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Social Constructivisms in Global and European Politics (A Review Essay)

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Abstract

Social constructivism has come of age in contemporary international relations (IR) theory. Indeed, more and more submissions to presses and journals in both Europe and America characterize themselves as constructivist or situate their arguments vis-à-vis those of constructivists. In substantive terms and as the three books under review attest, constructivists also now offer detailed empirical studies that amplify and enrich their earlier conceptual and meta-theoretical critiques of mainstream approaches. Yet, as with any maturing research program, there are gaps to be filled and challenges to be met. These include a better appreciation and theorization of domestic politics; more explicit attention to research methods; further work on the linguistic turn so central to much of constructivism; and, finally, a rethink of attempts to build bridges and, in particular, of the difficulties and tradeoffs involved in such efforts.

Ted Hopf, Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 & 1999. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002, 299 pages.

Henry R. Nau, At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002, 314 pages.

Maja Zehfuss, Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 289 pages.

Introduction

Constructivism is trendy. The fiftieth anniversary issue of the journal International Organization declared the rationalist-constructivist debate to be a central dividing line in the discipline (Katzenstein, Keohane, Krasner 1998), while ever more submissions to presses and journals characterize themselves as constructivist or situate their arguments vis-à-vis those of constructivists. Within certain subfields such as European studies, constructivism has increasingly acquired buzzword status (Banchoff 1999; Christiansen, Joergensen, Wiener 2001; Checkel and Moravcsik 2001).

This is a largely healthy state of affairs. For one, it pushes these scholars to think harder about and debate among themselves the boundaries of their research program. What are constructivism's defining characteristics and how do these distinguish it from other schools of thought (Guzzini 2000; Adler 2002)? Equally important, more and more constructivists operationalize their claims, helping readers to see better how a particular argument - be it along theoretical, empirical, methodological or critical/normative dimensions - sheds new or different light on the world around us.

This essay takes advantage of the latter trend, utilizing the books under review to argue that constructivism does indeed help contemporary IR advance a more complete picture of "what makes the world hang together" (Ruggie 1998). In doing this, my

intent is not to offer (yet) another characterization of constructivism. If someone says they are a constructivist or claims to be offering a constructivist argument, I accept this at face value and then ask: Would we be any worse off if these (and many other constructivist) books had never been written?

To give away the punch line, my answer to that last question is yes, IR would be worse off. Yet, as with any maturing research program, there are gaps to be filled and challenges to be met. Thus, after describing the three books under review – in each case, highlighting central contributions and limitations – the essay explores these ‘where next’ challenges. The latter include a better appreciation and theorization of domestic politics; more explicit attention to research methods; further work on the linguistic turn so central to much of constructivism; and, finally, a rethink of attempts to build bridges and, in particular, of the tradeoffs involved in such efforts. While the first three are for the most part easy fixes, the last raises a host of difficult questions.

Social Constructivisms: Conventional, Interpretative and Critical

Of the many characterizations of constructivism available in the literature (Adler 1997; Ruggie 1998, Introduction; Christiansen, Joergensen, Wiener 2001, Introduction), a three-fold distinction among conventional, interpretative and critical/radical variants is a useful starting point. Conventional constructivism, which is the school dominant in the US, examines the role of norms and, in fewer cases, identity in shaping international political outcomes. These scholars are largely positivist in epistemological orientation and strong advocates of bridge building among diverse theoretical perspectives; the qualitative, process-tracing case study is their methodological starting point. Sociology and elements of institutional/organizational theory are sources of theoretical inspiration (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Wendt 1999).

