

6

Constructivism and poststructuralism

Image 6.1 Germans scale the Berlin Wall on November 9th, 1989.

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Learning objectives

- Understanding the differences between rationalist and constructivist IR theories
- Knowledge of the main concepts of constructivism/poststructuralism
- Application of these concepts to questions of international politics
- Knowledge of constructivist explanations for continuity and change in international politics

The power of ideas

The years 1989–91 witnessed a spectacular cascade of historical events. First, the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the post-World War II division of Europe, fell. This was followed by the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, a military alliance under Soviet Russia's domination in which most East European states were more or less willing members. After the dissolution of the Pact, these countries embarked on a process of fundamental political transformation towards democratic regimes. Finally, the superpower Soviet Union itself disintegrated into 15 independent parts, though Russia remained the largest country in the world by territory. Since then, there has been an intense debate about the causes of these completely unexpected developments. Many, mostly conservative, commentators assumed that the American policy of strength, embodied in particular by Republican President Ronald Reagan, was ultimately the main factor. Realists tend to agree. They argue that the realization by Soviet leaders of having lost the necessary capability to compete has to be seen as the core cause of the end of the Cold War, and that differentials in material power sealed the fate of the Warsaw Pact (Wohlforth 1994).

Other interpretations, however, pointed to the internal contradictions and dynamics of the Soviet system: '[Soviet President] Gorbachev's determination to reform an economy crippled in part by defence spending urged by special interests, but far more by structural rigidities, fueled his persistent search for an accommodation with the West. That persistence, not SDI (Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative), ended the Cold War' (Lebow and Stein, 1994: 39). This quotation by two well-known IR theorists is from an article in the news magazine *Atlantic Monthly*. It clearly pertains to the liberal-domestic theory of change and continuity, which we got to know in Chapter 4. According to this lens, the new leadership of the Soviet Union recognized that a dynamic society could never emerge due to the entrenched sclerosis of the political and economic system. Soviet leaders were forced, therefore, to undertake comprehensive reforms, which set in motion the above-mentioned unintended chain reaction.

Both interpretations have some plausibility, and both are possibly correct to a certain extent. The point of explaining complex events in the social sciences is not to find the one and only true solution, as in most natural sciences, but to provide the best plausible explanation based on solid evidence and valid methods. The realist and liberal explanations cited above have a problem insofar as they leave open the question of why the unexpected collapse occurred at this specific time, after decades of both arms races and mismanagement in

the communist bloc. Precisely the indeterminacy of these rationalist theories and their inability to foresee the fundamental shift that took place at the end of the Cold War was a core factor giving rise to a new and highly productive school of IR theories in the 1980s and 1990s. These theories argued that it was not fixed interests derived from international and domestic structures, but rather profound ideological changes that transformed the outdated antagonistic attitudes of elites and populations on both sides. These ideological changes were caused by new ideas spreading through transnational networks, and by the intensification of global communication. The old friend–enemy distinction and superpower rivalry dissolved – at least temporarily – and entrenched national interests were re-defined.

The argument that new ideas and identities are fundamental to explaining change in international politics, and that the latter is not determined by fixed structures independent of human interpretation, is the basic tenet of a broad theoretical perspective on international politics that has continued to grow over the past 30 years and whose many different ramifications are subsumed under the umbrella term of **constructivism**. This school of theories comprises many different outlooks, ranging from ‘conventional’ to ‘radical’ constructivism. While many constructivists continued to adhere to an ontology (see Chapter 1) that assumes that there is an objective reality that can be grasped with scientific methods and which is shaped by subjective factors, such as ideas, frames, ideologies, etc., others depart more radically from rationalist theories. They argue that objective reality has no fixed essence beyond our attempts to make sense of it through language and practice. This more radical understanding of the world is advocated by *poststructural approaches*, which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

Foundations of constructivism

In the early 1990s, an intensive theoretical debate characterized IR research between representatives of the so-called rationalist theories (which include neorealism, institutionalism and liberalism), and researchers who fundamentally questioned the model of rational decision-making by actors in international politics on which these theories are based (the notion of so-called *homo economicus*). This debate was inspired, on the one hand, by the lack of predictive power of the dominant theories, especially with regard to the transformation of the Cold War. On the other hand, in many other scientific disciplines, such as sociology, philosophy, or art history, postmodern and critical ideas had challenged the rationalist worldview on which most sciences, especially the natural sciences and economics, were based (Balzacq and Baele, 2014). The challenge posed by constructivism was not so much an argument about which specific factors determine international politics, but rather about whether material factors should be taken as a starting point at all instead of their ideational and subjective foundations.

With this basic ontological and epistemological orientation, constructivism opened a wide door for the integration of sociological theories into IR. Sociological thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Chantal Mouffe, Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens, and many others were intensively discussed, especially in European IR research. Representatives

of rationalist theories, however, rejected these perspectives as imprecise and not very scientific. This long debate, in which many IR scholars and researchers participated intensively with their characteristic penchant for elaborate meta-theoretical discussions, has since weakened and given way to a more or less peaceful coexistence of rationalist and constructivist approaches. After all, the question of whether 'being determines consciousness' or 'consciousness determines being' resembles the well-known riddle of whether the chicken or the egg came first. Constructivist theories (which assume that material and ideational factors are co-constitutive) and poststructural approaches (which privilege the latter) are by now thriving theoretical traditions within the broad array of theories that attempt to understand and explain international politics. They have their own journals and book series, they have contributed new perspectives across the whole range of questions that IR grapples with, and they have opened up innumerable new paths of inquiry and new interpretations.

