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Constructivism

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Constructivism's arrival in IR is often associated with the end of the Cold War, an event that the traditional theories such as realism and liberalism failed to account for. This failure can be linked to some of their core tenets, such as the conviction that states are self-interested actors who compete for power and the unequal power distribution among states which defines the balance of power between them. By having a dominant focus on the state, traditional theories have not opened much space to observe the agency of individuals. After all, it was the actions of ordinary people that ensured the end of the Cold War, not those of states or international organisations. Constructivism accounts for this issue by arguing that the social world is of our making (Onuf 1989). Actors (usually powerful ones, like leaders and influential citizens) continually shape – and sometimes reshape – the very nature of international relations through their actions and interactions.

The basics of constructivism

Constructivism sees the world, and what we can know about the world, as socially constructed. This view refers to the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge that are also called ontology and epistemology in research language. Alexander Wendt (1995) offers an excellent example that illustrates the social construction of reality when he explains that 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than five North Korean nuclear weapons. These identifications are not caused by the nuclear weapons (the *material structure*) but rather by the meaning given to the material structure (the *ideational structure*). It is important to understand that the social relationship between the United States and Britain and the United States and North Korea is perceived in a similar way by these states, as this shared understanding (or intersubjectivity) forms the basis of their interactions. The example also shows that nuclear weapons by themselves do not have any meaning unless we understand the social context. It further

demonstrates that 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.

Constructivists argue that agency and structure are mutually constituted, which implies that structures influence agency and that agency influences structures. Agency can be understood as the ability of someone to act, whereas structure refers to the international system that consists of material and ideational elements. 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. They are important to constructivists as they argue that identities constitute interests and actions. For example, the identity of a small state implies a set of interests that are different from those implied by the identity of a large state. The small state is arguably more focused on its survival, whereas the large state is concerned with dominating global political, economic and military affairs. It should be noted, though, that the actions of a state should be aligned with its identity. A state can thus not act contrary to its identity because this will call into question the validity of the identity, including its preferences. This issue might explain why Germany, despite being a great power with a leading global economy, did not become a military power in the second half of the twentieth century. Following the atrocities of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime during the Second World War, German political identity shifted from one of militarism to pacifism due to unique historical circumstances.

Social norms are also central to constructivism. These are generally defined as 'a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity' (Katzenstein 1996, 5). States that conform to a certain identity are expected to comply with the norms that are associated with that identity. This idea comes with an expectation that some kinds of behaviour and action are more acceptable than others. This process is also known as 'the logic of app-ropriateness', where actors behave in certain ways because they believe that this behaviour is appropriate (March and Olsen 1998, 951–952). To better understand norms, we can identify three types: regulative norms, constitutive norms and prescriptive norms. *Regulative norms* order and constrain behaviour; *constitutive norms* create new actors, interests or categories of action; and *prescriptive norms* prescribe certain norms, meaning there are no bad norms from the perspective of those who promote them (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). It is also important to note that norms go through a 'lifecycle of norms' before they can get accepted. A norm only becomes an expected behaviour when a critical mass of relevant state actors adopt it and internalise it in their own practices. For example, constructivists would argue that the bulk of states have come together to develop climate change mitigation policies because it is the right thing to do for the survival of humanity. This has, over decades of diplomacy and advocacy, become an appropriate behaviour that the bulk of citizens expect their leaders to adhere to. Liberals, on the other hand, might reject the notion of climate change politics in favour of continued economic growth and pursuing innovative scientific solutions, while realists might reject it due to the damage that climate policies may do to shorter-term national interests.

Although all constructivists share the above-mentioned views and concepts, there is considerable variety within constructivism. Conventional constru-ctivists ask 'what'-type questions – such as *what causes an actor to act*. They believe that it is possible to explain the world in causal terms and are interested in discovering the relationships between actors, social norms, interests and identities. Conventional constructivists assume, for instance, that actors act according to their identity and that it is possible to predict when this identity becomes visible or not. When an identity is seen to be under-going changes, conventional constructivists investigate what factors caused which aspects of a state's identity to change. Critical constructivists, on the other hand, ask 'how'-type questions such as *how do actors come to believe in a certain identity*. Contrary to conventional constructivists, they are not interested in the effect that this identity has. Instead, critical constructivists want to reconstruct an identity – that is, find out what are its component parts – which they believe are created through written or spoken communication among and between peoples. Language plays a key role for critical cons-tructivists because it constructs, and has the ability to change, social reality.

Most constructivists, however, position themselves between these two more extreme ends of the spectrum.

Constructivism and Bhutan's national interests

Bhutan is a Buddhist kingdom located in the Himalayas. The material structural conditions are reflected in its population of approximately 745,000, a territory that amounts to 38,394 square kilometres, a weak economy and a very small military. On top of this, Bhutan shares a national border with the two major powers in Asia: China in the north and India in the south. Bhutan's location is geographically sensitive as the country serves as a buffer state between these major powers, which perceive each other as rivals rather than friends. In addition to this, the Chinese leadership claimed, after it annexed Tibet in the 1950s, that Bhutan's territory was also part of its mainland. To date there remains an ongoing border dispute between Bhutan and China and there have been reports that the Chinese army has made several incursions into Bhutan. Likewise, India has had a hand in Bhutan's foreign policy. Article 2 of the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty (1949) notes that 'Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of India in regard to its external relations.' Although this Article was revised in 2007, commentators have reported that India still holds a degree of influence over Bhutan.

