Beyond constructivism: expanding the boundaries of international relations theory

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Abstract. One of the key research areas of Political Science is the field of International Relations (IR). Many scholars who speak of IR in terms of its Great Debates understand constructivism as the critical turn in theory. The main appeal of constructivism is the application of identity to IR problems. Interrogating the social construction of world order and considering identity as a factor enables scholars to offer better, deeper explanations. However, other scholars insist the constructivist turn is not critical enough and befalls some of the same traps seen in traditional approaches, namely essentialism. In this paper, I take the position that to engage in more meaningful dialogue about identity that challenges common knowledge and assumptions, we must move beyond constructivist approaches to advance the field of IR. This task is timely given increased academic attention to current social and economic issues in Europe.

Keywords: identity, constructivism, discourse, IR theory.

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1. Introduction

For many scholars who speak of International Relations (IR hereafter) in terms of the Great Debates, constructivism is often understood as the critical turn in theory. The main appeal of constructivism is the application of identity to IR problems. Interrogating the social construction of world order and considering identity as a factor enables scholars to offer better, deeper explanations. However, other scholars insist the constructivist turn is not critical enough and befalls some of the same traps seen in traditional approaches, and of particular interest here, essentializing, or over-simplifying identity. In this paper, I take the position that to engage in more meaningful dialogue about identity, and challenge common knowledge and assumptions, we must move beyond constructivist approaches to advance the field of IR. To illustrate my point, I examine how the concept of identity is commonly understood within mainstream IR literature. I then use my own work as an example research case to further reveal the limitations of constructivism. This task is timely given recent scholarly attention on social and economic issues in contemporary Europe. While area studies, such as Europe, have traditionally been the domain of Comparative Politics within Political Science,
the disciplinary lines between Comparative and International Politics are increasingly blurred. Because IR is one of the key research areas of Political Science, it is important to reflect on how the discipline is taught.

2. Constructing Identity

2.1. On Identity

The concept of identity is at the core of all variants of constructivism*. However, identity is treated differently among scholars. In “What Makes the World Hang Together”, John Ruggie traces the evolution of constructivism to determine how far the different strands have moved away from traditional approaches, which he insists are rooted in neo-utilitarian philosophy (1998). Traditional approaches place primary focus on nation-states and national interests. For Ruggie, a key point of contention with neo-utilitarian thought is that it takes identity and interests as “exogenous and given” (p. 862). The poverty of this approach is that the question of how those identities were constructed in the first place remains unexamined (p. 863). Further, for neo-utilitarians, external forces influence identity and interests. Ruggie argues that change in identity also happens internally from within domestic society, which in turn influences policy and reactions, finally affecting state interests and impacting international behaviour (pp. 863–864). In this sense, constructivism has theoretically widened the scope of the field to include the possibility of understanding domestic and social roles in IR. By critically thinking about identity, we can move beyond taking identity for granted. This matters because if we do not consider how identities are constructed and how they change over time, then we are telling a very limited story of international relations focused only on dominant, elite actors. The aim for constructivism is to offer a deeper understanding of IR by exposing the social construction of previously unproblematised units of analysis. By asking different questions and pushing the field in a new direction, Ruggie implies that among its variant contributions, constructivism has fared well (p. 878).

For example, take Wesley Widmaier’s 2007 article, “Constructing Foreign Policy Crises: Interpretive Leadership in the Cold War and the War on Terrorism”, where he examines patterns of how elites have constructed security threats over time. To tackle this research problem, Widmaier uses constructivism to infuse national incentives and interests with meaning (p. 782), namely how Presidents Harry Truman and George Bush Jr. understood and reacted to security threats. He certainly offers a deeper explanation of Cold War and post-9/11 politics than ones offered by the realists or neo-liberals by focusing on how construction of the threat informed policy and constrained elite maneuverability, however I do not feel that Widmaier pushed far enough. The idea of ‘national interests’, and differing interpretations thereof, is peppered throughout the paper. Beyond the motivations and interests of elite actors, Widmaier fails to make clear whose national interests he speaks of, as alternative interpretations of security problems are not put forth. Focusing only on elite interpretations does contribute to IR literature, but leaves many questions unanswered and unacknowledged. If the analytical goal of a research article is to limit examination of only elite actors, then the researcher should seriously consider potential ontological and epistemic consequences.

The move to reveal how interests and identities are socially constructed and influenced is a good start, however a rich analysis cannot assume such a simplified, singular identity, or national interest. The question of identity is an important one and I would argue that constructivism is too ontologically limited to dig deeper and get at what I feel are more pressing and fruitful research questions. To rework a phrase used initially by feminist scholars, simply ‘adding identity and stirring’ does not contribute to our understanding of how complex identities are, and the implications of that complexity in terms of what we can explain and what we cannot.

