

# Constructivism and the role of institutions in international relations

STEFANO GUZZINI

Copenhagen Peace Research Institute  
Fredericiagade 18  
1310 Copenhagen  
Tel: (45) 33455053  
Fax: (45) 33455060  
E-mail: [sguzzini@copri.dk](mailto:sguzzini@copri.dk)

First draft of a paper commissioned for a special issue of the *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, edited by Marco Clementi. A revised, shortened and translated version is expected to be forthcoming in 2003.

## Contents

### Introduction

1. Constructivism as a meta-theoretical commitment  
*The interpretivist, sociological and linguistic turns*  
*'Looping effects' and the relationship between the social construction of meaning and the construction of the social world*
2. Constructivism-inspired theories of IR: the 'debate' with neo-realism and neo-institutionalism  
*'Identity' in a critique of rationalist theories of action*  
*The constructivist synthesis: taking interests more seriously as realists and ideas more seriously as institutionalists*
3. The role of institutions in constructivist understandings of world politics  
*The long-term: institutions and the rules of the game*  
*The short term: the post-Cold War is what we make (made) of it*



# Constructivism and the role of institutions in international relations

STEFANO GUZZINI

Although Italy, in comparison to its Northern neighbours, is not a country of constructivists (Lucarelli and Menotti 2002), many of the themes crucial to constructivism are common currency in Italian academia. For constructivism stands for a series of debates in social theory which made a perhaps late yet virulent intrusion into the discipline of International Relations. Its content is probably best understood as the focus which bundles recent discussions on epistemology and the sociology of knowledge, on the agent-structure debate and the ontological status of social facts, and on the reciprocal relationship between these two.

A first section will introduce constructivism as a meta-theory, or as Kratochwil (2000: 100f.) called it, a ‘meta-theoretical commitment’. It is on this level that it has become usual to compare it with positivism, and now also with rationalist action theories, as in the recent state-of-the-art book published by former editors of *International Organization* (Katzenstein, Keohane et al. 1999).

As a meta-theoretical commitment, constructivism does not refer primarily to a theory which could be compared to other established theoretical schools in International Relations, such as realism or liberalism/pluralism or whatever one wants to call them. Yet, as a second section will show, it still has implications for international theory. Indeed, a considerable part of the interest in meta-theory does not stem from the faddishly abstract curiosities of IR researchers, but from their diagnosis that some of the reasons underlying the theoretical blockages in IR is to be found at this level. Two blockages have spurred most reaction. On the one hand, constructivism is a reaction against the narrow (individualist) conception of international politics underlying game theory and rational choice approaches. On the other hand, it opposes the ‘naturalist’ leanings of diverse ‘realist’ theories of international relations, who claim to know

the world ‘as it really is’ – ultimately unchangeable and historically circular<sup>1</sup> – leanings which ask for some version of scientific positivism (Brown 1992: 90).

Not being a ‘theory’ as the others finally implies that there is little sense in giving *the* constructivist reading of the role of institutions in today’s international affairs. What can be offered is a presentation of how some constructivism-inspired theories think about the role of institutions, both within the constitutive rules of international society and as practical fora for socialisation into such a society. I will conclude on a way how some constructivists could understand today’s world as the renewed ‘social construction of power politics’ (Wendt 1992) trying to put an end to the post-Cold War era: the ‘post-Cold War is what we make of it’.

### **1. Constructivism as a meta-theoretical commitment**

Constructivism emphasises three major inspirations of recent theorising, namely the interpretivist, sociological and linguistic turns in the social sciences. On the basis of this triple inspiration, one can propose a definition of the meta-theoretical commitment of constructivism and clarify both its social ontology and hermeneutic epistemology.

#### *The interpretivist, sociological and linguistic turns*

There are different ways for scientists to analyse a red traffic light. Natural scientists could, for instance, be interested in the electric circuit that finally produces something we recognise as light with a certain colour. Social scientists would relate the traffic light to the social world. One way is a connection of the light to action, like a driver stopping the car in front of it. A pure behaviouralist understanding of such an action would apprehend it in terms of a stimulus-reaction chain, similar to Skinner’s rat experiments, in which human choice is a black-box, a ‘through-put’.

Interpretivism (but not only) would oppose such a behaviouralist (and positivist) reduction of action. It claims that the very action which counts as significant in the social world cannot be apprehended without interpretation, that is, without understanding the meaning that is given to it (Weber 1988 [1922]). Even if two actors act the same way, they might do

<sup>1</sup> For the centrality of the assumption of circular history in realism, see Bobbio (1981).

so for different reasons – and those reasons are often crucial for understanding that action and for proper reaction. It made a huge difference to containment politics during the Cold War, if one assumed that the other (be it the West or communism) followed international rules, because it was convinced of it, or only because of physical constraint.

This necessary element of interpretation in human action is not reducible to the actors themselves, but must comprise the significance given to it by other actors. This point leads to the impact of the ‘sociological turn’ in the social sciences. Taking the sociological turn seriously implies that meaningful action (and hence also the knowledge of both agent and observer) is a social or intersubjective phenomenon. Meaning is not something idiosyncratic to be studied through empathy. There is no ‘private language’. The actor’s capacity to attach the ‘right’ meaning to a social event depends on the capacity to share a system of meanings within a group or society. Hence, ‘interpretation’, as used here, does not necessarily imply an act of conscious or intentional understanding, but the sharing of what Searle (1995: 127-147) calls ‘background abilities’ or what Bourdieu (1980) calls a habitus. It cannot be reduced to cognitive psychology or to choice based on interests. Instead, as shown later in more detail, the sociological turn emphasises the role of the social context within which identities and interests of both actor and acting observer are formed in the first place.

