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THE INTRINSIC EXPLANATORY VALUE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

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Abstract: Why has constructivism emerged as an important force in the field of international relations and politics in the end of the 20th century? Why constructivism and not any other theoretical approach? The constructivist perspective of international relations appeared as a counterbalance to rationalism that was entrenched in US Political Science throughout the last decades. Analyzing the contemporary state of world affairs through the prism of social constructivism provides us with a unique understanding of how intersubjective perceptions lead to unique epistemic interpretations of reality, which form the ideological framework within which social constructs are being generated. Constructivism succeeds not only in identifying the motives behind the behavior of international actors, but also in unfolding the mechanism through which those motives are being envisaged and accepted through the process of social construction – here lies the greatest value of the constructivist approach in IR theory. Culture formation, nation building, imagined communities, security complexes – the constructivist approach remains an invaluable tool in the arsenal of political analysts, seeking to understand how culture, history, social order, religion, and language project their influence on the international arena and ultimately: why international players behave the way they do?

Neither Neorealism, nor Neoliberalism, nor the Theory of Complex Interdependence seemed to accurately grasp and elucidate the underlying dynamics of contemporary international relations. The post-Cold war era required a new theoretical view of the undercurrents in world politics and international relations that could provide not only a new approach towards modern-day issues, but also one that could provide a sufficient explanatory value of the behavioral genesis of international actors. The constructivist perspective of international relations appeared as a counter balance to rationalism that was deeply entrenched in US political science throughout the last decades. The set was staged for the rise to significance of the social constructivism in International Relations theory, which caused a profound revision of discussions within the principal discourse of international relations theory. But why has constructivism emerged as a main force in the field of international relations and politics in the end of the 20th century? Why constructivism and not any other theoretical approach? Not since the introduction of the theory of complex interdependence back in the 1970s by Nye and Keohane, has the interest of political scientists matched the one that has emerged as a result of the increasing application of the constructivist approach in trying to explain the subtleties of international relations. While early constructivist ideas can be traced back to Max Weber and the symbolic interactionist school of the 1920s,[1]

[1] Palan, Ronen. Constructivism and Globalization: from Units to Encounters in International Affairs // *Cambridge Review of International Affairs,* 2004, No.17:1, pp. 11-23.

it was an American scholar by the name of Nicholas Onuf, who first introduced the term "constructivism" in International Relations theory in 1989 through his work "*World of Our Making*". Onuf was primarily contending that states much the same as individuals are living in a "world of our making".[2]

We live in the age where the interconnectedness between people, societies, states, and organizations has reached unprecedented levels and is growing exponentially. There is an ongoing tendency for our surroundings to no longer be perceived as "given" by nature, but rather as "created" by people, both physically and mentally. A noticeable, albeit under researched interrelatedness exists between the emergence of the constructivist approach in international relations and the global expansion in communications and technologies during the last decades, ultimately accelerating the process of globalization. Constructivism seems to offer a new understanding of international relations, that reflects the realities of globalization and thus it succeeds in providing an effective elucidatory framework for analysis of contemporary events occurring within the age of communications and globalization.[3] The process of globalization has inevitably led to the clash of civilizational perceptions, encompassing a wide range of socially defined experiences, such as language, religion, history, and culture. This has prompted many to try understanding how these socially generated perceptions affect the behavior of actors in the international environment. The appearance and influence of constructivist thought has more or less shifted the theoretical intersection, where the dispute is no longer between realism and liberalism, or between rationalism and post-positivist. The contemporary dynamics seem to accentuate on a contention between politico-oriented versus culturally oriented theories of global order and state of international affairs.[4] This goes in line with the seminal works of Samuel Huntington, Friedrich Kratochwil and Richard Lebow where they emphasizes on the critical role of culture and identity towards the formation of the global order.[5] In fact the pivotal concept of the civilizational identity in Huntington's "*Clash of Civilizations*" is the transnational civilizational construct as such, whose existence impacts the state of affairs on the geopolitical arena. A successful comprehension of the above-mentioned phenomenon would provide a feasible answer to the most challenging quandary in international relations: Why international actors behave the way they do? The key to answering this question lies within the genesis of national interests, which can be best explained through the lens of the constructivist approach.