The interpretative and critical/radical variants, in contrast, enjoy greater popularity in Europe.¹ Interpretative constructivists typically ask how possible questions as

¹ To appreciate this US-European contrast, one only need compare recent volumes of International Organization (IO), edited at Harvard, with Millennium, edited in London, or the European Journal of International Relations (EJIR), edited in Munich. Conventional constructivists dominate the constructivism published in IO, while interpretative and critical/radical constructivists are equally dominant at Millennium and EJIR.

opposed to the explanatory why sort; they are committed to a deeply inductive research strategy that targets the reconstruction of state/agent identity, with the methods encompassing a variety of discourse-theoretic techniques. Critical scholars add an explicitly normative dimension by probing a researcher's own implication in the reproduction of the identities and world he/she is studying. Discourse-theoretical methods are again emphasized; however, there is a greater emphasis on the power and domination inherent in language. For both interpretative and critical constructivists, key sources of theoretical inspiration lay in linguistic approaches - Wittgenstein, say - and continental social theory - Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida, among others (Hopf 1998; Price and Reus-Smit 1998; Neumann 2002; see also Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986).

While this brief review oversimplifies, it has the double benefit of highlighting key differences among both constructivists and the three books under review.

Identity, Power and American Foreign Policy. Henry Nau of George Washington University has written a theoretically provocative and forward looking primer for the grand strategy America needs to pursue in the early 21st century. While Nau would likely not call himself a constructivist, he is very explicit in noting how the manuscript “benefits enormously” from constructivism. He also sees the book as “deliberately seek[ing] to bridge” the divide separating realism and constructivism (p.xi).² Hence, one has the unusual juxtaposition of words in the book's subtitle: “Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy.” The volume is thus a clear example of the tendencies so evident in American-style, conventional constructivism.

Nau's core argument is that one can explain US foreign policy only by appreciating that both identity and material power shape its national interests and subsequent behavior (Introduction, chapter 1). Indeed, according to the author, a country's national interest “begins with what kind of society the nation is, not just what its geopolitical circumstances are” (p.16). In the best structuralist tradition - and the argument here is very much structural - Nau then advances ideas about the relation between the distribution of material power (equal or unequal) and the distribution of

² For the three books under review, I provide page or chapter numbers only. Full citations are given at the essay's start.

national identities (converging or diverging). From this, he constructs a 2 x 2 table (Figure 1.2, p.28) mapping out four spaces that define different types of international relations/structure: hierarchy, hegemony, security community and anarchy.

For the United States, Nau empirically measures the structure of relative power and identity in US relations with various countries, and locates the resulting configurations of identity and power in one of the cells in the 2 x 2. He then “reason[s] deductively from these structural circumstances to extrapolate the broad constraints on US foreign policy options” (p.28), which allows him to prescribe the proper American grand strategy in a variety of settings. This he does in chapters 4-7, providing a sweeping overview of US relations with all world regions. The analysis and, indeed, advocacy, in these chapters is in the best of the policy studies tradition, with his rich empirics informed by broad theoretical hunches.

Of course, Nau’s theoretical structuralism and broad empirical scope are not cost-free, raising at least three issues and dilemmas. First, some will question the author’s understanding and use of identity. Consistent with his (implicit) positivist orientation, identity for Nau is largely a fixed variable that can be read off a state’s domestic politics (see, especially, p.28). In contrast, constructivist scholars like Hopf and Zehfuss (see below) would see identities as multiple, contingent and fluid.

Second, national identity – as the book unfolds – more and more comes down to domestic politics (pp.122, 151, 166, 222-23, 237, 240). National identities change when domestic policies and institutions and national political institutions change (p.240). This is fine, but why call something identity when it is domestic politics/institutions that are invoked? In turn, this suggests Nau’s constructivist account would have benefited by drawing upon the rich menu of domestic-political arguments available in the comparative literature.

Third, the author’s effort to build bridges between constructivism and its theoretical rivals comes up short. For one, the architecture of Nau’s bridge is not clear. The reader gets no clear sense for how constructivism and, in this case, realism, are to be integrated theoretically. To be fair, this was probably not Nau’s intent, as the book is best viewed as a theoretically informed historical and contemporary narrative and not

as a hypothesis testing exercise aimed at theoretical synthesis.³ Still, the bridge-building language raises expectations. In this respect, it is a pity that Nau did not utilize his rich empirics to explore the real world plausibility of various conceptual schemes for achieving synthesis that have been advanced in recent years – temporal sequencing arguments, ideas about scope conditions and domains of application, and the like (March and Olsen 1998; Fearon and Wendt 2002; Caporaso, Checkel and Jupille 2003b).

