

Constructivism and 'First Encounters': A Critique

Written by Erik Ringmar

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ERIK RINGMAR, AUG 30 2020

Constructivists have taken an interest in so called 'first encounters' (Wendt, 1999). The term refers to the first interaction between two peoples who previously had no contact with each other. Examples include the first contacts between Spanish conquistadors and the native peoples of the New World, or, for that matter, the first encounter, yet to come, between earthlings and extra-terrestrials. First encounters, Constructivists assume, are important for what they can tell us about the way the international system works. The foil for their argument is the Realist understanding of international politics. Realists live in an anarchical, dog-eat-dog, world in which no one can be trusted, least of all someone who we never have met before. While we do not have to be the one who shoots first, Realists explain, we should always keep our weapons loaded and at the ready. As Constructivists point out, however, this attitude establishes a negative feedback loop where suspicion feeds on suspicion, and where we will end up creating exactly the kind of war-prone international system that Realists describe. It is a classical self-fulfilling prophesy.

But it did not have to be like this, Constructivists insist; international anarchy has no predetermined meaning (Wendt, 1992). Instead anarchy is a structural principle which describes the decentralized way in which power is distributed in the international system. As such, and like all principles, it is only as interpreted that anarchy can come to influence our actions. Instead, the outcome of a first encounter depends on how the interaction develops. There are positive feedback loops too. Appreciation can engender more appreciation; trust engender more trust.

This is how it works. Consider two parties who meet each other for the very first time (Wendt, 1999:328-333). They have no idea what to expect from the encounter, but they both bring two things with them: their bodily needs, and some idea regarding which role they want to play. If the one thinks of himself as a 'conqueror,' the other becomes a 'conquered'; if the one is a 'proselytizer,' the other becomes a 'potential convert,' and so on. By acting in terms of these roles, and by expecting the other to conform, they compete to define the situation, and thereby the terms of their interaction. Through their behaviour, and their interpretations of the behaviour of the other, the roles will become increasingly firmly established. A shared interpretation emerges as they teach each other what to expect. Power is important here. The party that can reward behaviour that supports its definitions, and punish behaviour that does not, is in control of the interpretations.

Danced Encounters

The first encounters which Realists and Constructivists describe are obviously theoretical constructions. They are just-so stories in the tradition of state-of-nature theories purporting to explain the origin of the state. This mode of theorizing always relies on a sleight of hand. A certain situation, with a certain logic, is described, and the conclusions that follow are those required by the description — by manipulating the starting-point we can always get the outcome we want. This makes the stylized accounts of first encounters vulnerable to descriptions of actual, historical, cases. So, what actually happened when different peoples encountered each other for the first time? These are some examples:

On December 1, 1498, Vasco da Gama and his four ships made landfall in the vicinity of today's South African city of Port Elizabeth (Ravenstein, 2010). Spotting some natives on the shore, and eager to replenish their supplies, the Europeans launched their dinghies. After an initial exchange of goods, four or five of the natives began playing flutes 'and they danced in the style of Negroes.' Yet it did not take long for Vasco da Gama and his crew to respond in kind.

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'The captain-major then ordered the trumpets to be sounded, and we, in the boats, danced, and the captain-major did so likewise when he rejoined us.' When the dancing ended, the European sailors returned to their ships with a black ox which they had bought for the price of three bracelets. A similar encounter took place on January 21, 1643, when Abel Tasman cast anchor at Tongatapu, the largest island in the Tonga archipelago (Balme, 2007). After he had invited the locals onboard, he treated them to an impromptu performance — 'the mate and the boatswains boy blew on trumpets, another played on the flute, the fourth on a fiddle; the ship's crew danced; at which the Southlanders were so astonished, that [they] forgot to shut their mouths.' In Tonga too dancing was a prelude to an exchange of goods.

Yet first encounters were not always as peaceful. On July 31, 1498, during his third voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus arrived on the eastern coast of the island he proceeded to call 'Trinidad' (Columbus, 1870). The following day a big canoe approached them containing some 24 men, armed with bows, arrows and wooden shields. The Europeans wanted to start trading, but the natives refused to come close. Then Columbus had an idea: 'I ordered a drum to be played upon the quarter-deck, and some of our young men to dance, believing the Indians would come to see the amusement.' Yet what Columbus intended as an inviting gesture was not understood as such. The natives left their oars, strung their bows and began launching arrows at the ships. At this 'the music and dancing soon ceased; and I ordered a charge to be made from some of our cross-bows.' Dancing, as this example illustrates, works best when both parties participate in it. When both parties dance, both parties can get to know each other. The problem with the dance performance staged by Columbus was that it was preceded by no other form of interaction. The natives were given no context by which to understand what the Europeans were up to. They may have concluded that they were performing a war dance.