From a realist perspective, one would argue that Bhutan is in an unfavourable position as it is hindered by its geographical location and cannot compete for power with its neighbours. The preservation of its national sovereignty would likely depend on the outcome of the greater competition between China and India. A constructivist view, on the other hand, would argue that these structural conditions do not necessarily constrain Bhutan's ability to pursue its national interests since they are not the only conditions that influence state behaviour: the *meaning* given to these structural conditions also matters. For example, when Tibet was annexed by China, Bhutan felt threatened. As a result, it closed its border in the north and turned to India, its neighbour in the south. From that moment onward, Bhutan perceived China as a potential threat and India as a friend. To date, Bhutan and India perceive each other as friends whereas Bhutan has no official relations with China. These social relationships represent the ideational structure that originated from the meaning given to the material structure. It is important to note, however, that the social relationships are subject to change depending on the ideas, beliefs and actions of Bhutan, India and China. For example, an agreement on the border dispute between China and Bhutan could change how both countries perceive each other. This change might lead to the establishment of an official relationship, the nature of which is friendship rather than enmity. A constructivist is well placed to detect and understand these changes since

their object of enquiry focuses on the social relationships between states.

Bhutan has also developed a distinctive national identity that differentiates it from its larger neighbours. This identity projects Bhutan as 'the last surviving independent Mahayana Buddhist Kingdom in the world' (Bhutan Vision 2020, 24–25). The usage of the word 'independent' refers directly to Bhutan's national interest – the preservation of its national sovereignty. Bhutan's national identity is socially constructed through a *Bhutanisation* process that started in the 1980s, when the fourth king of Bhutan introduced the 'One Nation, One People' policy. This policy demanded the observance of a code of conduct known as *Driglam Namzhag*. This code of conduct is built upon strict observance of vows – such as strong kinship loyalty, respect for one's parents, elders and superiors, and mutual cooperation between rulers and ruled. It also reinforced the rules for wearing a national dress – the *gho* for men and the *kira* for women. In addition to this, Dzongkha was selected as the national language of Bhutan. The Driglam Namzhag can be thought of as a regulative norm because the aim of the policy is to direct and constrain behaviour. For example, although Bhutan's national identity suggests that the Bhutanese comprise one homogeneous group, Bhutan is actually a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual country. There are three main ethnic groups: the Ngalongs, the Sharchhops and the Lhotshampas, who are of Nepali descent. Of these, the Ngalongs and the Sharchhops are Buddhists, while the Lhotshampas are mostly Hindus who speak the Nepali language. The policy had severe consequences for the Lhotshampas as Nepali was no longer taught in schools and people who could not prove residence in Bhutan prior to 1958 were classified as non-nationals. Consequently, thousands of Lhotshampas were expelled from Bhutan in the 1990s. Thus, the code of conduct is used by the Bhutanese authorities to create cultural unity and to stimulate citizens to reflect upon their cultural distinctiveness, which is paramount in creating a national identity.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, a norm needs to go through a lifecycle before it becomes established. In the case of Bhutan, we can witness the first phase, *norm emergence*, in the creation of the Driglam Namzhag by the Bhutanese authorities. The second phase, *norm acceptance*, required Bhutanese citizens to accept the Driglam Namzhag, including the national dress and Dzongkha as the national language. Once this acceptance occurred, *norm internalisation* occurs. The completion of this process entails that the behaviour of the Bhutanese citizens is circumscribed by these norms and practices. This circumscription also shows the constitutive nature of the Driglam Namzhag, which created new actors – that is, Bhutanese citizens who act and behave according to specific rules. We can see, for instance, that these norms and practices are regulated to date. For example, Bhutanese citizens are obliged to wear the national dress during national

events and when they attend school or work. This regulation is, as explained earlier, important as the behaviour of a state and its citizens should comply with the norms that are associated with Bhutan's national identity. The regulation also signifies that these norms are perceived as something good by the Bhutanese authorities, which underlines the prescriptive nature of norms.

Members of the Bhutanese elite have also created a second identity, which projects Bhutan as a leader in advancing a holistic and sustainable development paradigm. This identity is based on Bhutan's development philosophy, Gross National Happiness (GNH), which criticises the well-known Gross Domestic Product (GDP) approach for being solely focused on the economy of a state. Instead, GNH promotes a balance between material wellbeing and the spiritual needs of the mind. It is implemented and embedded in Bhutan's political and educational systems. Members of the Bhutanese elite have predominantly used the United Nations as a platform to promote the idea internationally. Subsequently, the United Nations adopted Resolution 65/309, which states that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental goal and that the gross domestic product indicator was not designed to, and does not adequately reflect, the wellbeing of people. Projecting their country as the last surviving independent Mahayana Buddhist kingdom in the world and as a leader in advancing a holistic and sustainable development paradigm enables Bhutanese authorities to signal their country's status as an independent sovereign state. It also allows Bhutan to increase its international visibility, which is advantageous when tensions run high with and among its neighbours.

Conclusion

Constructivism is often said to simply state the obvious – that actions, interactions and perceptions shape reality. Indeed, that idea is the source of the name of this theory family. Our thoughts and actions literally *construct* international relations. Yet, this seemingly simple idea, when applied theoretically, has significant implications for how we can understand the world. The discipline of International Relations benefits from constructivism as it addresses issues and concepts that are neglected by mainstream theories – especially realism. Doing so, constructivists offer alternative explanations and insights for events occurring in the social world. They show, for instance, that it is not only the distribution of material power, wealth and geographical conditions that can explain state behaviour but also ideas, identities and norms. Furthermore, their focus on ideational factors shows that reality is not fixed, but rather subject to change.