In addition, Nau's bridge has only one lane, with the flow of traffic going from conventional constructivism to realism and rationalism. Yet, in principle, the whole idea of a middle ground (Adler 1997) was to situate constructivism between rationalism/positivism and post-modern/interpretative approaches, with bridges being built in both directions. In reality, however, the overwhelming majority of the literature has done just as Nau. This is a serious problem, one that has rightly worried many European constructivists.

Identity, Discourse and Soviet/Russian Foreign Policy. If Nau offers us a thin understanding of identity, then Ted Hopf of Ohio State University thickens it considerably. Drawing upon a broad array of sources from sociology, social psychology and social theory, he seeks nothing less than “to recover the social origins of identity” in constructivist IR theory (p.2). Equally important, Hopf tells us how – via what sources and methods - he will use this theory to recover inductively Russian understandings of their own identities. The author's careful discussion and justification of his sources and textual methods, of the dangers of pre-theorization, of reliability and the like (pp.23-38) are a must read, especially for those with an interest in bringing interpretative approaches from the realm of social theory to that of social science.

Hopf puts this up-front attention to theory and method to good use, developing a two-part argument on the domestic construction of Russian identities and their subsequent impact on the country's foreign policy. He begins by reconstructing the domestic

³ Nau's volume is a Century Foundation (formerly Twentieth Century Fund) Book. In approach (theory lite) and style (rich, well written narrative), it is similar to other recent and well-received books sponsored by this group.

identity terrain in Moscow for two separate years – 1955 and 1999 (chapters 2, 4). In each case, he derives hypotheses for how Soviet/Russian leaders should understand other states if these identities have causal force. In the second part of the argument (chapters 3, 5), Hopf then tests if these hypotheses hold, advancing an account of “foreign policy choice” (p.1; see also pp. 83, 268).⁴

The author’s systematic recovery of Russian identities should put two groups of scholars to shame. For conventional constructivists, who many times claim to be studying identity, but do so with theories and methods that freeze and reify it (Checkel 2001b), Hopf’s analysis should compel them to specify their dependent variable with more care. For interpretative and critical constructivists, who too often deny the possibility and decry the danger of systematizing interpretative methods (Price and Reus-Smit 1998 for a good overview), the manuscript suggests a middle-ground epistemological position is possible.

All this said, there are limitations and perhaps unavoidable dilemmas in the book’s approach. On the one hand, Hopf is one of the few constructivists who, in taking the notion of a middle ground seriously, seeks to build bridges to interpretative scholars. To continue my earlier metaphor, Hopf’s bridge has two lanes: one from conventional constructivism to rationalism and positivism; and one from conventional constructivism to interpretative epistemologies.

On the other hand, conventional constructivists could well argue that Hopf’s innovative bridge building has come at some cost. In particular, the theories and methods underlying the second part of his argument – on foreign policy choice – are incomplete. Theoretically, for all his outstanding work in problematizing domestic politics (chapters 1, 6), this part of the analysis remains underspecified. Consider the following statement. “It is possible to infer implied interests from identities and discourse and then see if they in fact are present at the moment of choice” (p.268). Surely, however, to get from identities to interests and choice requires some kind of politics and debate – even in an authoritarian state. Were identity discourses being filtered by intervening – and powerful – political institutions (Checkel 1997)? At that

⁴ For the 1955 case (chapter 3), Hopf makes excellent use of recently opened Soviet archives.

moment of choice, were options debated, arguments advanced and justifications proffered – all linguistic acts that could easily influence dominant discourses and thus their actual impact on foreign-policy interests (Risse 2000; Eriksen and Fossum 2000)? To address such factors would require some theory of domestic politics.

Methodologically, if the methods for the first (interpretative) part of Hopf's argument are clear and robust, the opposite is true for the second part. Indeed, the "case studies" (p.105) of policy choice presented in chapters 3 and 5 benefit not at all from the increasingly rich literature on qualitative case studies and process tracing (Bennett and George, nd, for example).

