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Construction Sites

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Is there a constructivist research program and, if so, what are its chances for future progress? Hayward Alker’s note prodded us to reflect on these and other questions. I have been hoping against hope that someone would come up with convincing, positive answers, because I have not been able to. If a research program is a collective enterprise built around common questions, holding shared standards of progress and generating cumulative knowledge, we do not have one, nor are we likely to any time soon. Does this conclusion mean that “constructivism” is a fad that will leave no enduring traces in the world of international relations scholarship? Paradoxically, perhaps, the answer is, “No.”

If constructivism has not established a genuine research program, it is not because the concerns, or the practitioners, are fundamentally misguided. On the contrary: constructivism probes questions that will always be at the heart of social inquiry, and its adherents have produced creative, insightful research that expands the pool of human knowledge. The problem lies in the broader field of international relations, and it is (not surprisingly) one of social norms and expectations. Our institutions reward theoretical precociousness. Every IR scholar must (or feels that s/he must) make a theoretical “contribution.” As a result, the dominant incentives are to expose the flaws in existing theories and to propose something better. Collaborative research is difficult enough (the “herding cats” problem), but building a research program involving more than a handful of scholars seems out of the question (see Holsti 1985; Ferguson and Mansbach 1988).
So, we have many flavors of constructivism, with diverse questions, concepts, and methods. A growing number of researchers find persuasive the fundamental constructivist insight, that our worlds are at least as much social as they are material. And clearly, scholars are deploying various constructivist ideas and tools to ask fruitful questions about the world and find illuminating answers. Perhaps, then, we should be more conscious of the virtues of pragmatism: scholars use the tools that help them to solve the intellectual problems at hand. Constructivism will generate progress in this more diffuse, though pragmatic, sense because it zeroes in on what has always been the core of social science, namely, the ways in which people act in a collective world of which they are both the creature and the creator. Unlike other broad perspectives, constructivism recognizes that our capacity to navigate, and act upon, the physical and social worlds emerges out of collectively held understandings and rules. In this sense, constructivism addresses the questions that have been vital at least since Weber and Durkheim, if not Aristotle.

Our convenors also asked that we reflect on the question of what is to be done, where constructivist work might move so as to achieve progress. Given what I have said about fragmentation and herding cats, any attempt to tell everybody else what we should be doing would be fruitless and pretentious. Instead, I will outline several areas of inquiry that I see as both fundamental to constructivism and liable to offer decent payoffs in the form of expanded understanding of our worlds. I start with the foundations laid out by Nick Onuf. I see the major task for rule-centered constructivism as converting highly abstract social theories into mid-range theories of international relations that can guide systematic empirical research. The thoughts that follow are therefore not a work plan for constructivists, but rather a sketch of the kind of work I expect to be doing over the next few years.

The foundations are, briefly stated:
1. Rules are central, because they link agents and social structures. Rules both establish agency, enabling and constraining action, and define institutions – they are thus the means of mutual constitution.

2. Rules are in constant flux. Most of what actors do and say has an effect on the relevant rules, whether to consolidate or erode them (Onuf 1994).

3. Rules create the condition of rule, which is another way of saying that rules and power are inextricably intertwined.

Given these foundations, I explore three areas in which constructivism could build: the dynamics of rule change, the connection between rules and rationality, and the relationship of rules to power.

**Dynamics of rule change**

If rules are the basic building blocks of all social structures, including international relations, then explaining rule change is crucial to explaining social change. Indeed, change in international society means change in the rules that constitute actors and roles and govern their interactions. Shifts in basic rules, like sovereignty rules, imply changes in the nature of international society. IR scholars have recognized the importance of changing norms, and tracked the emergence of new norms, including norms that abolished the slave trade, promoted decolonization, sanctioned apartheid, justified humanitarian intervention, created weapons taboos, and so on. Others have described what I would call the political mechanics of international norm change, focusing on transnational activist networks, norm cascades and spirals, and domestic adaptation to transnational norms (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse and Sikkink 1999; Brysk 2000). What is still lacking is a coherent account of why rules evolve.
Why do some normative claims emerge and why do they prevail over alternatives? The transnational models of norm change are really based on pluralist politics: governments respond to mobilized political pressures. Why, in the first place, do the claims of norm entrepreneurs win over followers and allies?

One way to begin is to recognize that norm entrepreneurs and activist networks are participants in a broader process of normative evolution. If rules are in constant flux, why is that, and how does the process work? I suggest that there is an endogenous dynamic of rule change. That is, rule systems contain the seeds of change. Even if one could, as a thought experiment, hold power and technology constant, rule change would be constant and ubiquitous. Rule change occurs in a process that can be depicted as an endlessly repeating cycle linking rules to actions, discourses (argumentation), and change.

