

Lecture #4: Constructivism and Post-Structuralism

Constructivism

- Did not exist prior to 1989, roughly the end of the Cold War
- Brief history, but very vibrant
- Known as the ‘Social theory of International Relations’
- Articles to articulate this is the HIV/AIDS and War and Culture in a Global Context
- Alexander Wendt offers an example that illustrates the social construction of reality when he explains that 500 British Nuclear weapons are less threatening to the US than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons
 - These identifications are not caused by the nuclear weapons (material structure) but rather by the meaning given to the material structure (the ideational structure)
- Constructivists go beyond the material reality by including the effect of ideas and beliefs on world politics
- This also entails that reality is always under construction, which opens the prospect for change
 - In other words, meanings are not fixed but can change over time depending on the ideas and beliefs that actors hold
- Returning to Wendt’s example discussed above, this means that the social relation of enmity between the United States and North Korea represents the intersubjective structure (that is, the shared ideas and beliefs among both states), whereas the United States and North Korea are the actors who have the capacity (that is, agency) to change or reinforce the existing structure or social relationship of enmity. This change or reinforcement ultimately depends on the beliefs and ideas held by both states. If these beliefs and ideas change, the social relationship can change to one of friendship. This stance differs considerably from that of realists, who argue that the anarchic structure of the international system determines the behaviour of states. Constructivists, on the other hand, argue that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt 1992). This means that anarchy can be interpreted in different ways depending on the meaning that actors assign to it.
- Another central issue to constructivism is identities and interests. Constructivists argue that states can have multiple identities that are socially constructed through interaction with other actors. Identities are representations of an actor’s understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests.

Outline of the Lecture

- History
- Ontological assumptions of N-R and N-L
- Constructivist response

- “Anarchy is what States make of it”
- Social structures and IR
- Agents and structures
- Social constructions, contingency and change

History

- 25 years ago, didn't exist
- Now: major rival to N-R and N-L
- Origins: “critical IR theory” (1980s)
 - Critique of epistemological and ontological assumptions (R/N-R) and L/N-L)
 - Drew on philosophy, “social theory”

Ontological Assumptions of Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism (Not Constructivism)

- 1. Individualism
- 2. Rationalism
- 3. Materialism

Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism on Individualism

- Explanation reduced to characteristics of individuals
- Thatcher: “There is no such thing as society.”
- All individuals fundamentally the same
- Perspective of one abstract individual

Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism on Rationalism

- Rational-choice theory
 - Action produced by:
 - Deliberate choices
 - Maximizing self-interest
 - Mathematically precise cost-benefit calculations
 - Utility= value X probability
 - Not everyday sense of “rational”
- Perfect and complete information
- Or if incomplete information:
 - Actors know objective probabilities of events
 - Or assign precise subjective probabilities to them
- Each choice weighed vs. every other possible choice
- Interests imputed to actors

Materialism

- Human behaviour, history, driven by material/physical factors

- In IR:
 - Distribution of material power (number of tanks, aircraft carriers, divisions, etc.)
 - “Material” interests (power, wealth)
 - Factors easily observed, counted, measured

Social Theory

- What are organising principles of social reality?
- What are basic actors and patterns of the social world?
- How do these actors relate to the social structures they find themselves in?
- What is human nature? Is there one?
- Is nature or nurture more important to explaining human behaviour?
- How should we study human affairs? The way the natural sciences study natural phenomena?

Anarchy and Self-help

- Wendt: attacks N-R “logic of anarchy”
- Self-help principle does most of the work
 - But S-H doesn’t automatically follow from anarchy
 - Anarchy is just lack of world government
 - N-R needs to assume States are already fearful/suspicious (hostile identities)
 - Can’t derive that just from anarchy

Possibility vs. Probability

- Worst-case scenario thinking assumed
 - Dick Cheney’s “1% Doctrine”
- But society impossible if everyone made decisions like this
 - No certainties/guarantees, even within State
- People act on probabilities, not possibilities
- Where do expectations/probabilities come from?
 - People’s past behaviour, history of interaction
 - “Dr. Phil Doctrine”

Structure of the International System

- N-R/N-L assume IR structure= material
 - Ie. distribution of (material) power
 - Everyone in same position acts the same way
- But material structure doesn’t explain much
 - US attitude to UK vs. NK nukes
 - Both matter to US, but in totally different ways

- US relations with Canada vs. Cuba
- Distribution of power can't explain difference

Social Structure of IR

- So what drives IR?
- Social, not just material, structure
 - Norms, practices, identities, social institutions, ingrained patterns of interaction
- Give meaning to material/physical things
 - Shared understandings and expectations
- Intersubjective (not objective, subjective)
 - Public, shared, not created/controlled by any one individual, "already there", evolves over time
 - Like a language, rules of grammar

Identity

- Identities:
 - How States/people see others and themselves
 - Images of self and other; social roles and expectations
 - Identities create interests
 - Ie. university professors and students

Structure and Agency

- Agency:
 - Free will, ability to make independent choices
 - Ability to affect your environment, to make a difference
- Agency and structure shape another in turn
- One impossible without the other
 - People choose/act on basis of existing social rules and roles. Identities, expectations, meanings
 - But social structures can't exist if people don't reproduce them through their actions

↔ Agency ↔
Structure

Social Constructions

- Why "construction"?
- To construct: to bring into being something that otherwise wouldn't exist
- Why "social"?
- Social:

- Nor created by one individual
- Shaped by collectively shared meanings, norms, values, assumptions, etc.
- Often just “evolve”: not deliberately created/created by any one person/group

What's the Point?

