Is War A Social Construction?

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Social structures are a key aspect of the theory of constructivism. This essay will therefore pay particular attention to the cause of and role that these structures play in international relations, and to what extent they influence or even cause wars. Considering the entirety of the vast and disparate field of constructivism is beyond the scope of this essay, however, and therefore my focus will be narrowed primarily to the constructivist theories of Wendt. After examining and evaluating his conjectures, I will then move on to consider a less popular perspective in international relations, namely that of evolutionary psychology and anthropology. Bringing these topics together, I will conclude that they are wholly compatible in explaining how war is both socially and evolutionarily constructed.

The Constructivist Lens

Constructivism in International Relations is, as Brown explains, a somewhat nebulous term and is not so much an independent theory alongside realism and liberalism as it is a kind of meta-theory that seeks to challenge the assumptions of those two main theories of the field.[1] As such, and considering the limitations of this essay, I will contend mostly with the constructivism put forth by Wendt, who while not representing the entire view of constructivism, has nevertheless provided significant substance to it. Arguing against the rationalism of structural realism in particular, which explains the system of international relations as a state of anarchy in which states have little choice but to pursue a policy governed by self-interest in order to ensure their survival, constructivists such as Wendt posit that it is the interpretation by states of the system around them that determines their actions, rather than the system itself.

Central to the constructivist critique is the differentiation between "brute facts" and "social facts," where the former are facts that exist regardless of human subjectivity, and the latter are those that exist because they are interpreted to be so.[2] The material world exists independently of our perception of it, but not our assessment of it: as Wendt states, "material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded."[3] For constructivists, norms and ideas exert influence on human behavior just as material conditions do. Since these "social facts" are influenced by human actors, and influence them in turn however, a problem of endogeneity soon presents itself; it is exceedingly difficult (even, as Wight argues, impossible) to determine to what extent the features of international relations are influenced by structures or agents as they "are never totally independent of one another," a point I will return to presently.[4]

Is war, then, a result of social structures? Wendt for his part argues that this is so. Describing bellicose behavior as a self-fulfilling prophecy, he says that this is a result of both agency and social structures: in terms of agency, "what states do to each other affects the social structure in which they are embedded, by a logic of reciprocity."[5] However, in terms of social structure, the "ability of revisionist states to create a war of all against all depends on the structure of shared knowledge into which they enter."[6] Essentially, states as actors generate norms through their collective actions, and these norms will in turn inform other states about what behavior is expected, how the international system should be understood, and what the "rules of the game" are.

Applying this to the example of Imperial Japan for instance, is informative: from a constructivist perspective, the cause of the First Sino-Japanese war may have been the creation of international norms by European empires expanding into the East. Due to its policy of isolationism during the Tokugawa period, Japan had been absent for the

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endogenic agent-structure generation of norms governing international relations. By the time of the Meiji Restoration, where Japan began to interact with other nations and restructure itself along the lines of a Western state (basing its constitution on that of the 1871 Constitution of the German Empire, and its navy on that of the United Kingdom's Royal Navy)[7], Empire had already been firmly established as the "rules of the game," of international relations, and Japan began to build an empire of its own. However, as pointed out by Brown contra Waltz, modern Japan seems to have reinterpreted the meaning of anarchy in the international order and is not attempting to counterbalance the United States or acquire nuclear capabilities of its own.[8] This point is not entirely correct; constitutional amendment allowing Japan to maintain a military of its own (as opposed to a "Self Defense Force" prohibited from foreign deployment) was a long term if unsuccessful goal of the previous Abe administration,[9] and in addition to Japan having hosted American nuclear submarines during the Cold War there has been some debate, especially in 2017 when a North Korean rocket was fired over the Japanese island of Hokkaido, on whether or not Japan should nuclearize.[10] However, popular opinion opposes maintaining nuclear weapons in Japan,[11] and the overall observation of Brown's that contemporary Japan and Germany do not behave as naked structural realism would predict remains valid.

Up until now, the constructivism discussed and even the practical application of it has remained somewhat vague. While the idea that the decisions of states (actors) are informed not solely by the material word (brute facts) but by their interpretation and collective interpretations of these facts (social facts and structures) seems valid and at its core uncontroversial, upon further consideration it raises two main problems:

First, it is not empirically evident how structures interact as they are not themselves directly observable, but observable only in their presumed effect on actors. Indeed, Wendt's separation of anarchy into the categories of Hobbesian, Lockeian, and Kantian anarchy seems to imply that the international social structure is singular and falls into one of these three categories. However this view is complicated when we consider the proposition that peace may be as much a social construction as war is, and yet the two are in fact often found simultaneously in the international system. It is of course true that different actors will make of anarchy different things, but it is unclear in agent-structure causation how much the choices of a hawkish state will influence norms of war relative to the choices of a dovish state influencing norms of peace, or how much norms would be changed by a state pursuing peace compared to if it had pursued war.