The cycle begins with the constellation of existing rules, which provides the normative structure within which actors decide what to do and evaluate the behavior of others. Because rules cannot cover every contingency, and because conflicts among rules are inevitable (Hart 1994), actions regularly trigger disputes. The arguments are about which norm(s) apply, and what the norms require or permit. The dominant form of argumentation is by analogy: actors assert analogies between the act in question and some set of prior cases. When the analogy is persuasive, other actors will agree that the current dispute should fall under the same norms that covered the earlier (analogized) cases. But the argument does not end there, for it remains to be determined what the norms require in the present instance. Again, players argue by analogy with similar cases, in order to establish how the rules should apply to the case in question (if there are mitigating factors, if the case qualifies as an exception, and so on).
The outcome of such discourses is always to change the norms under dispute. If everybody agrees that the norms apply without qualification, then the norms have been strengthened and the scope of their application clarified. If the relevant actors agree that the disputed act qualifies as a justified exception to the norms, then the scope of their application has also been clarified (the proliferation of exceptions, of course, can weaken a rule, which is also a norm change). If the participants in the discourse fail to reach consensus, then that also modifies the norms in question, leaving their status weakened or ambiguous. Disagreements over the meaning of the rules, and over the justifiability of specific acts, can continue unresolved over long periods of time. By the same token, when broad agreement exists, governments can fairly quickly formalize a rule (against slavery, or piracy, for instance) by signing and ratifying a convention.

The crucial point, however, is that the cycle of normative change has completed a turn. In a given normative structure, actions trigger disputes. Argument ensues, grounded in analogies with previous experience. The outcomes of these discourses modify the rules, whether by making them stronger or weaker, clearer or more ambiguous. The cycle returns to its starting point, the normative structure, but the normative structure has changed. The altered norms establish the context for subsequent actions, disputes, and discourses.

A few insights derived from this conception should resonate with various strands of constructivist research. First, arguments (or discourses) are crucial, because they produce the varying degrees of consensus and disagreement that modify the rules. We have a lot of work to do to understand the workings of analogical argumentation, and the bases of persuasion. Second, we find that historical connectedness is inescapable. The raw materials of the normative entrepreneur, or bricoleur, are the ideas, experiences, and norm discourses of the past.
Analogical argument, the primary mode of persuasion where rules are concerned, is by definition referential to history.

**Rules and rationality**

The foregoing discussion has already raised the issue of rationality, in the assertion that the dominant mode of rationality in discourses about rules is analogical. Arguments arise at the point where (necessarily) general rules meet the particularity of experience. Though in principle some such disputes can be resolved by strict logical deduction, specific cases routinely and inevitably cross the boundary of what can be so determined: the rules are unclear, the proper classification of the facts ambiguous, and so on (MacCormick 1978). Argument by analogy takes over. The task of disputants is to persuade that the case at hand resembles (or does not) past instances in which the rules were applied in particular ways. All of us routinely engage such arguments of “fit,” in disputes that arise in families, sports, workplace, neighborhoods, and churches – not to mention the courts.

The committed rationalist will respond that all decision-making is based on a utility-based rationality, in which one calculates the consequences of alternatives and maximizes expected payoffs. People favor the application of the rules that will make them better off. Normative justifications (and thus the choice of analogies) are strictly self-serving window dressing. In order to demonstrate that the realm of normative reasoning and choice is at least partially autonomous and thus amenable to a distinct analytical approach, let us accept as a starting point the fully selfish, rational maximizer. We accept, only for the sake of argument, that the words and actions of this maximizer derive solely from calculations of advantage.
(subjectively defined). When confronted with a dispute over the application of rules, the maximizer will argue for the application of whichever rules justify her utility-driven acts.

At this point we note something curious. The utility maximizer, in order to avoid costs, is motivated to win the dispute. In order to win, she must offer the most persuasive arguments and analogies. But the determination of which arguments are likely to prevail has nothing to do with utility calculations, and everything to do with social standards of fit, relevance, and interpretation. At this moment, the maximizer has entered the world of normative discourse and reasoning by analogy. Naturally she wants the greatest possible payoff, but her success depends on her skill in understanding the group’s historically evolved standards of similarity and precedent, and offering persuasive analogies to past cases and decisions. In short, though driven ultimately by selfish, utility-based objectives, the maximizer is compelled to operate within a normative rationality, based on shared, historically contingent standards of precedent and fit. Achieving the greatest payoff means mounting the most convincing interpretation of the rules and their past applications. And that effort is not subject to internal utility calculations, but rather to external norms and understandings.