By the same token, the fact of interpretation made by an actor is no different from that of an observer insofar as also this action relies on background abilities. Yet when observers want to explain an action by someone else, and when they address an audience different from the one in which the initial action has taken place, then they will translate the interpretation given by the actor into an interpretation understandable within the background abilities of the other audience. Generations of Kremlinologists have tried to explain Soviet actions by translating the assumed interpretation given by Soviet actors into the language of the respective policy environment, so as to make them *understandable*. When researchers address their own community with its often arcane codes and concepts, they also re-translate from the meaning world at the level of action to the one at the level of observation (Sparti 1992: 102–3). Hence, social sciences have to carefully distinguish between the level of action

(proper) and the level of observation. They differ from naturalist approaches in that they need to (re-)interpret an already interpreted world (Schutz 1962 [1953]).

As this intersubjective or sociological turn shows, the whole is finally inscribed in a reflection on the role of language in the social world and in its understanding (Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; for a discussion, see Zehfuß 1998; Zehfuss 2001). Language works as the model case of intersubjectivity at the epistemological level. It provides the paradigm for understanding ‘meaning worlds’ where meaning is always already socially given (to make communication possible in the first place) and yet open through the common practice of this very communication.

Lastly, language underlies also the understanding of the practical performative function of interpretation, so important for constructivists. First, if interpretation is central for the social sciences, constructivism asks for the effect this meaning-giving, in turn, has on the social world. Constructivists insist that there are a series of ‘institutional’ facts which ‘exist’ only because social actors agree, whether consciously or not, in giving a certain meaning to them. ‘Money’ – as distinguished from a sheet of paper, for instance – is Searle’s (1995) preferred example. Second, constructivism carries out the epistemological implications of the aforementioned. If knowledge can be considered as an ‘institutional fact’, since it relies on language, and since ‘concepts are the condition for the possibility of knowledge’ (Kant), then also knowledge is socially constructed (Kuhn 1970 [1962]). Knowledge is not pre-given data passively registered by an observer. Eskimos distinguish with many more words, hence see many more things, for what others would simply refer to as ‘white’. This position asks for being sensitive to the effect of truth conventions, but does not necessarily imply that ‘anything goes’.

Summarising my reconstruction (Guzzini 2000), constructivism is a meta-theory which is characterised as

- (1) Being particularly sensitive to the distinction between the level of action (proper), the level of observation and the relationship between the two (usually theorised in terms of power);
- (2) Having an epistemological position which stresses the social construction of meaning (and hence knowledge);

- (3) Having an ontological position which stresses the construction of social reality.<sup>2</sup>

*'Looping effects' and the relationship between the social construction of meaning and the construction of the social world*

What adds the somewhat 'constructivist' spin to this tradition is related to the relationship between the social construction of meaning and the construction of social reality. For, again setting the social world apart from the natural, our understandings of people and their action can make a real difference to the latter. For instance, being identified as an opportunist state representative influences options in future negotiations. The categories we use, so they are shared, have an effect on the facts and people. Some Foucault-inspired research has been focusing on exactly this, as e.g. when it analyses the way statistical categories 'produce' what counts as significant facts, when it analyses the 'authoritative' way of understanding the world.

Indeed, calling something in a particular way might produce the very fact. Relying on the idea of a 'speech act', the Copenhagen School of security studies has tried to show that calling an event a threat of national security, the 'securitization' of that event, is doing something to it, in that it allows the use of exceptional measures outside of the regular political process (Wæver 1995; Buzan, Wæver et al. 1998). It becomes a security issue with all the standard operating procedures attached to it, by being called one (if the call is successfully received). Inversely, the re-definition of the event can also effect a 'desecuritisation', as exemplified by the German Ostpolitik. Ostpolitik offered a status quo on borders at the price of redefining their meaning. By the same token, it took economics and people's movement to some extent out of the Soviet definition of national security. In this approach, the Helsinki process can be seen as a

<sup>2</sup> This definition has gained a certain consensus, since also the latest state-of-the-art article invokes it (Adler 2002). For earlier discussions, see Adler (1997), Checkel (1998), Hopf (1998).

desecuritisation strategy which allows politics and diplomacy to work in an increasing number of areas.

Moreover, human beings – but not natural phenomena – can become reflexively aware of attributions and influence their action in interaction with them. This ‘looping effect’ (Hacking 1999: 34) is one of the reasons for the importance of ‘identity’ in constructivist writings, theoretically (see below) and empirically. The social process of identification is part of producing the very reality we are supposed to passively react to. It made all the difference that the Soviet Union under Gorbachev was no longer trying to make the USSR pass for the imperial challenger, but wanted it to be perceived as an ‘acceptable’ member of this international society. The Chinese ‘solution’ at Tien-an-Men was no longer possible. The satellites were left free. When this identity change happened, i.e. when the Soviet Union was no longer ‘seen’ by the other as it used to be, the Cold War came to an end.