* While there are other tenets of constructivism, for the scope of this paper, I focus on identity.
In Charlotte Epstein’s “Who speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity in International Politics”, she argues that discourse as a methodology can enrich theories of identity (2010, p. 328). This task cannot be accomplished with constructivism. To make her point, Epstein begins by critiquing the work of Alexander Wendt, a prominent constructivist scholar, for adding identity as a variable, but not explicating how it was created in the first place. Another problem is that Wendt then took the concept of individual identity and applied it to the state without providing logic for how the theoretical jump occurred (p. 331). Moreover, for Wendt’s constructivism, the individual only gains an identity based on culture and socialization, much like an empty sponge soaks up water. Understood this way, Wendt’s concept of (individual or nation-state) identity is essentialist and makes the same assumptions as more traditional IR approaches (p. 333). Other, more critical researchers, such as Katzenstein, Finnemore, and Sikkink have focused on the role of norms on international behaviour, however, this move also takes identity as given the same way Wendt does (p. 333).

To truly demarcate from such essentialism, the researcher must unpack the layers of the self and, here, Epstein’s argument gets interesting. She suggests reframing the terms from theorizing a self, to theorizing a subject and to re-imagine identity as a process of identification (p. 334). The subject better represents the multiple layers encompassed within identities. A single self is simply not possible, nor is possible to account for and take stock of all the components of identity, whether in self-reflection or in observing another subject. There are obvious identity markers one could point to which contribute to personal make-up and perspective including gender, race, ethnicity, language, and so on. However, there are myriad unconscious influences on a person’s identity that cannot all be accounted for, leading Epstein to assert the individual is, “Simultaneously a subject of desire and a discursive subject” (p. 335), acting and being acted upon. In this way, identification better describes the forces constantly acting upon, transforming, and constructing identity. To complicate the process further, as humans, we struggle with what we want to express and the limits that language will allow us to express (p. 336). This contention adds another layer of complexity to understanding identity and identification. If words fail to fully capture and articulate our essence, then analyses on identity can never be complete.

I fully agree with Epstein’s view on language and identification. Epstein draws on Lacan’s theories on the split subject. I think Lacan’s earlier study on the ‘mirror stage’ also fits with her arguments and provides a useful visual to clarify our understanding of what Epstein is trying to say. In the mirror stage, the infant subjects recognize the image in the mirror as themselves, representing a moment of ‘I and Other’ (Sharpe, 2005). We can apply the mirror analogy to identity as follows: there is the ‘I’ we understand ourselves to be comprised of, then there is our mirror reflection revealing how we see ourselves through the eyes of other, and finally, how others see us. Put this way, Epstein’s point about a split subject, rather than a cohesive one, is salient. It is logical to assume the same of the nation-state. Just as we cannot dictate how others see us, partly because we have little or no control over that and because of the earlier discussion on the limits of language in full articulation, the performative process of identification better explains how the individual, or nation-state, identity is not cohesive. That does not mean we should abandon studying identity with IR research, but it does problematize essentialist versions of identity even further. Research on identity should be more nuanced and humble in its assertions of what such studies tell us, and perhaps more importantly, what they cannot. Epstein contends that discourse analysis offers researchers a way to think about questions of identity, while avoiding the essentialist trap. With discourse analysis, we can focus on ‘who speaks’ (p. 341). Shifting our research to ‘who speaks’ challenges traditional and constructivist approaches to IR by resitutating the concept of power from structures and institutions, to the every day discourses and procedures about who speaks and whose voice is heard as legitimate. This approach is appealing to me because in my work, I am interested in thinking about racial and ethnic inequality by examining counter stories and
discourses to interrogate the ‘common sense’, and what implications of that order might be. Trying to uncover power relations moves debates away from grand theories and can provide deeper insight into IR puzzles and challenges in what I would contend are more interesting and meaningful ways.

2.2. Rules and Legitimacy

One way to approach the study of identity and discourse is to examine why some ways of ‘doing things’ are understood as more legitimate than others. This links to the above discussion because the rules we subscribe to partly shape our collective identities. Constitutions, for instance, are not value neutral. A constitution legally sets the scene for how a nation will be governed, and what is most important, or not, for a given society. There are less obvious sites of discourse and rule making, however. Some discourses, especially in highly professionalized areas, hold privileged social positions as authoritative and truth producing. Examples include science, law, and medicine. In their discussion on international rule making and legitimacy, Lang et al. note that there are two kinds of rules, formal (legal, official) and informal (diplomatic practices) (2006, p. 276). The authors note, “These tendencies [to codify rules into law] in the international system became even more marked following the end of the Second World War. The United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank were all designed to put into effect formal rules and to ensure that the powerful states in the system had a stake in running those institutions and thus not in violating these rules” (p. 277). Rule making, then, becomes a critical component in how our social world is constructed and shaped by dominant international institutions. Moreover, what different societies do, and how they interpret and solve problems, is part of who they are as a nation.