Thus, the so-called 'great debate' of 'constructivism vs rationalism' firmly established a hitherto quite marginal view of IR, which does not assume that there are fixed interests of international actors, but that these interests are *socially constructed* and determined by ideas, norms, cultures, identities, etc. What is important for actors in this perspective and what shapes their view of rational behavior is the social appropriateness of their actions (*homo sociologicus*). Actors do not primarily weigh up the advantages and disadvantages for themselves in a rational manner, but act in a way that is accepted as customary and legitimate within their social reference group. In this *logic of appropriateness*, norms, principles, and identities refer to 'appropriate' actions within a social context. In contrast, according to rationalist theories, actors act based on a *logic of consequences*. For them, the assumption that actors calculate these consequences rationally in order to maximize their benefits, explains reality best. These objective interests can be observed by the rationalist theories: they originate, for example, from the international system, from national bargaining processes, or from the rules of international institutions. Constructivist theories argue that such objective interests do not exist independent from subjective context. However, while they all basically agree on this outlook, they differ in how strongly they take the world existing outside the observer as given. A moderate version of constructivism assumes that there is an objective reality that comprises and is determined by ideas, norms, etc., whereas poststructural and radical constructivists argue that an objective reality cannot be said to exist independently of the observer.

Constructivism makes no firm assumptions about which actors have the highest relevance in explaining international processes (for example, states, classes, international institutions, social groups) or which are the most important issues and problem areas of global politics. It primarily makes statements about how actors in IR acquire and interpret their respective preferences, and how certain topics and problem areas become important and take on their 'intersubjective meaning'. This term describes assessments on which several people agree and which are not objective facts. This would be, for example, the concept of 'hereditary enmity' between France and Germany, which was accepted in wide circles in both countries until 1945 (whereas the existence of two main languages in these countries is an objective fact). In their analyses, constructivist authors make use of a number of concepts that help explain the social construction of reality, such as culture, identity, norms, and

roles. In this chapter, these concepts will be introduced and applied. First, however, we will present the fundamental critique that constructivism directs towards the rationalist concept of the state and the structure of the international system based on it.

Anarchy is what states make of it

Hardly anyone has outlined the specific view of constructivism in a more instructive way than the American political scientist Alexander Wendt. In his articles and books, Wendt took issue with neorealism as the leading structural theory of IR. His best-known essay is entitled 'Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics' (1992). He argues that the seemingly objective systemic structures that shape actors' international policies, such as anarchy, are in fact in constant flux as they are constantly reinterpreted by these same actors. Actors and structures are thus mutually dependent (instead of the actors and their interests being primarily shaped by the effects of structures, as Waltz argued). Wendt deals here with the so-called *agent-structure problem* that problematizes the fundamental question of whether structures and the actors operating within their confines are causally related. For example: to what extent do states act in the international space free of structural constraints? An institutionalist would argue that international anarchy and interdependence as structural factors strongly influence the actions of states (although not quite as deterministically as their neorealist counterparts). Constructivism does not specify whether it is the structures that influence the actors or the actors that shape the structures. It merely states that the structures are constructed and thus influence the actions of the actors, who, however, also reproduce, re-construct, and modify the structures through their actions. Accordingly, this process is not a static phenomenon which allows one to determine once and for all who influences whom and how, but an item that is constantly renegotiated and needs to be researched.

Constructivists thus agree that the anarchy of the international system influences the behaviour of actors, but they claim that these very actors can also change the nature of the international system through their actions. Anarchy might thus be replaced by something else; for example, a super-structure like a world state. Alexander Wendt argues precisely this in his article 'Why a world state is inevitable' (2003). The potential to be radically re-interpreted and understood differently also applies to states themselves, which, to use the famous formulation of political scientist Benedict Anderson, emerged as 'imagined communities' whose existence and sovereignty are socially shaped constructs. In our current understanding, they seem to have become the unquestioned central building blocks of the international system. It is hard to imagine a different world. This process of socialization is now so firmly anchored that even where completely different forms of political organization might have existed for a long time, terms like 'failed or fragile states' are used to describe the situation on the ground. This shows how the state is assumed to be the natural unit with given functions.

Constructivists, however, argue that states as we understand them now are relatively recent phenomena, and that their core attribute, sovereignty, is subject to continuous

re-interpretation (e.g. Reus-Smit, 2013). Likewise, the security dilemma seen by neorealist theory as the logical consequence of anarchy is, in a constructivist perspective, a socially constructed phenomenon, not a fixed reality. When states no longer believe that the anarchic international system necessarily leads to insecurity, and that they therefore have to resort to self-help and the acquisition of power, this construct collapses, according to Wendt, and is replaced by one or several other perceptions. The same is true for many 'facts' of international politics. To use an example: the disputed Temple Mount in Jerusalem has a different meaning depending on whether it is visited by a Jewish or Muslim person or by a non-religious tourist, while for a geographer or an archaeologist the material substance or historical provenance of the site might constitute its true essence. The same construction of intersubjective meanings is what makes paper money possible. Without general agreement that a bill is worth the amount printed on it, it would ultimately be just a nicely decorated piece of paper. How is it that certain places or things become charged with tremendous political symbolism, and why do people believe in paper money even when it is issued by another state? These are the kinds of questions constructivists ask.

Key concept

Socialization

Socialization is a process that describes the spread and internalization of values, ideas, and norms of an international society among states and other actors. The international dissemination of the values on which today's concept of human rights is based is one of these processes. Scholars distinguish between a shallower spread of norms and values which results in rhetorical action and tactical concessions by the actor on the receiving end, and a more profound process of socialization. Thus, for instance, there is a long-standing debate on whether the spread of EU norms to new member states that recently emerged from a long history of non-democratic government under communism led to genuine changes, or whether it was simply motivated by tactical motives to gain rapid accession to a community that provided both economic benefits and physical protection. Cases such as Hungary, which has experienced a clear turn towards a more authoritarian government and illiberal norms under the leadership of Victor Orbán since 2010, contrast strongly with countries such as Spain or the Czech Republic, which have become stable democracies.