These criticisms need to be kept in context. For one, given the extraordinary empirical complexity (and thus time) involved in inductively recovering Russian identities, it may be just too much to ask that Hopf also conduct a detailed process-tracing analysis.⁵ Moreover, even if one plans a bridge with two lanes – as I think Hopf does – its actual design will be difficult. Not only are there the time and resource constraints just mentioned; at some basic level, epistemological differences, despite the best efforts of scholars like Wendt (1999), do 'gum up the works' – a point to which I return below.

Constructivism and German Military Power. A way around the dilemmas just highlighted is to deny all possibilities of bridge building, which is one message to emerge from Maja Zehfuss's assertive critique of constructivism (pp.253-54, passim). Zehfuss, who teaches at the University of Warwick, takes no prisoners. While she is most critical of the conventional constructivist project, other scholars closer to her own critical/interpretative position come under attack as well.

The core of the book (chapters 1-4, 6) is destructive or, more properly put, deconstructive. Here, Zehfuss takes three versions of constructivism – those developed by Alexander Wendt (1999), Friedrich Kratochwil (1989) and Nicholas Onuf (1989) – and seeks to demonstrate "how their own assumptions undermine their stated purpose and make their theories unravel" (p.10). This is done by applying each

author's approach to the case of post-unification German military involvement abroad. While these chapters are somewhat repetitive – working through the same (German) materials three different times - they nonetheless offer a number of valid and important criticisms.

Consider the deconstruction of Wendt (chapter 2). Zehfuss correctly notes that a central concern for Wendt - and, indeed, many other constructivists - is to show that identities can change through interaction. Yet, the interactions he portrays are devoid of communication; his “actors do not speak” (p.48). This is a telling and fair criticism. Thus, in allowing for social construction and interaction, Wendt does not take the linguistic turn far enough. His famous duo of *ego* and *alter* are largely involved in a signaling game and an exchange of moves familiar to rationalists and game theorists (pp.47-50). For Zehfuss, this is just one example of the ways in which Wendt's theory begins to unravel.

In the remainder of chapter 2 and in the next two chapters as well, Zehfuss advances a number of other criticisms of Wendt, Kratochwil and Onuf, highlighting gaps and inconsistencies in their approaches. Such analysis reinforces her overall claim that constructivism is collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. This is a strong statement – one that nonetheless can be challenged on two grounds.

For one, Zehfuss's conclusions might have been different if she had engaged the more empirically oriented work inspired by these three individuals. At several points in the book (p.33 [footnote], pp.186-87), the author does indeed address this issue, noting she will not make use of the “more empirical work” published by Wendt, Kratochwil or Onuf as it remains “abstract,” “leaves off before getting to the practicalities,” and “provides little to work with for those wishing to analyse what is construed as the empirical reality of international politics.” While this seems an accurate assessment, it leaves the reader puzzling as to why Zehfuss does not then engage the by now extensive empirical literature inspired by the work of these scholars.

⁵ In a brief discussion (p.270) of “next step[s],” Hopf hints at a move in this direction by scholars who might build on his findings.

Consider two examples, both drawn from the empirically oriented constructivists who have built on Wendt's insights. In one case, they saw a problem in his understanding of interaction, especially its missing linguistic element. This led them to develop and apply empirically hypotheses on *social* interaction that emphasized arguing (Lynch 1999; Idem 2002; Risse 2000), persuasion (Price 1998; Checkel 2001b; Idem 2003a), social influence (Johnston 2001; Idem nd) and rhetorical action (Schimmelfennig 2003). More recently, they have sought to counter Wendt's failure to appreciate the interconnectedness of the domestic and international spheres (pp.76-77), making its problematization a central theoretical and empirical concern (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999).

Zehfuss might reply by noting that all these additions and corrections actually make her point. The constructivist project is full of inconsistencies and tensions. However, such a response would then lead to my second challenge. Is there any theory out there that does not begin 'to unravel' at some point? After all, we are talking about social science here, that imperfect enterprise of theorizing the rich tapestry of politics and everyday life.