This brings me to the last point, namely the importance of self-fulfilling prophecies in constructivist thought. If money is money and not just paper, because people identify it as such, then it ceases to be so the moment this shared attribution goes missing. When people stop trusting money, money will *through this very action* become untrustworthy. Some constructivism has been much inspired by earlier peace research which has insisted in the way *Realpolitik* becomes political reality not because of the alleged iron laws of world politics, but because of the combined effect of actors believing in its truth (Guzzini 2003 forthcoming). This does not imply that such a practice can be easily undone. That practices are socially constructed does not imply anything about their stickiness: some good will simply won’t do. Indeed, the Cold War practice was very sticky, often for reasons which can be analysed in terms of the dilemmas game theoreticians have come up with. But such game-theoretical understanding of collectively sub-optimal Nash equilibria is derivative from the very setting of the game. For constructivists, what is important is ‘what happens *before* the neo-utilitarian model purportedly kicks in’ (Ruggie 1998: 19). The potential stickiness and their possibly utilitarian explanation does not change the fundamental idea that these practices are the effect of the inter-relationship of the social construction of meaning and the construction of the social world.



## **2. Constructivism-inspired theories of IR: the ‘debate’ with neo-realism and neo-institutionalism**

Given the space constraints, I will move to the level of IR theorising by focusing on the agency-structure conception underlying IR theories. It is here where constructivism is often compared with rationalism. Such a debate immediately biases the discussion insofar as it makes all centre on the level of an action theory, on which dialogue with rationalism makes sense, rather than on a structural theory. With this caveat in mind, this section will show how the problematique of identity and identity formation can be seen as a crucial point to exemplify the difference between a constructivist and a rationalism-inspired action theory. This will also serve to clarify the difference with theories of the ‘neo-neo’ kind (see Andreatta in this volume).

### *‘Identity’ in a critique of rationalist theories of action*

“Identity” comes into constructivist IR theorising as an opposition to the limited approach of utilitarian action theories (for this opposition to ‘neo-utilitarianism’, see Ruggie 1998, Introduction). A behaviouralist rational choice approach<sup>3</sup> entails an individualist theory of action. It makes two main assumptions about human behaviour. First, humans are self-interested utility maximisers; and second, humans are choosing rationally on the basis of a consistent (transitive) preference ranking. If A is preferred to B and B to C, A should be preferred to C.

A straightforward and parsimonious theory of action derives from this basic depiction of self-interest and rationality. Once we know the *desires* of individuals (their preferences), as well as the *beliefs* about how to realise them, we can deduce their rational *behaviour*. Indeed, as Keith Dowding has succinctly put it

The three go together in a triangle of explanation and given any two of the triumvirate the third may be predicted and explained... This is a behaviouralist theory of action, since it is studying the behaviour of individuals that allow us to understand their beliefs (by making assumptions about their desires) or their desires (by making assumptions about their beliefs). We may understand both by making assumptions about different aspects of each (Dowding 1991: 23).

<sup>3</sup> Although rational choice does not necessarily entail such a behaviouralist theory of action, it has become prominent in IR (e.g. Waltz).

It is hence the situation, or the set of incentives, which suggests behaviour to the individual and, besides the two behavioural assumptions, carries the major weight in the explanation. 'Structure' does affect behaviour.

The neo-neo debate can illustrate this approach for IR. Neorealist rational choice can see structure linked to behavioural change only by assuming a different distribution of means which influences desire. For this is the only variable component which – taking rationality and the logic of interests as value-maximisation for given – influences calculus, choice and hence behaviour. As in Elster's famous use of the Biblical 'sour grape' analogy – where one comes to think oneself satisfied with sour grapes, because the sweet ones are too high to reach – actors readapt their desires according to their (perceived) share in the distribution of means (Elster 1985). On their side, neo-institutionalist approaches often focus on how, over time, structure can influence individual beliefs which then, independent of any material change, can affect behaviour. In both cases, preferences can change, interests do not.

Constructivists argue, instead – or better: moreover – that structure affects through shared beliefs the very definition of identity, hence interests, and eventually behaviour. For such an argument to work, constructivists have, however, first to redefine what is meant by a structure (for the following, see also Wendt 1995: 73-74). First, structure must be understood as social 'practice', not as objective constraint (see the model case of 'language'). Second, it cannot be materialist only or even mainly. For material factors cannot constitute themselves as causes independent of the meaning given to them. This meaning, in turn, is not something 'subjective' – again, there is no 'private language' – but based on a set of shared understandings and knowledge. In other words, the structural level for the constructivist is ideational in two senses: first, structure itself includes an ideational component; and second, matter matters for social action only through (shared) beliefs.

Once structure ideationally redefined, constructivists can re-apprehend the effect such shared meanings can have on actual behaviour. This is done mainly through the concept of identity. As already mentioned, the primary example for putting identity in front of the cart have been explanations of the end of the Cold War (see Lebow and Risse-Kappen 1995). The Cold War itself is analysed as a set of interaction, like a game (in particular, see

Fierke 1998), defined by a certain set of shared beliefs which define (social) roles and which have become part of the self-definition of agents.<sup>4</sup> The reproduction of these practices depends however on the role-taking itself, not on a whatever 'nature of anarchy'. By rejecting the role classically defined for the Soviet Union, Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' could, so successfully implemented, change the very definition of 'Soviet interests' and preferences. What was unthinkable earlier, like the free on-site inspection of nuclear sites, became strategy.