Question

Another example for a potential case of socialization could result from the analysis of China's expansion in Africa. Such a perspective allows us to see this policy not only through the lens of material power resources, which China acquires through alliances and investment, but also through the socialization of African countries to the norms of non-intervention and state-led economic development espoused by China. In his article 'Delegitimization and "re-socialization": China and the diffusion of alternative norms in Africa', Obert Hodzi from

the University of Liverpool analyses Chinese efforts to re-socialize African countries away from 'liberal international' norms to norms preferred by China. Read the article and answer the following questions: What is the core argument made by the author? What is the theoretical approach and how does he define 'socialization'? Which method does he employ to substantiate his findings? Are the arguments convincing?

Identities in the Israel–Palestine conflict

How states and other groups see their relations with each other is, in the constructivist view, intersubjectively constructed, i.e. a product of mutual perceptions, and not of given material circumstances. Thus, the questions of how certain attitudes solidify (institutionalize), and how ideational change towards stable cooperation (but also towards lasting competition) emerges, are fundamental themes for constructivist research. Scholars try to capture continuity and change with concepts such as culture, identity change, norms, practices, etc.

The concept of *identity* plays a central role in much constructivist research because it encompasses the construction of social realities through ideas of self and other. Collective identities can thus be understood as a web of intertwined ideas that circumscribe the definition of one's own group in distinction to other groups. They are the result of a community formation that both integrates its members and, in processes of exclusion, decides who does not belong to them. In this way, identities constitute a common understanding for a group, on the basis of which problems are defined and possible solutions appear as legitimate or also as unacceptable. According to Alexander Wendt, identities are ultimately the basis of interests (Wendt, 1992: 398). Only when actors know who they are do they know what they want. Thus, a corresponding 'we'-feeling can become the basis for joint action. This assumption has been much discussed, for example, in connection with the progress and stagnation of European integration, in which processes of Europeanization (at least among the elites) developed a kind of European identity that enabled and supported further cooperation (Risse, 2010). Another example of scholarship which draws on the concept of identity is provided by research that became sadly pertinent in February 2022 when Russia attacked Ukraine. It deals with the transformations of Russia's identity from a liberal identity emphasizing cooperation with Europe, to an exclusively Russian one, stressing the Otherness of the West (e.g. Hopf, 2016).

While deeply rooted identities provide continuity (for better or worse), fundamental change, in constructivist terms, is essentially due to identity change. Once competing identities become entrenched, however, conflicts can become intractable. One of the most obvious examples of such antagonistic identity consolidation in world politics is certainly the Middle East conflict, at the centre of which Israeli and Palestinian positions have been irreconcilably opposed for many decades. From a constructivist perspective, the massacre committed by Hamas terrorists on October 7, 2023, and Israel's extremely violent reaction illustrate how entrenched identities can be invoked and mobilised with sometimes tragic consequences. The origins of the conflict lie in the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916, whereby

the British and French colonial powers – largely without regard to the ethnic composition of the region – reorganized the territories in the Middle East that arose from the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. One of these areas was Palestine, where conflicts between resident of the Ottoman Empire. One of these areas was Palestine, where conflicts between resident and immigrant Jews and the Muslim inhabitants were already rampant. Jewish immigration took place against the backdrop of political Zionism, which had been striving for a Jewish state since the end of the 19th century. The Holocaust increased the extensive diaspora of European Jews and, at the same time, provided an extremely painful history which shaped the common memory of a previously rather diverse group. The Zionist goal was to finally live in a self-governed own state. However, the Palestinians resisted giving up their land, and so there was constant fighting and mutual killings.

The founding of Israel on 14 May 1948 triggered the first Arab–Israeli war, which resulted in the expulsion of more than 700,000 Palestinians (an event referred to in Arabic as ‘Nakba’ or ‘the catastrophe’), the descendants of whom still live in neighbouring countries and so-called autonomous territories. The defeat fuelled Arab nationalism, which was essentially fed by opposition to Israel. In 1964, the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) was founded to represent the Palestinians. It often resorted to terrorist means to gain attention for its cause (e.g. the 1972 Munich Olympics terror attack). The continuing tensions also resulted in inter-state conflicts in which many neighbouring Arab states became involved. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel seized the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and occupied the West Bank. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Egypt and Syria initially surprised the Israeli army, but the war ended in the prior status quo. It was not until 1979 that the Camp David Peace Agreement was reached, in which Egypt under President Anwar al Sadat recognized Israel and the Israelis restituted the Sinai Peninsula in return. However, the Palestinians’ struggle for their own state continued. In 1987–92, the First Intifada (‘The First Uprising’) broke out, in which the Palestinians tried to force Israel to change its policy through civil and armed protests. In this context, Hamas was founded as a new, more radical organization representing Palestinian grievances. In 1993, a new attempt to find a compromise was made with the Oslo Accords. Only two years later, however, the Israeli architect of the agreement, Yitzak Rabin, was assassinated by Yigal Amir, an Israeli right-wing extremist. When his more uncompromising successor, Ariel Sharon, entered the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in 2000, which both sides claimed as the highest religious symbol, he triggered the Second Intifada. The construction of a border wall by the government of Israel and the continuous expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank further exacerbated the conflict. After the October 2023 events, the conflict seems more intractable than ever.

In this almost uninterrupted succession of mutual violence, lasting collective traumas become identity-shaping elements. In the case of the Israelis, these are the Holocaust and the numerous terrorist attacks, culminating in the October 7 massacre; in the case of the Palestinians, the loss of their homeland, the many subsequent defeats and protests, and the many, mostly civilian casualties as a result of the extensive use of violence by the Israeli army which, at the time of writing, continues apace. Thus, exclusive collective identities have formed in which the respective positions have hardened to a zero-sum game view that interprets the other side’s gain as its own loss. Mutual enmity also acts inwardly as a constituting and unifying element. Hostility towards another group becomes a social marker of belonging that can hardly be questioned without risking a considerable degree of social ostracism (Siniver, 2012).