- “Denaturalise” things we take for granted
- Contingency:
 - “X is socially constructed” means:
 - X didn't have to exist, or look the way it does
 - Not determined by nature of things, not inevitable, “natural” or automatic
- Emerged at specific time and place; might disappear at some point; not universal

Post-Structuralism

Outline of the Lecture

- Structuralism and Post-structuralism
- P-S in IR
- Ontological and epistemological critique of traditional IR
- Major concerns
- power/knowledge
- Identity
- Theory as practice

Structuralism

- Early C20-1960s
- Language, grammar, all meaning systems governed by systematic deep structures
- Organised by opposition/contrast
- Unobservable deep structures determine observable surface behaviour
- Universal structure of human mind

P-S: Reaction vs. Structuralism

- 1960s
- Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze
 - Critique of universal absolutes
 - Limits of knowledge
 - Undermining binary oppositions
 - Critique of fixed essences
 - Dynamic over static; instability over stability
 - Fundamental role of power

- Importance of language and spoken/written discourse

Post-Structuralism in IR: History

- 1st wave (1980s to mid 1990s)
 - Abstract critique of philosophical foundations
 - 3rd “great debate”
- 2nd wave (late 90s-today)
 - Empirical study of historical events
 - Ie. War in Bosnia, US foreign policy in Korea, humanitarian intervention, European security

Ontology

- **Ontology:** what a theory assumes to exist in the world of IR
 - What are the main actors, processes, phenomena in IR?
 - Ie. States, institutions, anarchy, balance of power, globalization, international norms, etc.

IR's Ontology: Critique

- Traditional IR: concepts----> objective realities
 - Ie. “Structure of international system” or “globalization”
 - Pressures/constrains States, forces them to do things, etc.
- But ever seen/touched “the structure of the international system”? Ever witnessed it “act”?
- Is “globalization” a concrete thing? Is it a single thing?
- Even if it were: only has effects when people interpret reality in certain ways
- Conventional IR's image of “the subject” (ie. the actor, the individual)
 - Unitary
 - Autonomous
 - “Sovereign” (purely rational, always in control)
 - Center of analysis

IR's O&E: Critique

- **Interpretation:** central to social reality
- Any understanding of IR depends on abstraction, representation, interpretation etc.
- Any object/event/phenomenon can be interpreted in many different ways

Mercator vs. Peters Projection

- See slides 10-11 for information on this topic

Epistemology

- Epistemology: how a theory knows what it claims to know
 - Ie. how do we acquire knowledge in IR?
 - Ie. should IR follow methods of natural sciences?

IR's Epistemology: Critique

- Traditional IR: positivist epistemology
- **Positivism:**
 - Science only legit form of knowledge
 - Model: natural sciences
 - Only observation/measurable data
 - Goal: prediction and control
 - Laws of human behaviour
 - Methods of natural sciences only

P-S: Not Anti-Science

- **Against:**
 - Only 1 single scientific method
 - Science only path of knowledge
 - Must seek laws, universal generalisations
 - Science= answer to all humanity's problems
- **Argument:**
 - Discarding epistemological views about needing scientific proof, allows us to become closer to more complex and multi-faceted understanding of the world
 - Ie. more accurate understanding of the world

P-S: The Study of...

- 1. How aspects of IR (ie. power politics, war, sovereignty, globalization) come to be seen as natural phenomena
- 2. How they're represented
- 3. How certain representations come to be dominant
- 4. How this affects how we think/act

Major Concerns

- Language (or "discourse")
 - **Discourse:** codified ways of speaking/writing about the same subject
- Representations
 - Of people, things, reality, etc.
- Power

- And the resistance to power

Problematizing Social Phenomena

- “Problematize” is what we accept as natural/normal, take for granted
- Turn it into a problem, question it, make us look at it in new light
- One technique: historicize it
- Goal: new possibilities for thinking, acting, etc.
- **Ie. Sovereignty**
 - Trace history of changing concept and practice of sovereignty
 - Modern concept and practice only in C19
 - C18: dynastic politics
 - Land swaps, purchases
 - C19: nationalism
 - Emotional attachment to territory

Power/Knowledge

- See slides 20-21 for information on this topic

Representations and Order

- **Social Order:** depends on the creation and re-creation of meanings in social practices through knowledge, discourse, and representations
 - Why are certain representations accepted and valued, while others are ignored and marginalized? What are the effects of these patterns of dominance and exclusion?

Identity

- Multiple, not fixed
- Constructed through exclusions
 - “Self-other” (“we-them”) distinctions
 - Identity constituted in relation to difference
- Outside essential to constituting the inside
 - Insane vs. normal/rational
 - Criminal vs. law-abiding citizen
 - Foreign vs. domestic

Foreign Policy and Identity

- Campbell: security practices are key to constructing national identity
- Ie. identification of foreign enemies
- Domestic dissenters linked to foreign threats (ie. Cold War)
- To preserve social order, image of internal national unity

Theory as Practice

- Vs. positivism: separation of subject and object of knowledge
- **Theorising**= form of action, intervention
 - Even if unintended
 - Effects in real world
 - Intellectual, political, social, economic, etc.
- All theory/knowledge is situated
- Need for reflective theory
 - Aware of own biases, influences, potential effects, etc.
- **Theory**: not just tool of analysis, but object of analysis

Smith: IR and 9/11?

- 1. IR's focus: State's security (not humanity's, individuals')
- 2. Inter-State war greater than civil conflict
- 3. Violence= military; deaths from poverty, disease not considered
- 4. Ignores gender, religion and ethnicity
- 5. One universal rationality
- 6. Ignores identity issues