This constructivist move of bringing identity in opens up the Pandora box of the (national) interest, again (Finnemore 1996; Weldes 1999). There were precursors. It did not go unnoticed that, instead of being objectively deductible, the notion of self-interest or national interest as power or security maximisation<sup>5</sup>, has either a normative/prescriptive or a circular ring. According to early realist writers (Wolfers 1962: chapters 6 and 10), the maximisation of power has not empirically been, nor can it be rationally shown to be, the best strategy. Aron (1962: chapter 3) argued that the aims of foreign policy cannot be reduced to one. All complained that the very concept of power is so loosely used, that it can be ex post adjusted whenever the expected power-wielder does not control an outcome (for the most forceful critique, see the articles collected in Baldwin 1989). Perhaps we should live with the idea, that power is basically a tautological concept (Barnes 1988), but this is not the way realism or, for this matter, any neo-utilitarian theory in IR wanted to use it.

In response, proponents of rationalism in international relations insisted that the formula 'value-maximisation' is not as narrow as used by its critics. It does not at all exclude altruistic preferences (Keohane 1984: 74). Although this is strictly speaking not wrong, it does strip theories based on rational choice of their predictive power and possibly more. For, if

<sup>4</sup> I use the concept 'role' advertently, since, as Wendt (1992) explicitly notes, 'role-theory' can in many respects be seen as a precursor of these constructivist concerns. For the paradigmatic statement of role-theory, see Holsti (1987 [1970]). For a more recent use, see also Barnett (1993).

<sup>5</sup> Responding to earlier critics of realism, Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that neorealism is about security maximisation, not power maximisation. But by defining security related to relative gains and to (power) rank, it still remains ultimately dependent of power (for a similar argument, see Grieco 1997).

behaviour can be either driven by egoism or altruism, by one thing and its opposite, then the explanation of human action becomes indeterminate (Schmalz-Bruns 1995: 354). Indeed, rational choice inspired theories then risk becoming mere taxonomies, a system of concepts which simply reformulates any behaviour into terms of rational action. Then, as with Waltzian realism (Guzzini 1998: chapter 9), the biggest problem of rational choice inspired approaches would not be that they are wrong, but that they can never be wrong. Hence, this response simply begs the ultimately significant question, where these different interests actually come from; the classical constructivist charge.

The present constructivist discussion on identity and interest formation adds a further twist, however, since it asks for more far-reaching adjustments, both on the level of the philosophy of science and on the level of social theory. According to constructivists, identity, like ideas, cannot be used in a classical 'causal' analysis, since structure and agency, the shared set of beliefs and identity are co-constitutive.<sup>6</sup> It is the beliefs which define what can count as an agent property, i.e. as identity and interests. In a football game, the relations (and the embedded practical rules) might 'make' the referee to act in a certain way; but also by 'constituting' him/her as a referee in the first place. Applying this constitution of agents by structures to other sociological environment implies that the stronger an institutional environment is role-bound (and here games are obviously rather extreme cases), the more interests are defined through the attribution and acceptance of certain roles by certain agents.

But the central role of identity in constructivism exemplifies also a crucial difference on the level of social theorising. It includes an element of change and dynamism. The Soviet Union accepted a different role, one which Ostpolitik had actually prepared for it (Risse-Kappen 1994; Evangelista 1999). And when it did, it did not change from mid-fielder to goal keeper. Rather, it walked out of the game. In this rather particular case, its identity was crucial in the very definition of the game – both were co-

<sup>6</sup> Reducing ideas to causes has been the early charge against regime theory (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986), a charge forcefully repeated (Laffey and Weldes 1996) against some more recent institutionalist analysis (Goldstein and Keohane 1993).

constitutive. Changing identity meant that the Soviet Union ‘un-made’ the game and joined another one.

*The constructivist synthesis:*

*taking interests more seriously as realists and ideas more seriously as institutionalists*

As the previous discussion already indicates, the meta-theoretical commitment of constructivism implies a type of theorising which often does not exclude insights from other approaches, but redefines them as *special cases* within its own parameters. Materialist utilitarianism is often what actors pursue, their action is often rational, but only under conditions not specified by rational choice itself. Realism might well describe a particular political event, yet for the wrong materialist reasons. In particular, Alexander Wendt (1999) has used such a synthesising, and at times assimilating, strategy for developing his version of constructivism (for a discussion, see Guzzini and Leander 2001).

This assimilating strategy pushes the usual contenders in IR theorising into uneasy corners. If neo-utilitarians of a realist brand want to carve out anything particular of theirs, it will have to come in a kind of neo-Darwinian version. For only human nature as an intrinsic ‘material’ cause escapes the constructivist ontology. Albeit with caveats, some seem happy to go down that way (Thayer 2000). Yet, many realists would recoil. And indeed, even if that road is taken with some sympathy, it ends up requiring a constructivist contribution, since biological reductionism works no better than others (Sterling-Folker 2002).