IR theory in film

No Man's Land: Identities in the Balkan conflict

The tragicomedy *No Man's Land*, which won the Oscar for best foreign film in 2001, deals with the conflict in the Balkans during the 1990s. When the former state of Yugoslavia disintegrated after 1991, bloody secessionist wars marked by ethnic hatred and numerous human rights violations were the consequence. The fighting was particularly intense in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Serb, Croat, and Muslim populations lived together before the war and now fought against each other. The film shows how a Bosnian and a Serb fighter became stranded in a trench in the no man's land between the two front lines, while another Bosnian soldier lies on a mine and cannot move away. After intense debate, the two others decide to alert the UN observer mission stationed in the area in order to rescue the third man. Besides the cultural incomprehension and cynicism of the foreign observers, the film concentrates on the tense and often tragicomic dynamic between the two main protagonists, who try to keep each other in check but also depend on each other. They discover that they actually were born in the same town and even loved the same woman. But the exclusive ethnic identities constructed during the conflict keep on fueling mistrust until the end.

Discussion

- Can the individual identity constructions depicted in the film also be transferred to states and ethnic groups and thus explain violent conflicts, or is this view too simplistic?

Role theory in IR: Are Germany and Japan still 'civilian powers'?

The history of German and Japanese politics in the international system has many striking parallels. Both were laggards compared to their neighbours, both in terms of industrializing and in their participation in the imperialist division of the world. Neither achieved the longed-for 'equality' with the other great powers despite extreme efforts: Germany lost the First World War; Japan encountered the resistance of the victorious powers to a Japanese sphere of influence in East Asia. Subsequently, both developed into extreme nationalist dictatorships which challenged the liberal democracies and pursued a brutal policy of expanding the 'living space' of their peoples under ethnic pretences. Both countries failed catastrophically with these plans, and they were demilitarized and democratized under American control. The Cold War brought their integration into the Western alliance system, including remilitarization. However, the respective armed forces were strictly controlled. In addition, Germany and Japan renounced nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, and they were closely integrated into the military structure of the respective alliance, which was dominated by the USA. Subsequently, the two countries concentrated with great success on economic reconstruction and refrained from

military engagements abroad. At the same time, they were among the strongest advocates of rules-based multilateralism in a variety of international institutions.

For realist theory, this rejection of traditional power politics can be explained quite simply by Germany and Japan's involvement in the alliance with the USA and their dependence on military protection by their powerful ally. However, the end of the Cold War brought with it the end of this dependency, or at least a host of new options. Would the foreign policy of both states now 'normalize', as prominent realists predicted? Institutionalist and liberal-domestic analyses pointed to the economic interdependence of both states, their institutional networks, and the influence of domestic political groups. This would lead to continuity in the respective foreign policy orientation.

The most prominent argument for continuity, however, came from the constructivist camp. Constructivists emphasized that both states had by now internalized a social role which prescribed their framework of action and shaped what the majority in both societies considered to be appropriate foreign policy. The best known of these arguments was formulated by the *civilian power approach*. Essentially elaborated by the German political scientist Hanns W. Maull and his followers (see, e.g., Maull, 1990), this approach assumes that the foreign policies of Germany and Japan are shaped by a now firmly rooted identity. It privileges certain behaviours and leads these countries to assume roles that are defined by self-expectations (ego-role) and foreign expectations (alter-role). Typical characteristics of a civilian power, for example, are a pronounced culture of anti-militarism, according to which military solutions are only applied in extreme cases. In the case of Germany and Japan, this is a consequence of the lessons learned from the Second World War. Another role is the self-perception and external perception as a multilateral actor. Both Japan and Germany have achieved the restoration of their international reputations largely through involvement in international institutions. The emphasis on legal ties and norms that are not dependent on material interests is another characteristic of a civilian power. Finally, the will to 'civilize' international politics and work towards consensus-based conflict resolution are also among the relevant characteristics. To sum up, both countries have been socialized into a set of roles that determine to a large extent how they perceive their interests.

Such role-theoretical concepts are not new in the analysis of IR. As early as 1970, the Finnish-Canadian political scientist Kalevi J. Holsti attributed certain national roles to states on the basis of which they defined their interests (Holsti, 1970: 233–309; on role theory see: Thies, 2017). One example is the role of 'American leadership', in which the US ascribes to itself a duty for leadership in the world. Often, this expectation is also placed on it from outside. Whether the role of 'leadership' still makes sense for the USA is one of the most discussed questions in the American debate on the future global policy of the United States.

Norms in International Relations

Every human being has values and usually strives to live in an environment in which these values are shared as broadly as possible. Such collectively shared values are referred to in the social sciences as *norms*. An example of a norm that is of great importance for interpersonal relationships at all levels is fairness. Kicking an adversary who is already on the ground is

considered by most people a disgusting act, though it might be a rational one for the attacker who wants to pre-empt counter-attacks once and for all. Such norms of behaviour undoubtedly structure our social life.

Infobox

English School

The so-called English School is an approach to IR that stresses that states form a kind of international society with shared norms and ideas. As its name indicates, British scholars such as Hedley Bull and Martin Wight developed the approach. Like constructivism, the English School puts a strong emphasis on socialization and norms. Its key concept – the international society – suggests that the activities of those who pursue international politics produce and act within a framework of rules and institutions as well as a common morality that shapes their interactions. Thus, the actors do take into account the mutually recognized rules of the game and are not simply self-interested and utility-maximizing actors in an international system characterized by anarchy. Instead, as Hedley Bull wrote, states 'conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions' (1977: 13).