The most important figure in the study of Constructivism is Alexander Wendt. Born in West Germany, Wendt later went on to receive his PhD in Political Science from the University of Minnesota in 1989. He later taught at Yale University, Dartmouth College and currently teaches at Ohio State University. Wendt's book "*Social Theory of International Politics*"[6] expresses a constructivist approach to the study of international relations. Considered as the best known advocate of social constructivism, Wendt emphasizes the role of shared ideas and norms in shaping state behavior. He is critical of both liberal and realists approaches to the study of international relations which, Wendt argues, emphasize materialist and individualistic motivations for state actions rather than norms and shared values as he argues they should. Wendt does criticize neorealism and neoliberalism as "undersocialized" in the sense that they underestimate the social construction of actors in world politics. There are two principal conceptions, according to Wendt, that

2 Onuf, Nicholas. World of Our Making. Columbia: University of South California Press, 1989.

3 Palan, Ronen. Constructivism and Globalization: from Units to Encounters in International Affairs // *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2004, No.17:1, pp. 11-23.

4 Ibid.

5 Huntington, Samuel P. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996; Kratochwil, Friedrich. The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Riener, 1996; Lebow, Richard Ned. A Cultural Theory of International Relations. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

6 The title is a reference and response to Kenneth Waltz's 1979 work "*Theory of International Politics*", a centerpiece work of neorealists.

fundamentally distinguish constructivism from the traditions of realism and liberalism. First, international structures are comprised of social and material constituents, and second, these social features along with material factors influence the identities and interests of actors.[7] Wendt shares some key assumptions with leading realist and neorealist scholars, such as the existence of anarchy and the centrality of states in the international system.[8] However, he perceives anarchy in cultural rather than materialist terms. He extrapolates on the philosophical views of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Immanuel Kant. By theorizing on the latter three cultures of anarchy characterized respectively by "enmity," "rivalry," and "friendship", Wendt ultimately formulates a "cultural" theory of International Politics, exemplified by the dissimilar cultures of anarchy, constructed by state themselves.[9] In Wendt's interpretation, constructivism tries to expose that the meaning of the forces and motives behind actors "*depend largely on the shared ideas in which they are embedded, and as such culture is a condition of possibility for power and interest explanations*".[10] Richard Ned Lebow takes the base of Wendt's interpretations further in his work "*Cultural Theory of International Relations*", where he introduces his own constructivist theory of international relations, based on the motives and identity formation drawn from the ancient Greeks.[11] His major contribution to the constructivist approach is to recognize the psychological dimension of identity and its subsequent manifestation on the individual and social levels.[12]

The basic theoretical concepts of constructivism proposed by Alexander Wendt challenge core neorealist assumptions. By inherently being causal structuralists, neorelists explain international politics through the structure of the international system. This notion was first proposed by Kenneth Waltz in his book "*Man, the State, and War*" (1959) and advanced further in his seminal work "*Theory of International Politics*" (1979). Alexander Wendt challenges the assumed structure of international relations, by arguing that the underlying powers attributed to "structure" in the Neorealist perception are in fact not "given by default", but are rather constructed by social practice. Furthermore, constructivist reasoning argues that Neorealist deductions are completely centered on unchallenged and tacit suppositions about the way actors construct social institutions and give meaning to them.[13] Constructivists argue that Neorealists falsely exclude the processes of social construction and thus rigidly rely on the imposed meaning of the structure of the international system. In contrast to the philosophies of Neorealism and Neoliberalism, Constructivism mainly strives to show how essential aspects of international relations are socially constructed – they acquire their form by continuous processes of social practice and interaction.[14] In doing so, it brings back into discussion the social, historical and normative aspects of political thinking. It is the process of social construction that actually provides the key explanatory work behind Neorealist observations. Alexander Wendt and Emanuel Adler actually claim that constructivism is not an antipode of realism, but it rather clarifies the realist theory by arguing that concepts such as "national interests" and "reason of state" are actually historically constructed and lack objective ontological genesis.[15] What's more, the alignment of Realism and Constructivism may in fact lead to a substantial progress in the field of International Relations theory. To

[7] Chernoff, Fred. Theory and Metatheory in International Relations. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008. P. 69.