Here, let us return to the case of Japan and consider the following counter-factual: let us suppose that after the Black Ships of Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo Bay, Japan decided not to arm itself and begin a project of empire-building but rather pursued exclusively a conciliatory, non-military foreign policy. Wendt seems to argue that this would have an "effect on the structure of shared knowledge, moving it towards a security community."[12] But what sort of effect, and how far towards a security community? Would this have, if not created a Kantian anarchy, at least contributed to one? Or would the later cooperation between Japan and the United Kingdom in the Anglo-Japanese alliance ironically have been no longer possible without an imperialistic foreign policy?

The problem of multiple contradictory social constructions is magnified exponentially if we suspend the state-centric model of Waltz and Wendt and consider instead the five levels of analysis posited by Buzan et al., namely: international systems, international subsystems, states, non-state actors, and individuals.[13] At all of these levels we find agent-structure problems running parallel to each other, since each actor is of course influencing and being influenced by the international system. As such, without the sufficient ontological clarity called for by Wight, that is knowing "what agents and structures actually are" before being able to "investigate the effects they have on each other,"[14] linking effects to causes becomes a vexed endeavor that tends toward the teleological. This in turn begins to confound the question of to what extent war is socially constructed, the previous finding that it is indeed partially socially constructed notwithstanding.

Second and more importantly, however, is the issue of whether actors, when interpreting facts both "brute" and socially constructed, really do so with a *Tabula Rasa* set of cognitive tools. Here I am not arguing in favor of postmodernists, who are, as Wendt puts it, "skeptical about the possibility of objective knowledge."[15] Rather, I argue against the Lockean idea that human cognition is a blank slate that is shaped by our environments, which seems to be implied by how constructivism's actors are influenced exclusively by social constructs that sit between

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the object and the subject.

Instead, I suggest that the reality seems to be more Hobbesian, in that human perception contains *a priori* biases that tend towards self-interest.[16] These biases, I will argue, precede social constructs because they predate society itself. It is to the origin of these biases, and the role they play in war alongside constructivism that I will now turn for the remainder of this essay.

Monkey Realism: The Evolutionary Perspective of War

Whereas for Wendt goals and preferences are defined by identities, from the study of evolutionary biology one goal is seen to be a given: the reproduction of genes into future generations. This is summarized succinctly by Alexander: "what natural selection has apparently been maximizing is the *survival by reproduction* of the genes, as they have been defined by evolutionists, and . . . this includes effects on the copies of genes, even when those copies are located in other individuals."[17] This is essentially the concept of "inclusive fitness", whereby continuation of genomes is attainable not only through direct offspring, but the offspring of any genetic relative. Organisms (or phenotypes) that carry the same genotype will be mutually preferred over carriers of other genotypes, as genotypes that do not behave "selfishly" will have a lower chance of reproduction and therefore will disappear over time as they are outcompeted by genotypes that engage in more self-preferential or nepotistic behavior.

The goal of genotypes to maximally copy themselves into future generations relative to other genotypes need not prevent cooperation, so long as such cooperation does not negatively affect propagation. Indeed, Alexander suggests two methods of cooperation of genotypes through phenotypes: the first, as was briefly discussed above, is that of *nepotism*. Here, phenotypes will confer resources on relatives in order to maximize their relatives', and vicariously their own, reproduction. That is, "an organism . . . gives benefits to a genetic relative [and] expects absolutely nothing in return except an increased reproduction of the genes it shares with the recipient of its altruism."[18]

The second method of cooperation is that of *reciprocity,* which Alexander defines as "interactions that normally occur between nonrelatives, the structure and circumstances of which indicate clearly that each party may be expected or expects to receive benefits greater than those given."[19] In both examples, cooperative acts are engaged in as a means towards achieving ends of augmented competitiveness. It is interesting that to the extent that this 'desire' of genotypes echoes realism, though it does so perhaps along the lines of Mearsheimer's offensive realism, it seems more akin not to structural realism but to the lust for power described by Morgenthau and other classical realists.[20]

Noting the deleterious effects of group living outside of family circles for humans, namely heightened competition for mates and reproduction, Alexander outlines the hypothesis that war and intergroup aggression necessitated the growth of tribes which bequeathed a net benefit to individual members; interestingly, he refers to this as the "Balance of Power Hypothesis." This hypothesis maintains that human history moved through three main stages: first, small tribes that "stayed together for protection against large predators," then, small tribes that remained together for such protection as well as for hunting large prey, and finally "increasingly large . . . bands that stayed together largely or entirely because of the threat of other, similar, nearby groups of humans," with modern society acting as a kind of legacy of the third stage.[21]