The first encounter between Charles Darwin and the natives of Tierra del Fuego illustrates the importance of reciprocity. 'In the morning the Captain sent a party to communicate with the Fuegians,' Darwin wrote in his diary on December 17, 1832 (Darwin, 1906). The natives, he reported, are a sad lot. 'Their very attitudes were abject, and the expression of their countenances distrustful, surprised, and startled.' Yet, luckily, they were excellent mimics. As soon as we coughed or yawned or made any odd motion, Darwin recalled, they immediately imitated us. This is how a face-pulling competition got underway. At first 'some of our party began to squint and look awry,' but before long one of the young Fuegians 'succeeded in making far more hideous grimaces.' Next, an old man patted Darwin on the chest and made 'a chuckling kind of noise, as people do when feeding chickens,' and this demonstration of friendship was repeated several times. 'It was concluded by three hard slaps, which were given me on the breast and back at the same time. He then bared his bosom for me to return the compliment, which being done, he seemed highly pleased.' This exchange soon led to dancing. 'When a song was struck up by our party, I thought the Fuegians would have fallen down with astonishment. With equal surprise they viewed our dancing; but one of the young men, when asked, had no objection to a little waltzing.'

Given the tragedy of the subsequent European interaction with the native peoples of Australia, it is remarkable how well the two parties seem to have understood each other at the time of their first encounter (Clendinnen, 2005). On January 29, 1788, three days after the first British ship-load of convicts — the 'First Fleeters' — spotted land in New South Wales, they came across a group of natives on the shore. The locals were friendly and welcoming, and pointed to a good landing place 'in the most cheerful manner, shouting and dancing' in excitement. And as soon as the British had dropped anchor, they joined them. 'We had frequent meetings with different parties of the natives,' John Hunter, a naval officer, reported in his journal. 'They danced and such with us, and imitated our words and motions, as we did theirs.' 'These people mixed with ours,' William Bradley, a British officer, recalled, 'and all hands danced together.' A picture which Bradley painted of the occasion shows Englishmen and natives joining hands and dancing together like children at a picnic.

Carnal knowledge

These interactions seem at first to come fairly close to the Constructivists' theoretical account. Given that Europeans and non-Europeans had no language in common, they were forced to communicate by means of gestures. And the exchanges worked well, except in the case of Columbus in Trinidad. But something more is clearly going on here. The two parties are not just interpreting gestures in order to infer intentions, but the exchanges of gestures seem to

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have acquired a life of their own. They really spend a lot of their time dancing. This is surprising. When we think of European explorers in non-European locations, we rarely think of them as dancers. However, and as an anthropologist might explain, dancing features prominently in welcoming ceremonies in many societies around the world. More than anything, dancing is a way for bodies to get to know each other. Perhaps we could call it 'carnal knowledge' — knowledge acquired by the body. This is the kind of knowledge that Adam had of Eve, and Eve of Adam, when the Bible said they 'knew' each other. But no sex is required, any form of embodied interaction will do. Carnal knowledge is derived from the way our bodies move, co-mingle with other bodies, sweat together, breathe in sync (Ringmar, 2016).

Dancing is a good way to obtain carnal knowledge. By dancing we learn how we can move, we learn about posture and poise, and about the kinds of movements that are possible in a particular place. But we also learn about other dancing bodies, and how we can coordinate our movements with theirs. Dancing is a way to get to know ourselves, other bodies, and the situation in which we find ourselves.

Compare the kind of knowledge that Constructivists discuss. (Wendt, 1999:139-165) The knowledge that interests them is conceptual — the kind of knowledge which is represented in the mind and laid out in words and sentences. Knowledge, according to Constructivists, is always verbalized, or at least verbalizable. You know what the intentions of your counterparts are since you have gathered the evidence and analysed the situation. Gestures matter to a Constructivist too of course, but only to the extent that they allow us to reach these explicit interpretations. Constructivists treat gestures as signs, and like all signs they mean nothing in themselves and only something because of what they represent. Like traffic signs, they point away from themselves, and they must be interpreted, "read," before they can mean something. In a first encounter, gestures only matter to the extent that they are signs of the intentions of the other party.

Carnal knowledge, by contrast, is not conceptual; it does not result in representations in our minds, and it requires no acts of interpretation. Carnal knowledge does not speak, is not verbalized, and although it influences how we think and what we do, the connection is tacit. If someone asks us how we know, the answer is that we know because our bodies know. And if someone asks us why we did a certain thing, the answer is that "it felt like the right thing to do."