But also neo-institutionalists do not stay unscathed. For despite the impression that ‘there is nothing new’, constructivist-inspired theories do not just go on ‘adding ideas and stir’. The claim is stronger. For social action, matter matters mainly through shared beliefs, through what people ‘make of it’. Indeed, beliefs are not a second parallel ‘cause’ for action, but define how actors come to think of their interests in the first place. Regime theory, for instance, has been going as far as conceptualising regimes as ‘autonomous variables’, in the sense that regimes are at most parallel to an equally autonomous (and deductively given) material interest (Krasner 1982). Instead, constructivists would argue that the very conception of interests independent of shared beliefs, i.e. of the ideational structure, is

erroneous. Sterling-Folker (2000) has rightly argued that neo-institutionalism has *de facto* included such argument. But it has not drawn the consequence which would be a re-arrangement of its meta-theory. As already argued by Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986), it would have to abolish the individualist bias in its agency-structure conception and, as argued again by Kratochwil (1989: 99-102) shift to a different understanding of explanation not reducible to classical causality (as exemplified by King, Keohane et al. 1994). It is this particular view of the world, a certain understanding of politics, which pushes for a meta-theoretical grounding, not (only) the other way round. Certainly for Wendt it is the case, that for being able to propose a coherent liberal theory of IR, it requires first a constructivist meta-theory.

Hence, bringing identity into established action theories allows constructivism to beat other theories on their ground and make them face these theoretical dilemmas. It is for not taking interests (and indeed power) seriously enough, that neorealism is insufficient. It is for not taking (shared) beliefs seriously enough that neo-institutionalism is. Whether or not 'identity' is able to shoulder such a weight is, however, another issue.

### **3. The role of institutions in constructivist understandings of world politics**

After having established first the tenets of constructivism as a meta-theory, and second the implications this has for IR theorising, as compared to other established theories, this last section will spell out the role institutions play in a constructivist understanding of world politics today.

It is important to stress that constructivists focus on 'institutions' at a general society-constituting level, i.e. not necessarily in the sense of 'material' international organisations (yet, see below). They are, to use Barry Buzan's (2002) distinction, mainly interested in primary institutions such as 'sovereignty', not secondary institutions like the UN. They share this interest obviously with the English School (see Alessandro Colombo in this issue) and with regime theory which, somewhat ironically, once dominated the journal *International Organization* by downgrading the actual study of Ios.

The focus on fundamental, the 'international' defining, institutions implies that constructivism-inspired thinking is rather interested in the

‘longue durée’. As with the ‘English School’, it makes therefore less sense to *assume* that after 1989, there have been changes. Similarly, constructivism shows up *in the way* one needs to analyse international relations, the framework of analysis, which can inspire many also divergent empirical hypotheses.

In the following, I will not much cover secondary institutions. There are two reasons for this. On the one hand they are rather reflecting more fundamental changes in terms of international legitimacy, such as for instance in the move for an International Criminal Court discussed in the post-45 system (Wright 1952), but realised only now. 1989 is of importance primarily for the way IOs have contributed to the ‘rules of the game’ in IR, and not that much how the end of the Cold War, then reduced to an exogenous shock, has done to secondary institutions and their role. On the other hand, their function is pretty constant for constructivists and hence not much under the influence of events like the end of the Cold War. In a way reminiscent of earlier studies (Claude 1956; Haas 1964), and showing some neo-functionalist roots, constructivists have engaged in showing the socialisation function of International Organizations (for more detailed accounts of this role, see Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Johnston 2001).

*The long-term: institutions and the rules of the game*

Time frames are long for understanding change in primary institutions. Rodney Hall (1999) has argued that, ever since the existence of a state system, there have been two fundamental historical shifts from the dynastic sovereign via the territorial sovereign to the national sovereign state. Reus-Smit (1997; 1999) has claimed that it is this level of ‘constitutional structures’ defining legitimate statehood and rightful state action, which, in turn, define the meaning of sovereignty. Similarly, Alexander Wendt (1999) distinguishes three ‘cultures of anarchy’ (Hobbesian, Lockian and Kantian) which define the rules of the game, and he gives examples how historically and theoretically change from one to another can and did happen.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It is important to add, that although some constructivists like Wendt have a nearly-teleological vision of history, not unsimilar to earlier functionalists, there is nothing in

This stress of rules of the cultures which define the game and of the central legitimacy norms constituting ‘authorised’ agency in the society, shows the main conduit of constructivist analysis of change: the diffusion of norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). It is important to stress that constructivists see norms not as simple reflections of power, but – as better Weberians than realists – see power and norms linked in authority (through legitimacy). As Weber insisted, power without legitimacy is under constant potential pressure. Many studies have insisted how change can happen not only in longer historical terms, like in Hall’s study, but also in individual cases, such as in the demise of apartheid (Klotz 1995), the diffusion of human rights in a spiral dynamic including the ‘shaming’ of the ‘pariah’ state (Risse, Ropp et al. 1999), or the diffusion of norms in and beyond existing security communities (Adler and Barnett 1998).<sup>8</sup>

If, as already mentioned, with the change of legitimating principles, also the very identity of actors is affected, then one of the main questions today would be about the very boundaries of that international society which is said to share such institutions. They seem increasingly fuzzy and multifaceted. It is perhaps not astounding that the majority of writers tend to simplify things. In the English School tradition, much is done by reading backwards to apparently easier times, when one could talk of the classical European international society which tried to export itself elsewhere (Bull 1977, 1989 [1984]). In another simplification, early poststructuralist writers tried to pinpoint this society in the community of realists, i.e. in that international community which denies that an international community exists (Ashley 1987, 1988), an argument which has been differentiated in more recent constructivist/English School writings (Cronin 1999). In the search of a society, also some more recent constructivists end up focusing

constructivism which asks for a progressive view of history. As fundamental agnostics, constructivists would tend to be sceptical against both a progressive and a cyclical vision of history, the latter typical of realism. The norms that are diffused, the culture they define, are not necessarily moving ‘for the better’ (leaving for a moment the issue aside how to define the latter). Constructivism seems more conform to the concept of history-dependent institutionalism, as developed by March and Olsen (1998).