[8] Wendt, Alexander. A Social Theory of International Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Lebow, Richard Ned. A Cultural Theory of International Relations. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[12] Burton, Paul. Culture and Constructivism in International Relations // *The International History Review*, 2010, No.32:1, pp. 89-97.

[13] Wendt, Alexander Anarchy is What States Make of It: the Social Construction of Power Politics // *International Organization*, 1992, No.46:2, 396 p.

[14] Wendt, Alexander. A Social Theory of International Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[15] Palan, Ronen. Constructivism and Globalization: from Units to Encounters in International Affairs // *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2004, No.17:1, pp. 11-23.

continue our analysis further it is important to ask the question: *Why have we seen a shift from nation state-centered, predefined international structure (realism), towards the encounter of actors with socially constructed interpretations of the surrounding world and nature of international relations (constructivism)*?

Constructivism, unlike realism or liberalism, is not a theory of politics by default. It is neither anti-liberal nor anti-realist by ideological conviction. Its design does not set an optimistic or pessimistic tone. What it definitely represents, however, is a real attempt to create a synthetic theory of International Relations, which has never been accomplished since Edward Carr.[16] To be precise, it is a social theory on which constructivist theories of international politics are built on. The social theory characterizes collective thinking as an instrument that has the potential to shape the object of observation, which results in a uniquely created perception. This embodies the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world.[17] Principal to constructivist reasoning are such core concepts as discourse, identity norms, and socialization.[18] Constructivism shows that even our most enduring institutions are based on collective understandings; that they are abstract structures that were once upon a time conceived by human consciousness and that these understandings were subsequently diffused and consolidated until they were taken for granted, becoming a "common sense". However, the "taken for granted" process also entails that while certain ideas become materialized, other competing ideas are instinctively delegitimized. In this line of thought, an organization such as the European Union has initially been envisioned as an imagined community and later on materialized into a fully functional institutional organization through the process of transnational social construction. The adherence to common values, understanding of human rights, historical influences, and religious commonalities has enabled the creation of a transnational social community that has constructed and realized the idea of a unified Europe. Constructivism not only plays a vital role in the governance of the EU, but it is also defined by the basic principle of identity. The idea of a shared identity is valuable in explaining the process of decision-making and European integration, while the EU enlargement can be considered as an "identity construction" in action.[19] An extension of the idea of a "common identity" has been the exemplification of the "security community",[20] which according to constructivist thought *"has contributed to the convergence of national foreign policies and to a growing sense of a common international identity"* resulting in the creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.[21] Barry Buzan and Ole Waever further explore the concept of the security communities while adhering to the constructivist approach.[22] What's more, the collective institutionalization of norms can potentially lead to the formation of new institutions.[23]

Constructivists think that there is no such thing as a universal, transhistorical, culturally autonomous idea or identity. Everything is socially constructed, hence the name of the

[16] Adler, Emmanuel. Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics // *European Journal of International Relations*, 1997, Vol.3(3), pp. 319-363.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Checkel, Jeffrey T. Constructivism and Foreign Policy / in *Foreign Policy: Theories. Actors. Cases*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. P. 72.

[19] Risse, Thomas. Social Constructivism and European Integration / in Wiener, A. & Diez, T. (eds) *European Integration Theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp.159-176.

[20] Adler, Emmanuel; Barnett, Michael. Governing Anarchy: A Research Agenda for the Study of Security Communities // *Ethics and International Affairs*, 1996, No.10(1), pp. 63-98.

[21] Wagner, Wolfgang. Why the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy Will Remain Intergovernmental: A Rationalist Institutional Choice Analysis of European Crisis Management Policy" // *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2003, No.10(4), pp.576.

[22] Buzan, Barry; Waever, Ole. Regions and Power. The Structure of International Security. Cambridge, 2003.