The latter is no easy task, as two examples suggest. Nearly a decade ago, Green and Shapiro did a masterful job dissecting the rational choice research program, showing that it was full of conceptual inconsistencies, shallow in terms of empirical verification and wrapped up in a self-referential 'citation cartel' (Green and Shapiro 1994; see also Walt 1999; Olsen 2001). More recently, the realist research program has undergone a revival, with many arguing for a return to its classical roots. However, this has led observers to question if such scholarship is not smuggling in assumptions on the role of beliefs or domestic politics that are inconsistent with realism's core (Legro and Moravcsik 1999). My point simply is that the tensions and inconsistencies that Zehfuss so carefully uncovers in the constructivist project may be inherent to most forms of social science theorizing.

This said, Zehfuss is to be praised for using her book to address another, related issue. Towards the end (pp.246-49), she acknowledges that all social science, including the constructivist sort, is about trade offs. As researchers, we have to start somewhere. However, the choices we make "are not innocent. The choice of a beginning opens

up certain avenues of thinking and closes down others” (p.248). These are obvious, almost commonsensical, insights, which she documents empirically throughout the book. Yet, they should be kept centrally in mind as constructivists go about building their bridges.

Lacunae and Challenges

Despite my criticisms, the three books under review deserve a wide readership among constructivists and IR scholars more generally. Not only do they provide a vivid sense of the diversity and disagreements that characterize constructivist scholarship. Their lucid writing style also helps a critical reader see flaws and gaps in the argumentation, thus making it that much easier to explore those challenging ‘where next’ questions.

Domestic Politics. At the risk of sounding like a broken record (Checkel 1998, 342-47), IR constructivists could still benefit by taking domestic politics more seriously. Despite my critiques of Hopf on this score, his manuscript demonstrates the clear benefits of a domestic move. For constructivists in particular, greater attention to the domestic realm is essential because many of their key ‘variables’ – identities, discourse, public spheres, institutions, norms – are likely to be more robust, embedded and institutionalized at the national level (see also Hopf, pp.278-83).

Consider Europe. If there is any region in the world where the international/supranational should trump the national, it is here. The continent is densely institutionalized and, in the European Union (EU), it has something that is far more than a classic intergovernmental organization or regime; rather, the consensus view among most Europeanists and many politicians is that it is a polity in the making. Yet, a growing body of empirical research – some conducted by constructivists – shows that European identities, discourses and public spheres are still dominated by their national counterparts or, at best, co-exist uneasily side by side with them (Checkel 1999; Olsen 2002; Risse and Maier 2003; Lewis 2003; Beyers 2003). If this is the case in Europe, it is all the more likely to be true elsewhere.

Thus, one important lesson for constructivists is that “constructivism [starts] at home” (Hopf, chapter 1).⁶

A second lesson would be not ‘to throw the baby out with the bath water.’ That is, IR constructivists should not forget about the international system. However, the challenge is not to view it in isolation, but to explore the crosscutting interactions between the domestic and international levels. How to do this? Do we develop additive frameworks that first theorize one level and then move to the other? Or, do we advance more complex approaches emphasizing the simultaneity of international and domestic developments (Risse, Ropp, Sikkink 1999)? While the latter surely better captures empirical reality, its systematic theorization stands as a central task for IR more generally (Gourevitch 2002, for an excellent discussion).

Research Methods. In recent years, there have been a growing number of calls by both conventional, positivist (Adler 2002) and interpretative constructivists (Milliken 1999; Neumann 2003) for greater attention to methods. One can only hope this trend continues and, moreover, that future methodological discussions begin to transcend the positivist-interpretative epistemological divide.