People are rational, in both the utility sense and the normative sense. I see the two modes of rationality not as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary; indeed, utility maximization requires normative rationality, or the ability to understand and manipulate arguments based on analogy and fit. I further assume that people constantly and routinely reason about both utility and norms, and that both kinds of considerations affect their choices. Though utility may trump norms in some cases, in others norms will outweigh immediate utility. Actors may even develop complex ways of balancing norms and utility. What we need is a better understanding of norm rationality, and the ways in which it interacts with utility calculations.
**Rules and power**

International actors deploy both arguments and material resources to bring others to their view. At one extreme, actors with sufficient power resources can impose their preferred solutions on other actors, though they will simultaneously offer arguments designed to show that their choices are also normatively justified. But “unipolar moments” are exceptionally rare, and never absolute. Britain did not dictate the terms of the 19th-century Pax Britannica, it negotiated those rules with the continental European powers (McKeown 1986). Similarly, the United States has found that its status as sole superpower in the post-Cold War era by no means allows it to impose its preferences on the rest of the world. Pluralism, not unipolar hegemony, seems to be the usual condition of international relations. Under pluralism, no single actor can impose a solution, hence normative arguments about what course of action is justified are crucial in establishing consensus among multiple interested parties.

The regular deployment of material resources, whether as incentive or coercion, underlies the persistent image of international relations as structured fundamentally by relations of power. The neo-realist tradition denies that norms and suasion play any independent role in international politics; actors offer arguments and invoke norms, but only as decoration for what they would have done in any case. Material structures are the only ones that count. Thus the powerful do what they will and the weak accept what they must.

Of course powerful actors have a disproportionate influence on international rules and outcomes. They seek to establish international rules that favor their perceived interests and maintain their advantages. Thus, in Onuf’s terms, rules do create rule (Onuf 1989). But even actors with the greatest material resources do not operate outside of normative structures. The dynamic of normative evolution is not simply reducible to the exercise of power. In other words,
power and norms are both at work in international relations, and they interact in ways that are not
determined by one or the other. Four related arguments support this assertion.

First, the range of disputes that can be settled by the unilateral application of material
power or coercion is restricted and probably shrinking. Indeed, military force (the ultimate
currency in realist and neo-realist approaches) is simply not a factor in the vast majority of
disputes. Indeed, the frequency of wars among great powers has been in secular decline, and
essentially non-existent since World War II. Thus the great powers can impose armed faits
accomplis in a small set of instances, and these (in practice) only vis-à-vis weak or collapsed
states. Second, in the far more common situations where military force is not an option, the great
powers operate within a set of institutions (rules) most of which they did not devise but rather
inherited. They must therefore employ persuasion, and for that they must assert their claims in
terms of existing normative frames. Third, to the extent that powerful actors internalize rules,
their values, goals, and choices are shaped from within by normative structures that have been
“domesticated.” When international rules alter the terms of domestic policy debates, get
incorporated into domestic legislation, affect the decisions of domestic judges, and become
integrated in the organizational cultures and routines of domestic bureaucracies, then
international rules have been absorbed into a country’s own practices and institutions (Cortell
and Davis 1996; Koh 1998; Cortell and Davis 2000).

Fourth, the development of international rule structures (e.g., rights) can offer
transnational actors, and a state’s own subjects, new possibilities for pursuing their political
interests. Much of the action in modern international law concerns how international norms are
noticed, absorbed, and used politically within the legal frameworks of states and supranational
bodies, like the European Court of Justice. Citizens, groups, firms, NGOs, and governmental
officials may then be led to alter their own cognitive schema, values, and decision-making in light of such processes - e.g., how such norms are interpreted and applied by judges and other officials operating at home, abroad, and at the international level.

Finally, a real breakthrough for constructivists would be to offer empirical theories and evidence as to how rules convert raw physical materials into resources for actors. This is Onuf’s argument that even material power is socially constructed, to the advantage of some and not others. How do rules create resources? Control over people, money, and arms is clearly intensely rule governed. Rules define who can deploy financial and coercive resources, and under what circumstances. In some systems of governance, the constitutional rules deliberately create different kinds of power resources and allocate them to distinct groups of actors, so that they can control and check each other. Constructivists could pay much closer attention to this interplay of rules and power, showing how specific rules create specific kinds of power resources for identifiable actors. By so doing, we could take the wind out of critics who dismiss constructivism for ignoring the exercise and effects of material power.

An ending

The core concepts in this version of constructivism – actors, rules, institutions – supply the essential building blocks for developing empirical theories of international relations and testing them with evidence and data. Rule-centered constructivism offers points of entry into the problems that are, and will likely remain, at the core of social inquiry: change, rationality, and power.
References