[23] Chebakova, A. Theorizing the EU as a Global Actor: a Constructivist Approach // *The Maturing European Union – ECSA-Canada Biennial Conference Paper*, 2008, pp.1-16.

approach. Consequently, international relations consist primarily of social facts, which are facts only by human agreement via intersubjectivity.[24] Therefore, this line of reasoning follows that the international system is fundamentally a socially constructed entity which can be best approached by theories of Social Constructivism, where understanding how intersubjectivity generates perceptive reality is key for understanding the concept.

Intersubjectivity is best understood through the prism of Karl Popper's "3 worlds" conceptualization, in which he divided the Universe into three subuniverses.[25] World 1 consists of the physical matter, including bodies, organism and physical forces. World 2 is the subjective world of conscious experience, such as feelings, emotions, thoughts, and aspirations. Whereas World 3 is the world of culture, where everything is a product of the mental structures of the human mind, "*and especially the world of our languages: of our stories, our myths, our explanatory theories, ... of our technologies, ... of architecture and of music"*.[26] World 3 epitomizes the institutional or social facts, which gain an ontological reality by becoming an object outside ourselves.[27] The intersubjective world is thus characterized by the fact that it exists by virtue of collective agreement, deduced by the establishment of social facts. The intersubjective beliefs of people affect their intentions and motivation, thus any "attempt to understand the intersubjective meanings embedded in social life is at the same time an attempt to explain why people act the way they do".[28] This attempt to analyze and explain the behavioral dynamics of social units correlates with the attempt to find out what actors on the international arena think they are doing and what fundamental presumptions motivate and justify their behavior.

The constructivist approach falls well within the domain of encounter theories, by depicting the state of international affairs as a global arena, where encounters of large social units occur. Constructivism is suited to analyze interaction of political entities on the global arena, rather than portray the rivalry between fixed nation-states.[29] The resulting problems of such interactions are essentially the difference in perceptions towards one and the same issue. Those differences in turn result from the internally generated images from intersubjective social reasoning. An illustration of how different significances are assigned to one and he same issue is the case of nuclear weapons. A nuclear weapon in the United Kingdom and a nuclear weapon in North Korea may be materially identical (though, so far, they are not) but they possess radically different *meanings* for the United States. This exemplifies the constructivist argument that the mental structures of the observer generate a unique epistemic interpretation, as a result of an inherent social heritage, consisting of cultural, historical, linguistic, and religious intersubjective assumptions, deeply ingrained within the cognitive perception of the population of the given community. Here is where the social theory of constructivism excels in explaining the genesis of these social constructs and thus provides a theoretical approach that examines the projection of social microcosms onto the global macro level, where international processes take place. The phenomenon of socially constructed perceptions is thus pivotal to the explanatory functions of constructivism, which examines the transformation of the vibrant

[24] Adler, Emmanuel. Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics // *European Journal of International Relations*, 1997, Vol.3(3), pp. 319-363.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Popper, Karl R. Three Worlds by Karl Popper – The Tanner Lecture on Human Values. University of Michigan. April 7, 1978; Popper, Karl R. The Open Universe: An Argument for Indeterminism / ed. by W.W. Bartley, III. Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982; Popper, Karl R. The Place of Mind in Nature / in Richard Q. Elvee (ed.) *Mind in Nature*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982. Pp. 31-59.

[27] Searle, John R. The Construction of Social Reality. New York: Free Press, 1995.

[28] Gibbons, Michael T. Introduction: the Politics of Interpretation / in Michael T. Gibbons (ed.) I*nterpreting Politics*. New York: New York University Press, 1987.

[29] Palan, Ronen. Constructivism and Globalization: from Units to Encounters in International Affairs // *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2004, No.17:1, pp. 11-23.

normative perceptions of nature into epistemic interpretations, generated by the mental structures of the human mind.[30] Constructivist epistemology thus concludes that natural science consists of mental constructs, which are generated with the ultimate aim of explaining sensory experience of the natural world. Consequently, the world is independent of the human mind, but the epistemic interpretation of the world is always a result of individual or social construction.[31]