Discussion

- Can the reaction of the world to the Covid-19 pandemic be considered as an expression of an 'international society'?

The notion of 'international norms' is one of the concepts that became very widely used with the rise of constructivist approaches in IB, and it is still applied in the analysis of a huge variety of international issues. There are many definitions of what constitutes an international norm. Martha Finnemore, who produced one of the first and most cited works on norms in IR, describes them as 'shared expectations about appropriate behavior held by a community of actors' (Finnemore, 1996: 22). Historically, for example, civilizations have adopted certain rules for warfare that regulate behaviour during violent conflicts. 'Do not shoot the messenger', i.e. not harming envoys from the opposing side, is one such universally accepted norm (of course, these norms have been repeatedly violated throughout history, but such action has usually been seen as abhorrent).

Thus, norms provide instructions for action in the sense of appropriate behaviour in a community. Actors refer to norms when justifying and coordinating their actions, particularly once these norms are widely diffused and institutionalized. In this sense, they create and strengthen identities. At the same time, norms are practices that refer to the underlying convictions and create community. They are therefore both cognitive maps and building blocks of identities and interests.

Research on norms has been very prolific over the past 30 years. It has looked at the conditions for and process of the emergence of norms, at problems of compliance with norms,

and at the contestation of norms. For instance, the emergence of the 'Responsibility to Protect' norm has been a major focus of research. While initially most states signed up to it, its application was very contested. The case of the international intervention in Libya in 2011, which led to the downfall of Gaddafi's dictatorship and the descent of the country into civil war, demonstrated how contested this norm remained.

Theories in action

The R2P norm

In 2005, at a World Summit in New York, almost all states recognized a new norm which became known as Responsibility to Protect (R2P). At its core was the idea that sovereignty not only bestows privileges but also duties on states, in particular with regard to the treatment of vulnerable populations. The R2P document named genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity as key concerns that would trigger an international response should states be unwilling or unable to prevent them on their territories. The R2P was pushed by a vibrant community of norm entrepreneurs, most prominently by the UN General Secretary Kofi Annan himself. A group of eminent personalities, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, had drawn up a report on which the World Summit document was based. Despite overwhelming approval, the exact application of the norm remained contested. This became very clear during an uprising in Libya against long-term dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi. Known for his brutal rule, Gaddafi threatened to kill all protesters like 'cockroaches' and started bombing rebel strongholds indiscriminately. The United Nations strongly condemned these actions, and after Gaddafi did not heed calls for restraint, the Security Council authorized in its resolution 1973 of March 2011 'all necessary measures' to stop the killing. Soon after that, NATO aircraft bombed positions of Gaddafi loyalists. This led to the quick collapse of the regime, and ultimately the apprehension and killing of Gaddafi by rebels. States such as China, India, Russia, and many African states heavily criticized the intervention afterwards, because Resolution 1973 had not authorized regime change. They argued that the fall of Gaddafi actually signalled that R2P was deeply flawed.

Discussion

- Has the international intervention in Libya resulted in the 'failure' of R2P? Scholars are divided on this issue. Search for relevant literature on this issue and draw up a list of the contending arguments.

Core human rights and fundamental rules of behaviour in international relations are areas which demonstrate the importance of norms quite obviously. But can norms, such as fairness, also apply to those policies between states, in which supposedly hard-core interests are at stake and mutual solidarity is hard to achieve?

Let us look at the tough case of international trade policy, where gains and losses are easy to track and state negotiators are under pressure from their producers and consumers to

secure the most advantageous deals possible. US politics professor Ethan Kapstein has explored this issue, and he challenged the predominant notion that international trade policy has to be understood only as an expression of the commercial and strategic interests of the major economic powers and their corporations (Kapstein, 2005: 80–101). For how else could it be explained that there are many trade concessions to poorer countries, and that there is a dominant discourse on fair trade in international institutions?

Kapstein's analysis is based on a game-theoretical model, the so-called *ultimatum game*. Let's assume that a man receives 100 dollars or euros as a gift on the condition that this sum should be divided between him and the person sitting next to him. The most rational course of action would be to offer the other person one or two dollars, since he or she would already be making a profit. Experiments show, however, that people do not act this way. They divide the sum much more fairly. If the distribution is very unfair, the recipients often reject the amount and forego the profit. Kapstein argues that such fairness norms also play an important role in international economic relations. Trade agreements and international economic organizations reflect this when they grant preferential status to weaker states. One example is the fisheries agreements that the EU has been concluding with third countries for several years. These are about access for the EU fishing fleet to the territorial waters of these states. Since the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy in 2012, the idea of sustainability has been a central norm in shaping the external dimension of the EU's fisheries policy (Zimmermann, 2017). A key objective is also not to displace local fisheries. In recent agreements with, for example, Mauritania or Morocco, it is very obvious that the EU made major trade-offs in terms of potential commercial gains from these agreements. Pressure from the European Parliament ensures that sustainability and social justice standards cannot be neglected by EU negotiators.

How do norms prevail in the reality of international politics, which is apparently shaped by hard-nosed interests? This is often the work of so-called *norm entrepreneurs*. These are individuals or transnational networks who make a particular issue their own and use their prominence, organizational skills, and public relations work to try to persuade political actors to act accordingly. Margret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink refer to these as Transnational Advocacy Networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). One example of such a network is the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), which is dedicated to eliminating one of the worst legacies of the many wars of the 20th and 21st centuries. Landmines pose a significant threat to populations in many post-conflict regions (not to mention their terrible impact during the conflicts themselves). It is estimated that up to 110 million landmines are still buried in the ground worldwide. Until a few years ago, 20,000–25,000 people were killed annually, many of them children. Countries particularly affected include Egypt, Afghanistan, Iran, Angola, and Cambodia.