The importance of such boundary crossing moves can be seen in the following example. As part of a project on the construction of new citizenship/membership norms in Europe, I have been concerned with tracking their initial development within committees of several European regional organizations. My hunch was that arguing dynamics played some role in these settings, thus shifting the preferences of national agents. To theorize such processes, I turned to a laboratory-experimental literature on persuasion taken from social psychology, from which I developed hypotheses on the roles of agent properties (for example, their degree of authoritativeness) and of privacy in promoting persuasion (Checkel 2001b; see also Johnston 2001). To test these arguments, I relied on a traditional positivist methodological tool kit – process tracing, triangulation across sources and interviews (Checkel 2003a).

⁶ In a similar fashion, empirically driven, rational choice IR scholars are also paying increasing attention to domestic politics. Martin and Simmons 1998; Moravcsik 2000; Martin 2000, for example.

It was only when I presented my findings at several meetings that interpretative constructivist colleagues pointed to a theoretical-methodological gap in the analysis. Simply put, particular agents are not only persuasive because they are authoritative or because they argue in private. Their arguments are also persuasive because they are enabled and legitimated by the broader social discourse in which they are embedded. Did a particular agent's arguments in a particular committee resonate with this broader social discourse? To answer such questions and thus provide a more complete account of persuasion's role, it will be necessary to supplement my positivist methodologies with others more grounded in interpretative techniques.

Taking Language Seriously. Knowledgeable readers may be puzzled by this subtitle. Do not constructivists already take language very seriously? After all, it is a central analytic category in their narratives and causal stories. Interpretative and critical constructivists focus on discourse, the mediation of meaning through language, speech acts and textual analysis. The conventional sort, by theorizing roles for arguing, persuasion, deliberation and rhetorical action, see language as a causal mechanism leading to changes in core agent properties. Thus, the question is not "whether language is important; the question is rather *which* approach to language" (Fierke 2002, 351 [emphasis in original]) - and, I would add, how to use it as a practical research tool.

At this level, I see two challenges facing constructivists. For interpretative and critical scholars, a key task is to continue the discussion begun by individuals like Milliken (1999), Neumann (2003) and Hopf. Among the issues that might be addressed are the proper balance between textual approaches and those emphasizing practice (Neumann 2002; Hopf, pp.269-70), and the degree to which these scholars need explicitly to describe and justify the sources and techniques they use to reconstruct discourses.

On the latter, I am not suggesting some sort of positivist primer that puts discourse into variable language or seeks to establish a single way of conducting such analyses. Rather, the time is ripe for further debate about best practices for those working with

discourse and texts (Milliken 1999; Neumann 2003, 1-3).⁷ The importance of such a move is highlighted by Zehfuss's book. Surprisingly, for a volume with such a strong empirical focus, the reader is given no indication for how her discourse analysis (p.83) will be conducted. Surely, Zehfuss has some rules or hunches for identifying when normative commitments are "shared amongst a number of people" (pp.120-21), for recognizing "prominent narratives" (pp.121-22), or for how she identifies and reconstructs instances of "shared meaning" (pp.127-28). Her silence here raises questions about the validity and reliability of the reconstructions, which, as Hopf so nicely shows, are key issues for interpretative accounts as well.

For conventional and (mostly) positivist constructivists, the challenge is of a different sort. In this case, it is time for a discussion and debate between proponents of arguing/deliberation and persuasion perspectives. Arguably, both groups are seeking to explain the same phenomenon: how and under what conditions arguments 'change people's minds.' They disagree on the best micro-mechanism. Students of arguing draw upon Habermas' theory of communicative action (Risse 2000; Lynch 2002), while proponents of persuasion make use of insights drawn from social psychology and communications theory (Johnston 2001).