It is important to note that the evolutionary perspective does not prescribe a biological determinism to human affairs, or imply that humans are by nature aggressive. Alexander rejects such an assumption, as does Shaw who states the fact that, "war proneness may be innate" does not imply that we are "inherently driven to fight."[22] Supolsky also clarifies that "the action of genes is completely intertwined with the environment in which they function; in a sense, it is pointless to even discuss what gene X does, and instead we should consider instead only what gene X does in environment Y."[23]Otterbein expands on this point: "man is neither, by nature, peaceful nor warlike. Some conditions lead to war, some do not. Among these are (1) The structure of the polity . . . (2) The military organization . . . (3) Coercive diplomacy."[24] Simply put, the "selfish" nature of genes do not predict war unless they are in an environment in which it is more beneficial to do so than to cooperate.

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The extent to which Sapolsky's findings in fact substantiate constructivism is surprising. Describing how researchers captured a pair of baboons from two separate troops with unique social structures and released them into the other troop, Sapolsky remarks that the time it took these baboons to adapt to their new social settings was approximately only an hour.[25] This is entirely consonant with Wendt's assertion that behavior is influenced by given social structures; here the effect of a new culture and set of norms was adopted almost instantly.

Moreover, this example is illustrative of how primates (perhaps including ourselves) are at once influenced in their perceptions to a large extent by the socially constructed world around them, and beholden to fundamental *a priori* goals of genetic reproduction; it should be noted that the environments of these baboons was not one that Otterbein predicted to cause conflict; failing to conform to their new groups, these baboons would have nothing to gain and only risk ostracization or physical attack. Instead, learning the new "rules of the game" allowed the baboons to compete within these new rules as best they could, while still affording the net benefits of group living such as collective defense and access to food.

Conclusion

War is socially constructed. However, this construction is bound by certain *a priori* biases that shape the nature of social interactions and interpersonal relations, which may in turn be reflected on the international relations of states. While it is true that anarchy is what states make of it, it is simultaneously likely that systems in which cooperation based on genetic favoritism become favored over general reciprocity will tend towards aggression, violence, and ultimately war. Therefore, though this prescription may not be entirely novel, it seems that if we wish to cultivate norms and constructions which favor peace it is vital that actors are able to clearly draw sufficient benefits from these systems to justify their cooperation and reciprocity.

Notes

[1] Brown, Chris. "Chapter 4: Agency, Structure, and the State" in *Understanding International Relations* p.45

[2] Ibid

[3] Wendt, Alexander. "Constructing International Politics." *International Security*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1995, p. 73

[4] Brown, p.66

[5] Wendt, p.77

[6] Ibid

[7] Yamamoto, Hiroyuki. Japanese Politics in Comparative Perspective. September 2017. Tokyo International University. Lecture.

[8] Brown p.66

[9]Sieg, Linda. "Abe's Mission Unaccomplished". Reuters 13 Nov. 2019

[10] Matsumura, Masahiro. "The Time for 'Nuclear Sharing' with Japan Is Drawing Near." *The Japan Times*. See also Corr, Anders. "Japan: Go Nuclear Now." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 1 Feb. 2017, and Kurose, Yoshinari. "If Japan Doesn't Go Nuclear, What Are the Options?" *JAPAN Forward*, 19 Oct. 2017.

[11] Inc., Sankei Digital. ⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜18 Sept. 2017, here Sankei News finds that 77% of interviewees are opposed to Japan having nuclear weapons.

[12] Here Wendt argues with the parallel example of the Soviet Union's actions during the 1980s. See Wendt p.77

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[13] Brown p.63

[14] Ibid p.66

[15] Wendt p.75

[16] On the views of these two philosophers, see Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1690*, and Hobbes, Thomas, et al. *Leviathan*. Boom, 2007.

[17] Alexander, Richard D. *Darwinism and Human Affairs*. University of Washington Press, 1988. p.xii

[18] Ibid p.54

[19] Ibid p.52

[20] Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1973. p.56

[21] Ibid p.223-224

[22] Shaw, R. Paul. *Genetic Seeds of Warfare: Evolution, Nationalism, and Patriotism*. Routledge, 2020.

[23] Sapolsky, John. "A Natural History of Peace." *Council on Foreign Relations*. p.4

[24] Otterbein, Keith F. "The Origins of War." *Critical Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1997, p.272

[25] Sapolsky p.4

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Inc., Sankei Digital. "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□." □□□□□□□, 18 Sept. 2017, www.sankei.com/politics/news/170918/plt1709180034-n1.html.

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