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the literature on norm diffusion, see Wiener (2003 forthcom.).



on the society of states only (Wendt 1999) again in a way much reminiscent of the (old) English School (Suganami 2001).<sup>9</sup>

This more classical and easier identification of international ‘society’ appears, however, at a historical disjuncture. For we arguably experience not only (1) a secular decline of the grip of classical European rules and institutions and the (old) conservative ideology which legitimated them (already registered since the early days of IR), i.e. a change of the society of states itself (see also Alessandro Colombo in this issue), but also (2) the constitution of transnational communities with a distinct language and certain clout, be it what Strange (1989; 1999) dubbed the ‘business civilisation’ or the emergence of transnational civil networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998) – the ‘Davos community’ and its discontents, as it were. What is at stake, and what is in the focus of constructivist thought (but not only), is the very identity of this international society.

*The short term: the post-Cold War is what we make (made) of it*

So far, I have relativised the impact a single event like the end of the Cold War could play in constructivist understandings of world politics. For constructivists, the way the Cold War ended was a proof to the reasonableness of their assumptions, but part of a longer process, not itself the cause of a new era. This said, we have now a series of variables in place with which to understand the ‘post-wall’ system: the constitutive relationship between the identity/roles and the ‘rules of the game’ (the institutions of international society). I will close this piece by concentrating on one particular sensibility of constructivists – the clash between international institutions and norm diffusion vs. identity politics – which cannot in itself, however, give the entire picture of institutional change as of today.

After 1989, international relations seemed to be set to be more domesticated. Post-45 Germany and Japan are the easy cases for the

<sup>9</sup> The obvious implication for constructivists is that also the ‘war of all against all’ can exist, but only as the product of a social process, nothing ‘innate’ or ‘natural’. The Hobbesian (or also Schmittian) description of politics can be correct for some international societies at some times - they are no necessity, not even ‘in the last resort’ as all historical determinist theories would put it.

constructivist argument that interests derive from roles and identity and not simply from capabilities (Berger 1996, 1998; Katzenstein 1998a, 1998b). But also other countries in Europe (mainly in the Nordic countries) had come to take the changed identity of their 'security community' seriously. Similarly, Soviet 'New Thinking' tried to rethink Soviet identity, South Africa shed off its apartheid identity. 1989 came as moment in which those met, in which a different vision of legitimate rule made its way.

Yet, whereas some countries saw their identity in resonance with the emerging rules of international society, others did not. Most remarkably, the US was to find it difficult to adapt to a new role. 'Kuwait', besides and on top of 'Berlin', became the 'defining moment'. For constructivists, Kuwait set in motion a re-mobilising of Cold War biases which threatened to close the window of opportunity opened after 1989 (Guzzini 1994). The legitimation of the war was partly done in a language which seemed to herald 'a new world order', but relied extensively on World War II metaphors and containment scripts (Luke 1991).

Constructivists were alarmed by the possible self-fulfilling prophecies of some brands of realism which had undergird much US foreign policy debate and, far from receding in 1990, immediately moved onto the stage. The wall had hardly come down, when John Mearsheimer (1990) already wrote that 1989 meant the return to old-type European politics, where Germany, whether it wanted or not, will become a more aggressive power again. If all European partners had preemptively balanced, as Mearsheimer suggested, this might indeed have been the outcome. Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis (Huntington 1993), far from being anything new, mainly re-mobilised Cold war clusters. He divides the world in different civilizations (poles) which occupy different cultural areas (territories), at the borders of which (the former iron and bamboo curtain) friction are likely to occur. In particular, the Western world (democracy) will face the combined onslaught of civilisations which, by their nature, cannot compromise (totalitarianism). In other words, it was not a new problem which spurred a 'Western' response, but 'Western' strategic solutions which were in search of a problem. After a decade of heated debates, it was as if a constructivist nightmare had come true, when the US Presidential candidate George W. Bush said during his campaign that 'we do not know what the enemy is, but we know it is there.'

It is not a pre-given US identity which defines its foreign policy. Its identity and foreign policy are constituting each other (Campbell 1990, 1992). Given the preponderant position, these US identity processes play a major role in defining the game, however. Its re-militarisation and turn towards unilateralism (Guzzini 2002), although similar to the first Reagan administration and hence not a purely post-wall phenomenon, runs now quite openly against the rules and the legitimacy of the international society, and does not fit part of its own role-perception. To some, the US quite legitimately appears as the 'rogue superpower' (Huntington 1999: 42).

These processes in the US are at the heart of a diffusion of norms which undercut the existing institutionalisation of international society. This applies not because the nature of 'anarchy' or of 'US hegemony' is like this: it is the effect of particular international social practices. And it only works if the other participants accept 'playing the game'. It is therefore not fortuitous that those countries in which the spirit of Ostpolitik and détente, or of a security community, is strongest, are resisting this across the ideological divide: they are resisting the social re-construction of power politics in the post-wall institutions of international society.