This debate should have two parts. Theoretically, a key question is whether Habermas' social theory can be specified and operationalized in such a way as to allow for the development of a robust empirical research program. Risse (2000) has suggested this is possible. However, scholars like Johnston (2001) and myself (Checkel 2001a) have questioned the very basis of Habermas' theory, arguing that the real heavy lifting in his approach is done by persuasion. It is thus not the force of the better argument that changes minds, as students of Habermas would claim. Rather, arguments carry the day when advanced by individuals with particular characteristics who operate in particular kinds of institutional settings that are conducive to persuasion.⁸

Methodologically, a central challenge for proponents of both arguing and persuasion is recognizing it when they see it. While scholars like Johnston (2001) have proposed

⁷ As Neumann likes to say, we are, in the end, social scientists and not social theorists.

specific methodological strategies, we still have only preliminary empirical tests of them (Risse 2000; Checkel 2003a; see also Pollack 2003). Moreover, there is continuing and worrying confusion on the question of agency. Simply put, do robust explanatory claims about arguing and persuasion need to control for actor motives? Habermasians answer in the negative (Sjursen 2002), while students of persuasion suggest that ‘getting between the earlobes’ is both necessary and possible (Johnston 2001; Checkel 2001a).

Ironically, if Habermasians stick to this view, they will be heading down the same problematic theory-building route as the rational choice theorists they so often criticize. The latter build their theories on ‘as if’ assumptions: agents act as if they are egoistical and self interested. However, if agent motivations are likewise bracketed as we develop explanatory theories on the role of arguments, we end up with the same type of ‘as if’ reasoning, only now assuming that agents are other-regarding and moved by the force of the better argument. In both cases, the result is bad theory that tells us little about how preferences are actually constituted (Wendt 1999, 119-22, for an excellent discussion).

Bridge Building and the Middle Ground. This has been an exciting and, increasingly, controversial topic among constructivists in recent years. By exciting, I mean that researchers have followed up general calls for bridge building (Adler 1997) with increasingly sophisticated conceptual schemas for fitting constructivism better with its rivals. These include ideas on how one can integrate the ideational and the material, game theory and social constructivism, strategic-choice and cognitive perspectives, and other-regarding and self-interested behavior (Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner 1998; Lepgold and Lamborn 2001; Lebow 2001; Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002; Fearon and Wendt 2002). At the level of research designs and strategies, scholars have been equally creative, advocating notions of sequencing, domains of application and scope conditions as ways to integrate constructivism with its theoretical rivals (March and Olsen 1998; Caporaso, Checkel and Jupille 2003b).

⁸ For an excellent discussion of these characteristics and settings, see Johnston 2001.

Most important, though, a growing number of empirical projects are testing these integrative schemes and designs on a variety of different topics and world regions. These include the effects of regional institutions (Acharya and Johnston 2001); the study of international organization (Tierney and Weaver 2003); institutional theory and the European Union (Caporaso, Checkel and Jupille 2003a); compliance and the European Union (Tallberg 2002); compliance and international institutions (Kelley, nd); and international institutions and socialization in Europe (Checkel 2003b). Collectively, these projects offer not some mushy grand theory that makes everyone happy. Rather, scholars have gotten down to the hard work of better specifying their alternative constructivist and rationalist theories, thus providing more complete yet still methodologically rigorous approaches for understanding the world around us.

The point of increasing controversy is that the bridges being built nearly all have just one lane, going from conventional constructivism to rational choice (see also Zehfuss, pp.3-7). Given that such bridges can in principle have two lanes (with the second going from conventional constructivism to the interpretative/critical sort), we need to understand better why this is not happening. I see four factors at work.

First, just as there are some conventional constructivists with little desire to build multi-lane bridges, there are interpretative scholars with similar views (Zehfuss, *passim*). There are real tradeoffs to consider if one heads down the integrative path. If scholars can explain their concerns about these possible tradeoffs (Zehfuss, chapters 1, 6), then so much the better. Bridge builders can only benefit from external and critical commentary of this sort.

Second, at a practical level of getting research done, bridge building can be difficult and time consuming. In a project on the EU and institutional theory, Caporaso, Jupille and I were seeking to build modest (one-lane) bridges from conventional constructivism to rationalism, but still found the going tough. The problem was not our collaborators; they were willing and eager learners. However, the reality is that we all have invested significant time in particular research programs and thus have sunk costs. Reaching out to the other side (conventional constructivist or rationalist), means learning about it in sufficient detail so that one offers robust alternative

arguments (and not caricatured simplifications).⁹ This is not easy. Challenges of this sort are only amplified if one seeks to develop frameworks and arguments that speak to both the positivist mainstream and interpretative/critical constructivists.