Questions to think about are why certain official rules are revered, and why are they so difficult to change. Bruno Latour’s work in “Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together”, provides an interesting perspective on how legitimacy is maintained, namely through paperwork and bureaucratic practices (1986). For Latour, rather than attempt to observe superstructures ‘out there’ or to pinpoint moments in time that lead to ‘advancements’ in mental intelligence, we need to look more critically at what we do with our hands and eyes (p. 3). In this way, we have physical, observable objects that provide insight into how discourses happen. We produce objects such as graphs, notes, maps, charts, etc., and point to them as solid documented evidence (p. 5). Latour makes a compelling argument and I think research could be expanded to include other expressions of culture and discourse, language, music, use of resources, and use of technology to name a few. Further, his work is important because it encourages us to be critical of ‘observable evidence’, rather than take it for granted, and by implication, to be careful how we conceptualize our world.

What makes modern humanity different is not a radical, sudden revelation about ourselves and the social world, but rather a documented history and a culture that places high value on observable objects. Throughout history, skills of literacy and writing were reserved for the noble and educated, not a necessary tool for the average person. At the time of the Enlightenment, with scientific and industrial advancements, practices of writing and charting became commonplace to manage information. Perhaps by infusing official structured practices with specialized literacy skills helped entrench the importance and authority of formal discourses like medicine, law, and science. Moving back to the discussion of identity and IR, take the example of maps as inscribed objects, to use Latour’s terms. Maps are as political as they are geographical, yet often within scholarship, policy, and popular discourse alike, geographic borders are taken as given. However, borders are arbitrary, constructed, and change over time. Assuming natural borders and land ownership conceals a great deal, such as imperial colonial struggles, along with other historical disputes over

territory, which displaced populations. The damages of displacement often carry strong legacies, and continue to affect communities in negative ways. By not even acknowledging that history, then any claims of injustice running counter to the dominant narrative of the nation are viewed with skepticism and suspicion. The version of history told influences what claims are viewed as legitimate and which claims warrant dismissal, thus painting a limited picture of what is happening in the world. So it is with physical, yet socially constructed, evidence. A map, a chart, or a notarized letter can offer insight to only one piece of the puzzle. I think good, thorough IR research should take that point seriously to better contribute to existing debates by offering rich, new insights to scholarship engaging with politics of identity.

3. Limits of Constructivism

3.1 Research Case Study

The next issue to consider is the merits and limits of constructivism. The appeal of constructivism is clear. By including the concept of identity, possibilities open for new, deeper research questions. The problem, however, is that constructivist scholarship engages with identity in a singular, limited way. As discussed earlier, identity is not historicized to explicate how particular identities formed in the first place. Additionally, identity is understood as cohesive, rather than split. Also, constructivism puts together a coherent, progressive structure. The very notion of construction implies a set framework to achieve a finished product. In this way, constructivism is not a radical departure from earlier approaches.

To illustrate the limitations of constructivism as applied to a research design, I will use my own work to provide an example case study. In my doctoral work, I plan to examine how the story of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, the peace agreement dividing the Austro-Hungarian Empire, has been politicized as either a great victory or a tragic loss, and continues to inform debates on Hungarian minorities along the Hungarian-Slovakian border region. For such interests, the concept of group, minority, and national identity is central. Treating the Hungarian minority identity in the singular would produce too narrow a focus for my project and offer very shallow insights into some of the issues. We can revisit the many selves as illustrated in my above discussion on Lacan’s mirror stage to clarify this point. There is the actual number of people comprising the legal minority population. Then there are the ways different sectors (Roma, women, Slovak-Hungarian mixed, to name only a few) of that population imagine themselves, and their situation as minorities. Add in Epstein’s insights on inability to articulate the self and the limits of a constructivist approach to this problem become readily apparent. That is without considering how different groups in Slovakia and Hungary imagine the minority, or diaspora, respectively.

The same level of complexity holds for expressions of Slovakian and Hungarian nationalism. These concepts cannot be essentialized or taken as given. If they are, then they carry many ontological assumptions. For example, the question of whose nationalism would remain unaddressed under the blanket of how all Hungarians or how all Slovaks feel about border-region minorities. Further, by taking the status of Hungarian minorities as a given ignores the history of how those border region populations were created in the first place. That history is crucial to understanding the context of current competing claims and grievances. If richer research lies in destabilizing notions of Trianon, and the affected Hungarian and Slovakian populations, then Elstein’s question of who speaks fits well here. To that end, the deconstructivist project is better suited than the constructivist approach for such research goals.

4. Concluding Remarks

Deconstruction may not be appealing for researchers seeking structured, textbook formats to follow. However, I contend that rather than trying to fit socially and politically complex issues into neat, organized
frameworks, illustrating how incoherent the picture is offers better insights and explanations. By rejecting rigid paradigmatic frameworks, and all the theoretical assumption they encompass, we are free to engage in creative scholarship that can contribute to the field in new ways.

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6. References