## References

- Adler, Emanuel (1997) 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 3, 3, pp. 319-363.
- (2002) 'Constructivism and International Relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons, eds, *Handbook of International Relations*, London: Sage, pp. 95-118.
- Adler, Emanuel and Michael Barnett, eds (1998) *Security Communities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aron, Raymond (1962) *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Ashley, Richard K. (1987) 'The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space: Toward a Critical Social Theory of International Politics', *Alternatives* XII, 4, pp. 403-434.
- (1988) 'Untying the Sovereign State: A double reading of the Anarchy Problematique', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 17, 2 (Summer), pp. 227-262.
- Baldwin, David A. (1989) *Paradoxes of Power*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Barnes, Barry (1988) *The Nature of Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Barnett, Michael (1993) 'Institutions, roles, and disorder: the case of the Arab states system', *International Studies Quarterly* 37, 3 (September), pp. 271-296.
- Barnett, Michael and Martha Finnemore (1999) 'The politics, power, and pathologies of international organizations', *International Organization* 53, 4 (Autumn), pp. 699-732.
- Berger, Thomas U. (1996) 'Norms, Identity and National Security in Germany and Japan', in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 317-356.
- (1998) *Cultures of Antimilitarism: national security in Germany and Japan*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bobbio, Norberto (1981) 'La teoria dello stato e del potere', in Pietro Rossi, ed., *Max Weber e l'analisi del mondo*, Torino: Einaudi, pp. 215-246.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1980) *Le sens pratique*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Brown, Chris (1992) *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches*, New York et al.: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Bull, Hedley (1977) *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, London: Macmillan.
- (1989 [1984]) 'The Emergence of a Universal International Society', in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds, *The Expansion of International Society*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 117-126.
- Buzan, Barry (2002) 'The primary institutions of international society',; manuscript under review.

- Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Campbell, David (1990) 'Global Inscription: How Foreign Policy Constitutes the United States', *Alternatives* XV, 3 (Summer), pp. 263-286.
- (1992) *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Checkel, Jeffrey T. (1998) 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory', *World Politics* 50, 2 (January), pp. 324-348.
- Claude, Inis L., Jr. (1956) *Swords into Plowshares: The Problems and Progress of International Organization*, New York: Random House.
- Cronin, Bruce (1999) *Community Under Anarchy: Transnational Identity and the Evolution of Cooperation*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dowding, Keith (1991) *Rational Choice and Political Power*, Hants: Edward Elgar.
- Elster, Jon (1985) *Sour grapes: studies in the subversion of rationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Evangelista, Matthew (1999) *Unarmed forces: the transnational movement to end the Cold War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Fierke, Karin (1998) *Changing games, changing strategies: critical investigations in security*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Finnemore, Martha (1996) *National Interests in International Society*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Finnemore, Martha and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization* 52, 4 (Autumn), pp. 887-917.
- Goldstein, Judith and Robert O. Keohane (1993) 'Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework', in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, pp. 3-30.
- Grieco, Joseph M. (1997) 'Realist International Theory and the Study of World Politics', in Michael W. Doyle and G. John Ikenberry, eds, *New Thinking in International Relations Theory*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview, pp. 163-201.
- Guzzini, Stefano (1994) *Power Analysis as a Critique of Power Politics: Understanding Power and Governance in the Second Gulf War*. Florence, European University Institute.
- (1998) *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: the continuing story of a death foretold*, London, New York: Routledge.
- (2000) 'A reconstruction of constructivism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 6, 2 (June), pp. 147-182.
- (2002) 'Foreign policy without diplomacy: the Bush administration at a crossroads', *International Relations* 16, 2 (August), pp. 291-297.