In the last 25 years, however, the number of victims has decreased considerably, and this is mainly a result of the Ottawa Convention of 1997, an international agreement that bans the production and use of landmines. This agreement was brought about to a considerable extent through civil society engagement, even though the initiative originated from an Austrian diplomat (Werner Ehrlich) and was pushed forward considerably by that country. The ICBL, an association of NGOs founded in 1993 that campaigned for the abolition of mines, provided a common platform for civil society engagement. A core goal was to redefine mines as a humanitarian

issue, and not as a security or arms control problem as before. If landmines were no longer understood primarily as a possible and legitimate means of defence against attacks, the use of these weapons would constitute a human rights violation in itself. This would require much more justification by the producers and users of these weapons.

Due to many effective media stunts and the painful, highly publicized images of mine victims, the campaign was successful. When the ICBL was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, the issue received another enormous boost. In 1999, the 'Convention for the Ban of Landmines' was concluded in Ottawa, to which 164 states have signed up to date (November 2023). However, notable abstainers included the USA, China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Israel.

The ICBL can thus be understood as a norm entrepreneur that both consolidates and disseminates norms. It provides information to other actors and influences national policies. In an almost paradigmatic way, it illustrates how norms emerge and become established. First, the *de-legitimization* of existing practice is necessary. It is redefined as failure and in need of change. This goes hand in hand with the *emotionalization* and dramatization of the issue in order to arouse broad media attention. Also important is the *catchiness* of the message as well as links to existing norms, for example the norm of protecting the civilian population in conflicts (for recent research on these questions, see Hoffmann, 2017). Finally, a norm can be considered enforced when it has been internalized by the actors (i.e. the new practice is no longer questioned). Despite their often considerable influence, however, norm entrepreneurs in international politics remain dependent on states for the establishment and execution of laws and policies based on newly established norms.

Norms research has been exceptionally popular, and one of the core articles introducing the topic, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), is the most cited article in the whole of IR (Peez, 2022: 4). Most of this research has dealt with the spread and the 'performance' of norms in the Western world. Given the increasing debate about the so-called 'crisis of the liberal international order' (see Chapter 3), a particularly vibrant field of research has been the study of norm contestation, both by official actors and civil society (see Wiener, 2018). This also concerns the debate about whether many norms are truly global, and whether norms research does share the Western liberal bias of IR (Acharya, 2011). Another criticism concerns the status of norms as independent variables that are to be studied as 'fixed entities' in isolation from other phenomena. Instead, this critique argues, norms should be seen as embedded in structures of power that are expressed in the way norms are pronounced and enacted. Such a view of norms is called 'poststructuralist', and we will turn to this more recent theoretical development in the next section.

Discussion topic

Norm enforcement in international politics

In the group, identify a norm that you would like to see enforced internationally and become norm entrepreneurs. How would you plan the campaign, drawing on the conditions for enforcing international standards described above?

Poststructuralism: The world as text

As the preceding sections have shown, constructivist theories emphasize the non-material, cognitive, psychological, or ideological dimensions of how the international system works. Certainly, most constructivists accept the existence and influence of 'hard' material factors which exist 'out there', beyond the perceptions of actors. Nonetheless, they stress the complex interplay of these material factors with ideological or psychological elements that traditional, 'positivist' approaches have mostly neglected.

Poststructuralists, however, go a step further than constructivists in their emphasis on non-material factors. They argue that a straightforward experience of 'reality' is impossible, because of humanity's profound entrapment in *language*. The roots of poststructuralism lie in the study of linguistics, and particularly the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He argued that language does not, in fact, directly denote physically existing objects in a stable way, but that it actually functions as a largely autonomous system of 'signifiers' which is subject to constant change. In short, words relate to each other, not to 'things' which exist in the 'real world', meaning that language is an inherently unstable and shifting system.

But who has the power to influence the structure and character of language at any given point in time? This is a central question for poststructuralist approaches, which hold that the capacity to shape and determine 'dominant discourses' is a key source of power in any given society. For example, medieval Europe was dominated by religious discourses, which meant that particular forms of behaviour or statements might see an individual burned for witchcraft. Conversely, in 21st-century Europe, dominated by discourses around medicalization and science, the exact same forms of behaviour or statements might result in psychiatric incarceration. In both cases, dominant discourses themselves are decisive in determining the ensuing 'practices' – and they also tell us which social forces or institutions exercise 'discursive dominance' over society.

Clearly, then, the poststructuralist focus on language has a revolutionary potential. This is why it was swiftly taken up by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault. From the 1970s, such figures began to target the 'dominant discourses' of their time, and especially established 'scientific' discourses, which they aimed to 'deconstruct' in order to show how their basic terms and concepts were deeply implicated in dominant power structures. Their approach was historical and genealogical. They asked how certain concepts – which may appear to us as 'naturally occurring' – really came to exist, how they came to be taken for granted, and which power structures they serve to consolidate. Obviously, such an approach represents a radical challenge to 'positivism' – that is, to the idea that we can arrive at 'objective truth' through 'scientific methods'. 'Truth' becomes historically contingent, determined by the specific discourses which dominate in a given society. As one of its pre-eminent representatives wrote: 'poststructuralism is a critical attitude, approach, or ethos that calls attention to the importance of representation, the relationship of power and knowledge, and the politics of identity in an understanding of global affairs' (Campbell, 2010: 216).

From the 1980s, poststructuralist approaches began to make their presence felt in the study of IR. This entailed a querying of the fundamental concepts – such as 'sovereignty' or

'the state' – which the discipline has traditionally taken as given. For example, IR has, from its inception, assumed that 'the state' is a naturally occurring entity which inevitably results from a higher stage of political 'development'. Poststructuralists, however, traced the genealogy of discourses around 'the state' to the violent, acquisitive politics of medieval Europe. It was a European arrangement, formed by groups of (almost exclusively male) Europeans who wanted to legitimate their right to control particular territories and bodies. This concept of 'the state' was exported across the globe in brutal fashion during the era of European colonialism, and used to exert further dominance over yet more territories and bodies. And yet IR has naturalized the idea of 'the state', and invested it with a glorious narrative, whereby Europeans, by virtue of their superiority, were the first to happen upon it while negotiating the Peace of Westphalia.

