was faced with several legitimacy disputes, visible in the two national elections within 3 years and the uncertainty about the decision to leave the EU in general as well as the internally disputed extent of Brexit, which centrally influenced the negotiations for an agreement with the EU to formally terminate the membership in the international organization (Stockemer, 2019, p. 115). Following the

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Constructivist approach, non-material power is necessary in order to influence norms, meanings and interpretations, thus the uncertainty and internal legitimacy struggles in the British government complicated the negotiations between the EU and UK for a so-called Brexit deal. Thus, the internal division in Britain about Brexit ranging from the call for a second referendum or the hope of maintaining close economic relations with the EU and a regulated, soft Brexit or a "hard Brexit" or the possibility of a "no-deal Brexit" due to the lack of coherence, increases the complexity of the negotiations due to the final vote on the Brexit deal by the British parliament (Stockemer, 2019, pp. 114-116). Due to this internal divisions, the official Brexit date has been postponed twice to January 31, 2020 as a majority of the parliament didn't legitimate and approve the deal.

The proceedings set into motion with the vote for Brexit, followed a specific normative, regulated structure, specifically Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union (Lisbon Treaty), which sets a 2 year negotiation deadline for an agreement on the terms of leaving the EU after officially declaring the wish to terminate the membership (Stockemer, 2019, p. 114). As the normative international structure regulates and influences the actors' behavior, the Lisbon Treaty provides the main normative basis for Brexit with constitutive rules, constructing the possible actions after formally filing for Brexit on March 29, 2017, but in addition the domestic regulations of the decision-making process in the British parliament influenced the Brexit negotiation period, in order to legitimize the deal.

## Conclusion

With the vote for the Brexit deal in the British parliament, the Brexit proceedings entered a new phase, with Great Britain leaving the EU on January 31, 2020 another round of UK -EU negotiations focusing on the post-Brexit relations will begin. Problems encountered within the first round of negotiations due to an internally divided British point of view, are likely to further influence the UK, as no perspective on the extent of Brexit is sufficiently legitimized. The referendum, as the starting point for Brexit can be understood as a result of the British national identity, a product of the UK's geography and history, which was perceived as incompatible with a growing European identity.

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