Constructivism holds not only a strong critical component, but also a problem-solving mechanism, which make it a valuable tool in the hands of skillful decision makers. It is critical because it searches for an explanatory model of "how things came about" both within the social microcosm and within the international arena as a macrocosm. Its problem-solving capacity is best exemplified by the inherent formation of practices and institutions, which create a rudimentary action framework, that sets the "rules and boundaries of the game".[32] Constructivist reasoning suggests that social reality is merely the imposition of function and meaning to physical objects. The ability to set the fundamental "rules of the game", to define what acceptable play is and to convince actors to act according to those rules and within those boundaries is what constitutes the most effective form of power.[33] The *concept of power* thus plays a decisive role in the construction of social reality. The attractiveness and appeal of certain social constructs such as culture and political values may in fact hold the key towards the effective projection of soft power, a concept first proposed by Joseph Nye in 1990. The influence of soft power over social and public opinion may indeed illustrate how a stronger and more appealing social constructs overwhelms weaker ones and results in the dominance of the prevalent culture and values, and ultimately in the dominance of the stronger epistemic interpretation of reality.

One of the primary explanatory values of Constructivism comes from its ability to intertwine knowledge and power in explaining the genesis of interests, whether social or individual. In the case of international relations, it is a matter of national interests – intersubjective insights that determine the needs to advance influence, wealth and power, while surviving the political process. All this occurs within a predetermined distribution of power and knowledge within a society. The "objectivity" of national interests relies on the common agreement and assignment of meaning and function to physical objects. The critical component of the analysis deals with the formation national interests as such, threats to those interests and their relationship to one another. National interests further define the vector of the developmental pattern and guide the foreign-policy making process, with the ultimate goal of projecting and expressing the identity of the state on the international arena. An examination into the conditions as to "*why one particular intersubjective perspective prevails over others*" formulates the basic empirical study model that can be carried by adhering to the constructivist approach[34]. To conclude, *the key explanatory value of constructivism lies in its ability to explain why and how national interests are conceived, how they acquire their status of mutually agreed political acceptance, and how perceptions are selected through the political process*. This process is structurally constrained by the underlying cultural identity of the social core and evolves within a pre-existing framework of socially conceived, accepted and propagated values and norms, which guide the process of formation of national interests. Therefore, Constructivism succeeds not only in identifying the motives behind the behavior of international actors, but also in *unfolding the mechanism through which those motives are being envisaged and accepted through the process of social construction* – here lies the greatest value of the constructivist approach in IR theory.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Crotty, Michael. The Foundations of Social Science Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process. London: Sage, 1998.

[32] Cox, Robert W. Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory / in Robert O. Keohane (ed.) N*eorealism and Its Critics,* pp.204-254. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

[33] Adler, Emmanuel. Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics // *European Journal of International Relations*, 1997, Vol.3(3), pp. 319-363.

[34] Ibid.

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СВОЙСТВЕННАЯ ЦЕННОСТЬ СОЦИАЛЬНОГО КОНСТРУКТИВИЗМА В ТЕОРИИ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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конструктивизм; социальные конструкты; культура; эпистемические интерпретации; международные отношения; идентичность; межсубъективность; национальные интересы.

Аннотация: Почему конструктивизм возник в качестве влиятельной силы силы в области международных отношений и политики в конце XX века? Почему именно конструктивизм, а не любой другой теоретический подход? Конструктивистская перспектива международных отношений появилась в качестве противовеса к рационализму, который закрепился в политической науке США на протяжении последних десятилетий. Анализ современного склада мировых дел через призму социального конструктивизма дает нам уникальное понимание того, как интерсубъективные восприятия приводят к уникальным эпистемическими интерпретациям реальности, которые формируют идеологические рамки, в пределах которых генерируются социальные конструкты. Конструктивизм является ценным не только в определении мотивов поведения международных игроков, но и разворачивании механизма, посредством которого эти мотивы были созданы и приняты через процесс социального строительства – здесь лежит наибольшее значение конструктивистского подхода в теории МО. Формирование культуры, формирование национального самосознания, воображаемые сообщества, комплексы безопасности – конструктивистский подход остается бесценным инструментом в арсенале политических аналитиков, которые стремятся понять, как культура, история, общественный строй, религия, и язык, проецируют их влияние на международной арене, и в итоге: почему международные игроки ведут себя именно так, как они себя ведут?

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