As this example shows, the intensive examination of discourses and their genealogy, and the exposure and critique of the power dynamics which underlie and determine them, helps to explain why poststructuralism is closely related to (and was inspiring for) other approaches such as postcolonialism and radical feminism. Such approaches also aim to 'deconstruct' the accepted narratives of IR. While postcolonialism attempts to expose the 'Western' origins of IR concepts and narratives, radical feminist scholars frequently argue that ideas such as 'the state' are invested with tribal and potentially violent 'masculine' values and histories. For both approaches, such discourses continue to be indispensable from the point of view of powerful actors in shoring up their continued dominance of the international system. Feminist and postcolonial approaches are examined in more detail in Chapters 7 and 8.

Theories in action

Framing famine

In medieval Europe, famine was viewed as an act of God, as punishment for sinful behaviour or deviation from the proper principles of a 'Christian' life. The main solution to such catastrophes was to pray for divine mercy. This reflected the fact that the dominant discourses in medieval Europe were religious and Christian, with European societies controlled by church institutions and registers. In the 21st-century West, famines are constructed very differently. Now they are conceptualized as the 'naturally occurring' results of environmental or political disasters. Their origins are still, to some extent, uncontrollable, but their pernicious effects can be resolved through modern scientific methods of food production and distribution. Unfortunately, 'less developed' regions with less advanced technology and unstable politics are not necessarily privy to such methods, and so they must be delivered from famine by the 'advanced' West. In this way, famine has been 'depoliticized', rendered a naturally occurring problem which must be addressed through non-political, technical, and scientific solutions. It also appears as something 'pre-modern', a problem which only 'less developed' societies struggle with. The political scientist Jenny Edkins (2000) drew on poststructuralist theory to argue that famine is anything

but 'apolitical' or 'naturally occurring'. Instead, it results from a persistently asymmetrical relationship between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South', with the West actively working to maintain this dependency. Aid-giving policies may alleviate famines in the short term, but they also ensure a basic inequality between Global North and Global South that virtually guarantees their reoccurrence by keeping the 'Global South' in a state of subjugation. Ultimately, in her view, the successful construction of famines as 'pre-modern', 'naturally occurring', and susceptible only to non-political 'technical' solutions serves to stabilize dominant power structures in the West and elsewhere.

Discussion

- How might a poststructuralist and a more moderate constructivist agree or disagree over Jenny Edkins' analysis of famine? Poststructuralism has proven prodigious at offering critical analyses such as the one sketched out above. But what kind of concrete solutions would you expect a poststructuralist to suggest for the problem of a specific famine? Is a revolutionary rethinking of the relationship between North and South, a complete rewriting of discourses and power relations, the only way forward?

Discourse analysis: A core methodology of poststructuralism

As we have seen in this chapter, a fundamental goal of the International Coalition to Ban Landmines was to change the way these weapons were talked about and thought about, i.e. to bring about a change in the relevant discourse from a definition of landmines as merely one category of weapons, to identifying them as a human rights problem. *Discourse* is a central term for constructivist research. The term originally stood for comprehension-oriented speech acts, especially lectures. However, it is now used more broadly, both to refer to argumentation in social processes in general and to the creation of social realities through language. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, authors of some of the most quoted works on discourse theory, cite the example of natural disasters. Prior to relevant scientific discoveries, they observe, these were talked about by almost everybody as wraths of God imposed on humanity (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Nowadays, our understanding and the associated discourse has changed. Similarly, in today's climate debate, some frame a heatwave as a natural meteorological phenomenon whereas others link it to the vast body of research on climate change and see alarming abnormalities. Perhaps the most important inspiration for the practice of discourse analysis is the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84), who studied how social knowledge is created, how particular interpretations of reality become accepted truths and institutions, and how certain interpretations of reality are constructed through discourse.

This close focus on language, coupled with an intensive confrontation with power, means that poststructuralist discourse analysis frequently examines the narratives created by those in

power to legitimize certain courses of action and de-legitimize others. For example, when Donald Trump became US president, he inherited the difficult problem of dealing with Syria, a country experiencing the greatest humanitarian disaster of the 21st century to date. Trump, however, had one main aim: American withdrawal, on the basis that 'Turkey, Syria, and all forms of Kurds have been fighting for centuries [...] Let someone else fight over this long-bloodstained sand [...] How many Americans must die in the Middle East in the midst of these ancient sectarian and tribal conflicts?' (Trump, 2019). From a poststructuralist perspective, Trump's invocation of 'ancient conflicts' and his description of the root causes of the conflict in Syria served as a rhetorical strategy for legitimating his basic agenda: 'America First'.

Compare this to the very different way in which Samantha Power, former US Ambassador to the United Nations, described the situation in Syria during a debate over a possible military intervention on the part of the Obama administration that preceded Trump's rule. This discussion occurred shortly after Syrian dictator Assad used chemical weapons against his own people. In a speech to the Center for American Progress, Power cited a Syrian father who, due to Assad's attack, had been forced to 'say goodbye to his two young daughters. His girls had not yet been shrouded, they were still dressed in the pink shorts and leggings of little girls. The father lifted their lifeless bodies, cradled them, and cried out "Wake up...What will I do without you?... How do I stand this pain?" As a parent, I cannot begin to answer his questions' (Power, 2013).