- (2003 forthcom.) 'The Cold War is what we make of it': when peace research meets constructivism in International Relations', in Stefano Guzzini and Dietrich Jung, eds, *Copenhagen peace research: conceptual innovation and contemporary security analysis*, London, New York: Routledge.
- Guzzini, Stefano and Anna Leander (2001) 'A social theory for International Relations: an appraisal of Alexander Wendt's disciplinary and theoretical synthesis', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 4, 4, pp. 316-338.
- Hacking, Ian (1999) *The social construction of what?*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hall, Rodney Bruce (1999) *National collective identity: social constructs and international systems*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Holsti, K.J. (1987 [1970]) 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', in Stephen G. Walker, ed., *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 5-43.
- Hopf, Ted (1998) 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security* 23, 1 (Summer), pp. 171-200.
- Huntington, Samuel P. (1993) 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72, 3, pp. 22-42.
- (1999) 'The lonely superpower', *Foreign Affairs* 78, 2 (March/April), pp. 35-49.
- Haas, Ernst B. (1964) *Beyond the Nation-State: Functionalism and International Organization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain (2001) 'Treating international institutions as social environments', *International Studies Quarterly* 45, 4 (December), pp. 487-515.
- Katzenstein, Peter J. (1998a) *Cultural Norms and National Security: Police and Military in Postwar Japan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- , ed. (1998b) *Tamed Power: Germany in Europe*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Katzenstein, Peter J., Robert O. Keohane and Stephen D. Krasner, eds (1999) *Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Keck, Margaret and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) *Activists beyond borders: transnational advocacy networks in international politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Keohane, Robert O. (1984) *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Klotz, Audie (1995) *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle against Apartheid*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Krasner, Stephen D. (1982) 'Regimes and the limits of realism: regimes as autonomous variables', *International Organization* 36, 2 (Spring), pp. 497-510.
- Kratochwil, Friedrich (1989) *Rules, Norms and Decisions: On the conditions of practical and legal reasoning in international relations and domestic affairs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2000) 'Constructing a New Orthodoxy? Wendt's 'Social Theory of International Politics' and the Constructivist Challenge', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, 1, pp. 73-101.
- Kratochwil, Friedrich and John Gerard Ruggie (1986) 'International organization: a state of the art on an art of the state', *International Organization* 40, 4 (Autumn), pp. 753-75.
- Kuhn, Thomas (1970 [1962]) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Laffey, Mark and Jutta Weldes (1996) 'Beyond Belief: From Ideas to Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, pp. 50.
- Lebow, Richard Ned and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds (1995) *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lucarelli, Sonia and Roberto Menotti (2002) 'No-constructivists' land: International Relations in Italy in the 1990s', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 5, 2, pp. 114-142.
- Luke, Timothy W. (1991) 'The Discipline of Security Studies and the Codes of Containment: Learning From Kuwait', *Alternatives* 16, pp. 315-344.
- March, James G. and Johan P. Olsen (1998) 'The institutional dynamics of international political orders', *International Organization* 52, 4 (Autumn), pp. 943-969.
- Mearsheimer, John (1990) 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security* 15, 1 (Summer), pp. 5-56.
- Onuf, Nicholas Greenwood (1989) *World of our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press.
- Reus-Smit, Christian (1997) 'The constitutional structure of international society and the nature of fundamental institutions', *International Organization* 51, 4, pp. 555-589.
- (1999) *The moral purpose of the state: culture, social identity, and institutional rationality in international relations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Risse, Thomas, Stephen C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink, eds (1999) *The power of human rights: international norms and domestic change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Risse-Kappen, Thomas (1994) 'Ideas do not float freely: transnational coalitions, domestic structures, and the end of the cold war', *International Organization* 48, 2 (Spring), pp. 185-214.
- Ruggie, John Gerard (1998) *Constructing the world polity: essays on international institutionalization*, London, New York: Routledge.
- Schmalz-Bruns, Rainer (1995) 'Die Theorie des kommunikative Handelns - eine Flaschenpost? Anmerkungen zur jüngsten Theoriedebatte in den Internationalen Beziehungen', *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 2, 2 (Dezember), pp. 347-370.
- Schutz, Alfred (1962 [1953]) 'On the methodology of the social sciences', in his, ed., *The problem of social reality*, The Hague, Boston, London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, pp. 3-47.
- Searle, John R. (1995) *The construction of social reality*, New York: The Free Press.
- Sparti, Davide (1992) *Se un leone potesse parlare. Indagine sul comprendere e lo spiegare*, Firenze: Sansoni.
- Sterling-Folker, Jennifer (2000) 'Competing paradigms or birds of a feather? Constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism compared', *International Studies Quarterly* 44, 1 (March), pp. 97-119.
- (2002) 'Realism and the constructivist challenge: rejecting, reconstructing, or rereading', *International Studies Review* 4, 1 (Spring), pp. 73-97.
- Strange, Susan (1989) 'Toward a Theory of Transnational Empire', in Ernst-Otto Czempiel and James Rosenau, eds, *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s*, Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Co., pp. 161-76.
- (1999) 'Corporate Managers in World Politics', in Michel Girard, ed., *Individualism and World Politics*, London: Macmillan, pp. 145-160.
- Suganami, Hidemi (2001) 'Alexander Wendt and the English School', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 4, 4, pp. 403-423.
- Thayer, Bradley A. (2000) 'Bringing in Darwin: Evolutionary Theory, Realism, and International Politics', *International Security* 25, 2 (Fall), pp. 124-151.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*, Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Weber, Max (1988 [1922]) *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).
- Weldes, Jutta (1999) *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wendt, Alexander (1992) 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization* 46, 2 (Spring), pp. 391-425.
- (1995) 'Constructing International Politics', *International Security* 20, 1 (Summer), pp. 71-81.



- (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiener, Antje (2003 forthcom.) 'Die Wende zum Dialog - Konstruktivistische Brückenstationen und ihre Zukunft', in Gunther Hellmann, Klaus Dieter Wolf and Michael Zürn, eds, *Forschungsstand und Perspektiven der Internationalen Beziehungen in Deutschland*, Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Wolfers, Arnold (1962) *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wright, Quincy (1952) 'Proposal for an International Criminal Court', *American Journal of International Law* 46, 1 (Januar), pp. 60-72.
- Wæver, Ole (1995) 'Securitization and desecuritization', in Ronnie Lipschutz, ed., *On Security*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 46-86.
- Zehfuß, Maja (1998) 'Sprachlosigkeit schränkt ein. Zur Bedeutung von Sprache in konstruktivistischen Theorien', *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 5, 1 (Juni), pp. 109-137.
- (2001) 'Constructivisms in International Relations: Wendt, Onuf and Kratochwil', in Knud-Erik Jørgensen and Karin M. Fierke, eds, *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 54-75.