Differently put, we must reject the separation between bodies and minds. René Descartes, in the seventeenth-century, insisted on this distinction. A mind, he explained, is *ares cogitans*, a "thinking thing," and a body is *ares extensa*, an "extended thing," and although they are closely related, they are entirely different entities. Constructivists are all Cartesians. There are two kinds of 'independently existing stuff,' they explain; there is 'a world of ideas' and 'a world of material reality' (Wendt, 1999: 112). As a result, Constructivists only discuss bodies in connection with physical needs, and those are best studied by doctors and biologists.

But Descartes was wrong and the Constructivists are wrong too. There are not bodies, on the one hand, and minds, on the other, but only body/minds, inextricably joined compounds. And no actual human being would ever try to pry the two apart. Of course it is possible, for the purposes of a scientific investigation, to artificially sever the connection, but the result will be flawed research. There is no way of telling the dancer apart from the dance, as it were, or the dance apart from the dancer.

Like children at a picnic

There is something wonderfully endearing about the danced encounters. Europeans and non-Europeans were getting on so well together. More than anything they understood each other since their bodies understood each other. Darwin and the Tierra Fuegians had a jokey, easy-going, relationship, and on the beach in New South Wales, Englishmen and Aborigines danced together like children at a picnic. But for that precise reason these encounters are also terribly sad. In all cases, we know what happened next — the exterminations, the European diseases, the long history of discrimination which still is ongoing. Something like 80 percent of the native population of the Americas died as a result of the first encounters, and today there are no Tierra Fuegians left (Todorov, 1984).

While bodies met easily and joyfully, there was no equivalent meeting of minds. Once the Europeans settled down

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and became colonizers, the dancing stopped. Now interpretations took place in words, and the language of the colonial administrators, like all languages, required discriminations to be made, categories to be created and essences to be defined. The knowledge which now was gathered was the kind of rational, detached, knowledge that administrators could put into the reports they sent back to the colonial offices in European capitals. Knowledge was no longer embodied, no longer the result of shared, sweaty, events, but something you obtained from a distance, through detached observations and rational analyses. No, the colonial administrators never danced with the natives.

And yet, despite their rational detachment, the colonial administrators could never detach themselves from their physical locations, and despite the power they wielded over the natives, they could never fully control their own bodies (Gendlin, 2004). Even if they never were mentioned in any official reports, the bodies of the colonial administrators knew about the injustices they perpetrated. Often their superiority registered as a rigid posture, their condescension as an inability to relax, or perhaps as a tendency to overreact in tense situations. After all, even the crimes you get away with can leave a lump in the pit of your stomach, a slight stutter when excited. Sometimes at night, when they heard the beating of drums far off in the jungle, the colonial administrators would have to steel themselves. (Conrad, 1902) It was a primitive sound, haunting but also strangely inviting. It was enough to drive you mad. This, in the end, is why the history of colonialism unfolded as it did — with minds telling one story in official reports, or over drinks in the clubs where expats congregated, and bodies acknowledging quite a different, and far more troubling, reality. We misunderstand colonialism, and the postcolonial legacy, if we only focus on the interpreted, verbalized, aspect of this encounter.

Consider a different example. Consider the curious disconnect between the minds and the bodies of American defence intellectuals (Cohn, 1987). Defence intellectuals are people who make plans for the execution of a nuclear war. Nuclear exchanges are always thought of in rational terms. In order to plan rationally, we must analyse our national interest and the interests of our counterpart, and then look at the weapons at our disposal. To do this, defence intellectuals rely on game theory and simulations. There is a logic to our interaction which can be described in terms such as “first strikes,” “counter-force exchanges,” “minimum deterrent postures” and “nuclear war-fighting capabilities.” To defence intellectuals, that is, war is a purely theoretical enterprise. While they certainly acknowledge that wars lead to death, the death toll is merely a number, and their models include no actual human suffering.

But consider what happens when defence intellectuals talk informally between themselves, or try to explain the logic of a nuclear exchanges to outside audiences. Here the references that defence intellectual constantly employ are gendered, and predominantly physiological (Ringmar, 2017). They talk about strategic missiles in unmistakably phallic terms, or about enemy defences that must be “penetrated” in “enormous blasts.” Although they speak softly, they carry “big sticks.” Here too bodies know something that minds do not fully acknowledge, and the embodied knowledge comes out in these casual remarks. Death and destruction is associated with sex, and more specifically with sexual violence. War is about imposing our bodies on the bodies of others, of dominating, restraining and humiliating them, and eventually killing them. A nuclear war, we are assured, will be the ultimate experience — just ‘one orgasmic whump.’ (Cohn, 1987: 693)

It is a mistake — a mistake which Constructivists make — to only look at the interpreted, verbalized, aspects of international encounters. A study of explicit interpretations and verbalized knowledge is not enough. Our investigations must bring the body and the mind together. If we really want to understand what is going on in international politics, we need intellectual tools that allow us to study what our bodies know and the suggestions they make.

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