Third, epistemology, is just not so easy to get around. While agreeing with Wendt (1999) that the real (meta-theoretical) issues are more ontological than epistemological, a bracketing of the latter becomes less of an option at the day-to-day, empirical levels. In the EU/institutional-theory project, for example, we hoped to include one or more interpretative constructivists doing work on European integration. However, as we thought about it more, we became increasingly worried about any such move. How would we integrate these individuals into the collaboration? Would our emphasis on ‘why’ questions unfairly limit and constrain his/her focus on the ‘how possible’? How could the two approaches be reconciled within the context of one time-limited project that needed to maintain some level of intellectual coherence?

In the end, we chose not to include these scholars, not out of sinister motives to delegitimize their research agenda, but out of a practical concern to finish within a reasonable time frame. In the project’s introduction, we discuss this dilemma openly.

This choice bears an inevitable cost in the practical exclusion of a body of scholarship of a different epistemological bent. We thus knowingly proceed partially and incrementally, aware of the terrain left uncovered. If Aspinwall and Schneider are right in suggesting that transcending epistemological differences represents a bridge too far, then our choice is one that prevents the best (epistemological agreement) from being the enemy of the good (intraepistemological, intertheoretical progress) (Caporaso, Checkel, Jupille 2003b, 24-25).

This is not an ideal state of affairs. Basically, it means we build bridges where we can control for epistemology, which, in turn, means they have only one lane. As Sil has argued more generally, continuing epistemological disagreements “militate against

⁹ In the EU/institutional-theory project, Hix and Kreppel (2003) offer the best example of a conscientious reaching out to the other side, in this case, by two scholars with grounding in rational choice and quantitative methods.

the emergence of a genuinely collaborative, truly integrated field of comparative analysis” (Sil 2000, 354).

Fourth, what if an unintended effect of exploring the middle ground is to narrow or close down the space for theoretical exploration? The latter outcome is all the more likely to occur as bridge building of the conventional-constructivist/rational-choice type becomes increasingly popular.¹⁰ This would be a pity as one of the wonderful things about constructivism has been its ability to bring fresh theoretical and disciplinary air to IR.

Consider two examples suggestive of just such a narrowing. As argued earlier, the Hopf volume is an important and innovative contribution to the constructivist research program. That said, it is hard to imagine that any of the mainstream bridge-building projects discussed above could find a place for Hopf. This would happen not because he is uninterested; rather, they would not know what to do with him.

A second example comes from a collaborative project on European institutions and socialization (Checkel 2003b). This endeavor seeks to make better connections between conventional constructivism and rational choice; our theoretical hook is socialization, while the regional focus is Europe (West and East). In the project, we worked hard to come up with a definition of socialization that would satisfy both constructivists and rationalists, and be sufficiently operationalized so as to allow for testing. This we did, on the whole with favorable results (Johnston 2003). Yet, this came at a cost. In our quest to converse across the constructivist-rationalist divide, we developed an understanding of socialization that did some injustice to commonsense definitions. Methodological and epistemological agreement was purchased at the cost of (partial) theoretical closure (Zuern 2003; see also Hopf, p.294).

¹⁰ To appreciate that such a trend is underway, readers need only reflect on the listing of projects given above or skim recent volumes of a journal such as [International Organization](#).

Conclusions

Constructivism is not only trendy; it is fun. Scholars grouped under this rubric have many disagreements and fights. They often refer to each other in derogatory ways, adding the adjectives thin, thick and – in my case – emaciated to constructivist. And, yes, they still have many problems to fix. However, despite the name calling and challenges, compared to 15 years ago, we now have a much broader conceptual toolkit for understanding ‘what makes the world hang together.’ As someone who has had the privilege of sitting down and taking a hard look at this literature in two separate review essays six years apart, the trend is clear – and positive. Indeed, as constructivism is applied empirically in ever more domains, pushed methodologically, theorized substantively and questioned critically, I would be very surprised if this trend line were not maintained.

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