

Hopf, Ted. The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory. IS Summer 98.

Overview

Mainstream (rational) IR scholars are skeptical of Constructivism for three reasons: 1) it is cast as antipositivist and postmodern; 2) constructivism's difficulty with reconciling its theoretical distinctiveness with social science norms; 3) cism's failure to advance an alternative research program. Hopf clarifies claims, differentiates conventional and critical Constructivism, and suggests a research agenda.

Conventional Constructivism and IR

Actors and Structures are Mutually Constituted

Instead of taking structure as constant and generating/constituting/defining/creating actors, we have a feedback loop: actors -> actions -> structure -> norms -> actors.

Two types of norms: Constitutive tells you who you are; Regulatory tells you what you do. Actions have no meaning without the intersubjective understanding formed by these norms.

Anarchy as an Imagined Community

Anarchy is indeterminate until you give it meaning. Wendt says that anarchy doesn't mean self-help unless you interpret it that way. Hopf says that neorealism applies in situations where lack of capabilities leads to disaster (ie security), but not where actors don't worry about ceding control over outcomes to others.

Identities and Interests in World Politics

Identities ensure predictability. They 1) tell you and others who you are, 2) tell you who others are, and 3) imply a particular set of interests. Constructivism takes identity as an empirical question; NR takes it as given that states have one identity: self-interested states. Both agree that interests -> choices.

The Power of Practice

NR/NL assume material power -> influence, authority. Constructivism argues discursive power is also important. Discursive power allows actors to reinforce existing patterns of meaning and produce meaning within a social structure. But the community must recognize an actor's identity before they can act as such. Material power allows for deployment of discursive power through institutions.

Change in World Politics

Cism recognizes difference and diversity in actors; this leaves a potential for change. Structures can be changed, but it is difficult.

Cisms: Conventional and Critical

Critical Constructivism is postmodern, and seeks simply to unmask the power relationships of discourse; Conventional Constructivism shares method and episteme with NR and NL a la "normal science" and citing Lakatos. Thus Conv Constructivism tries to discover identities, how they are reproduced, and how those identities imply actions; it separates actors (states) and observers (political scientists), and doesn't offer an account of how identity is created.

A Constructivist Research Agenda

Balance of Threat

Walt says states balance against threats, not power. Threats are socially constructed and subject to perception. Thus constructivism can offer theories of how states perceive threats. (They have to do with the construction of the Other.)

Security Dilemmas

Identity reduces uncertainty and eliminates security dilemmas between and among states with constructions of each other that are benign.

Neoliberal Cooperation

Cooperation between states can be the result of the distribution of interests and identities among states. Negotiating agreements with "friends" is easier than with "enemies."

Also, institutions persist due to having shaped mutual understanding between participants as "partners," instead of because of transaction costs, even if power and interests have shifted.

The Democratic Peace

Democracies don't fight each other because of how they understand each other; same true for authoritarian states?

Constructivist Puzzles

Cism offers an account of politics of identity, how they are constructed, how they construct each other, and how they are reproduced. Constructivism can explain differences between states. Constructivism can return culture and domestic politics to IR theory.

Constructivist Problems

Theories of culture can't supplant theories of politics. No causal theory of identity construction exists. Constructivism is an approach, not a theory; or at most a theory of process. How are decisions made based on identity (soln: psychology)? Constructivism is difficult to do, due to its commitment to thick description.

Constructivist Promise

Since actors and structures are mutually constituted, you need to know what the intersubjective meaning is before you predict behavior. Power can be both material and discursive. Constructivism can explain mainstream IR puzzles.