Trump used language to legitimate his 'America First' agenda, while Power's rhetorical devices were tailored to liberal-interventionist goals. From a poststructuralist perspective, however, both constitute discursive framings undertaken by different sources of power in order to legitimate particular political agendas. Poststructuralists are particularly interested in the capacity of language to perform this function. They study this with the methods of discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis. For example, in an article exemplary for framing analyses, American researchers showed how UN member states, despite a wide variety of interests, arrived at a common stance in the fight against international human trafficking. Of great importance was that the issue was defined ('framed') as a crime-fighting issue, and not just as a human rights issue (Charnysh et al., 2015). A discourse analysis can also show which point of view actors want to assert as valid and true, and which rhetorical strategies are used for this. It also examines whether these interpretations are accepted by the audience beyond the person expressing the discourse, thereby rendering them as 'discursive repertoires'.

However, discourse analysis also has its limits. It does not reveal what the people (or states and societies) under investigation really think, nor does it show whether individuals or groups really believe the statements of politicians or the media. What matters for its analyses are publicly pronounced and widely circulating discourses that gain widespread reception. For example, it matters whether anti-government armed groups in the long Syrian civil war were seen by Western governments and the public as freedom fighters, or, because of their ideology, as Islamist terrorists. The same group might be understood in completely different terms irrespective of their actions, and these understandings ultimately drive behaviour.

Poststructuralists exhibit a fundamental scepticism towards established narratives, which, according to them, are profoundly shaped by preconceived assumptions of what is true. These assumptions are usually determined by those individuals or institutions that have the

power of definition. Thus, there are powerful discourses, and these discourses shape how we understand our world. While realists are mainly concerned with material power, poststructuralists focus on discursive power. Consequentially, they also question traditional IR research which is built on discourses established by a powerful establishment and they try to discover marginalized interpretations. They ask how certain interpretations become dominant and why alternative viewpoints are often not even addressed. Like critical approaches, poststructuralism wants to show alternatives. Particular criticism is levelled at Western European perspectives on international politics, which, for example, lead to interventions in non-Western societies being regarded as a legitimate means of implementing a policy that is taken for granted. These policies are based on a dichotomy established by dominant discourses of an 'Inside', the so-called West as realm of democracy and good governance, and an 'Outside' or 'Other', a chaotic, violent and instable realm. Such dichotomies can not only be established through language, but also through often very powerful images. Many poststructural analyses are therefore particularly interested in the performative character of images. One example is the famous picture of the Vietnamese girl Kim Phúc by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut that shows her and other children fleeing a napalm attack in Vietnam. The picture has become a global icon and much more than a simple depiction of a war scene. It fundamentally undermined the narrative of the Vietnam War as a 'good war' that was fought on behalf of the Vietnamese population. Of course, such images not only perform processes of identification and alienation in Western societies but are used everywhere. Their power is often linked to deeply embedded practices in specific societies.

Practices in International Relations

The centrality of discourse and language is typical for the first generation of poststructuralist approaches. Subsequent iterations of poststructuralism, however, have broadened their conceptual vocabulary to integrate an understanding of social *practices*. The French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu has proven influential here. Bourdieu suggested that social practices are also a kind of discursive move, a communicative technique. A very fruitful research tradition has since developed that deals with a multitude of questions in international politics using this concept of practices.

'Practices' refer to behavioural routines and repeated patterns of action that are based on shared knowledge and regular interactions. Thus, they maintain social order. For example, the practice of military formations presenting arms while the national anthem plays during state visits has long been part of diplomatic tradition. There is a multitude of such, mostly much less spectacular but often very elaborate, practices that can be empirically observed. International negotiations, the routines in international organizations, diplomacy, the decision-making processes which underpin foreign policies – all of these are 'bundles of individual and collective practices woven together and producing specific outcomes' (Cornut, 2017).

Basically, practices have been studied by IR scholars since the origins of the discipline. Contrary to theories which assume agents' capacity for rational choice, practice theories show how certain habits condition choice and make some courses of action more likely than others. Constructivists put a lot of emphasis on collectively shared norms as drivers of behaviour,

while practice theory also looks at individual habits. This makes participant observation and interviews particularly important as methods to identify and describe practices. An example is provided by scholars Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot (2014), who analysed diplomatic negotiations at the United Nations regarding the international military intervention in Libya in 2011. Based on a large number of interviews with diplomats and officials, they show the importance of struggles for diplomatic competence and thus deeply embedded practices in explaining the outcome of the intense debate on the issue.

Conclusion

Constructivist approaches have brought about a massive expansion of the spectrum of theoretical perspectives on international politics. All the different versions of these perspectives share the basic assumption that actors constitute their environment and that they do so on the basis of assumptions about themselves and their group, assumptions which are shaped by processes of socialization. Thus, for these theories, entrenched thinking and rigid habits are the fundamental drivers of conflict. Idea-based change, however, can mitigate conflict. Poststructuralism has a similarly anti-positivist thrust, but it focuses more closely on language, discourse, and the power structures which discourses serve to consolidate. Overall, these post-positivist approaches invite us to reflect on the different and often contending structures of meaning and significance which confront any observer of global politics; they challenge us to critically interrogate how certain interpretations emerge and wane; and they encourage us to go beyond the purely material factors of economics and military strength which have traditionally been the primary concerns of IR theories.

Test your understanding

- What do IR theorists mean by socially constructed reality?
- What distinguishes appropriate from rational action?
- What is the fundamental difference between the constructivist approaches and the theories that have been explained so far?
- What does constructivism mean by socialization?
- Explain the actor–structure problem and why it is relevant to constructivism.
- What is meant by norms in IR?
- Formulate a poststructural critique of the development policies of industrialized countries.

Core literature

Hansen, L. (2006). *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. Abingdon: Routledge.

A brilliant volume that provides an introduction into poststructuralist IR theory as well as the method of discourse analysis, based on the examination of international debates on the 1990s wars in Bosnia.