Constructivism and International Relations Theories

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Abstract

International relations discourse post-Cold War offers more various approaches in understanding the world. Constructivism is one of the examples of the advanced development of international relations theory. Instead of undermining other mainstream theories, according to its founder and supporters, constructivism gives broader enlightenment in defining the dynamic of world politics. This paper attempts to explain the basic concept of constructivism and how does it relate to contemporary international politics.

Introduction

The fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union signified the end of the Cold War. The peaceful end of the Cold War changed not only the world order, but also debates in international relations theories. It was unpredicted by mainstream international relations theories. Without any big war erupted and without any change in the anarchical world system, neorealists expected that the world’s bipolar order would continue. Neorealists also argued that international institutions did not have any influence to make war unlikely. International institutions only reflect material power contestation among states that are not only concern about the absolute gain, but also relative gain in cooperation (Grieco 1988a, 485-507; 1988b, 600-624; Mearshimer 1994/1995, 5-49).

However, despite its nuclear weapon, the Soviet Union collapsed. Neorealists tried to give simple explanation by telling the decline of Soviet power (Mearsheimer 1994/1995, 46). However, such explanation was based more on domestic politics and economy¹ than on the material structure of world’s distribution of power. It

¹ Economic problem that the Soviet Union suffered from by the mid-1980s made the Soviet-Union could not maintain and support its hegemony and first-rate military expenditure.
could not adequately explain on why the Soviet Union—and Gorbachev—‘committed’ in something that could endanger its national security and survival (Waltz 1979, 126)\(^2\) and prevented it from maximizing its hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001, 32-33).\(^3\) Although neorealists were still confidence about the relevance of neorealism throughout century (Waltz 1993, 44-45; Mearsheimer 1994/1995, 45-47), the end of the Cold War eroded, or at least reduced, the hegemony of neorealism over international relations theories.

Democratic liberals tried to underscore the people’s aspirations for freedom and opposition to communism. Neoliberalism and market economy successfully imposed their hegemonies to the world and eroded the validity of authoritarianism and command economy. Although this argument could explain the decline of communist ideology in the Soviet Union, it could not understand why such change happens in 1980s, just after the Western market economy suffered from stagflation. Neoliberal internationalism, however, provided supplementary explanation. Liberalism and communism interacted across political borders. Pressures from below and new thinking among top political leaders eroded the hegemony of communism and made the Soviet Union collapsed. The peaceful prospect of democratic peace supported Soviet leaders’ decision to change the political regime (Doyle in Lebow and Risse-Kappen, http://www.ciaonet.org/book/lebow/Lebow04.html, 23 January 2007).

The end of the Cold War offered a challenge for constructivists to understand. Wendt said that “material structure can have sui generis effects..., [t]he Cold War was fundamentally a discursive, not a material, structure.” (Wendt 1994, 389 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006). The cold war could be over if the US and Soviet Union did not perceive each other as enemy (Wendt 1992, 397, 399 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006). Change could grow from below. It was possible for states to reinvent their identities and consciously transform their international roles, and subsequently change the world order.

In the case of Soviet Union, the breakdown of consensus about the Leninist theory of imperialism, the state’s inability to meet economic-technological-military challenge from the West, the reassurance from the West that it did not intend to invade the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev’s new policy of Perestroika encouraged critical self-reflection over old identity and the growing of new ideas (Wendt 1992, 419-420 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006). Gorbachev’s new thinking

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\(^2\) We can remember defensive neorealist argument about the main interest of the greatest powers. “In anarchy,” Waltz said, “security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit and power .”

\(^3\) Here, we can also note Mearsheimer’s, an expansive neorealist, argument on state’s interest. Instead of just being survive, the greatest states strive to maximize their relative powers in order to become “the most powerful state in the system” and then “ensure their survival.”
was also influenced by transnational epistemic communities, such as the US arms control community, Western European peace scholars and center-left policy makers, and analysts and scholars at the Soviet institutes (Risse-Kappen 1994, 213 in http://www.jstor.org/, 10 January 2007). With epistemic communities’ shared set of normative and principled beliefs, shared causal beliefs, shared notions of validity, and a common policy enterprise, the communities had discursive power to disseminate their ideas (Hass 1992, 3-16 in http://www.jstor.org/, 7 December 2006) into the Soviet Union. Their practice then contributed in making the Soviet Union collapsed and dissolved. Those constructivists’ arguments illuminated the relevance of constructivism theory in understanding world order and international relations.

This paper will not discuss the end of the Cold War any further. The above story are only preludes of notions about constructivism theory and about its position in front of two other mainstream international relations theories—neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Instead of only discussing about constructivism theory, this paper attempts to underscores some points in constructivism theory that are different—or against—the two other mainstream theories. This paper will also show how constructivism can be a useful theory to understand the current complex world. Avoiding from being a static and reductive theory, like neorealism and neo-liberal institutionalism, it tries to include many aspects of international relations. A complex world needs a complex theory to understand. And constructivism constructs itself to be a theory that can meet such demand.

The Constructivist Turn

The end of the Cold War raised constructivism onto the stage of debates in international relations theories. However, some scholars criticize that constructivism “remains a method than anything else” (Checkel 1998, 325, 342 in http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/world_politics/v050/50.2er_finnemore.html, 13 November 2006). It does not provide a substantive theory of world politics. It offers a research approach that can be applied to understand international political economy (IPE). Constructivism should work with many theories from various disciplines, such as sociology, comparative politics, social psychology and others.

But such openness, at the otherwise, supplies a wide-open space to develop itself and grants opportunity to constructivism in order to become a dynamic theory of international relations. It is always ready to be self-reflective, to practice self-criticism and take criticism from other theories. Paul Kowert and Jeffrey Legro, for example, admit that constructivists have not offered a causal theory of identity construction and tendency of constructivist to reject rationalist argument of material constraint (Kowert and Legro in Katzenstein ed. 1996, 469, 495-496;
Kowert 2001, 163-165 in http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/, 13 November 2006); and Friedrich Kratochwil considers that a theory of culture cannot substitute a theory of politics (Kratochwil in Lapid and Kratochwil ed. 1996, 206). This attitude is clearly different from neorealists, like Mearsheimer, who tend to be defensive over criticism (Mearsheimer 1995, 82-93 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006).

Through various researches, constructivism has been proving itself as a useful approach in understanding world politics and economy. Not longer after Alexander Wendt published his influential article, Anarchy is What States Make of It, and formulated the foundation of constructivism approach (Wendt 1992, 384-396 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006), other constructivists seriously applied it. Martha Finnemore, with her National Interest in International Society, gave excellent analysis on the role; Katzenstein and other scholars in his The Culture of National Security showed how applicable is constructivism for discussing international and national security; and Audie Klotz, with her Norms in International Relations demonstrated the effects of international norms to state identity (Finnemore 1996; Katzenstein ed. 1996; Klotz 1995). Other constructivists, like Alexander Adler, Ted Hopf, Thomas U. Berger, Thomas Risse-Kappen, Alastair Iain Johnston, T.J. Pempel, Amitav Archarya, Peter Hass, Yosef Lapid, Paul Kowert, and others, contributed also in developing constructivism as international relations theory. No doubt, as Checkel said, “constructivists have convincingly shown the empirical value of their approach, providing new and meaningful interpretations on a range of issues of central concern to students of world politics.” (Checkel 1998, 338 in http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/world_politics/v050/50.2er_finnemore.html, 13 November 2006).

**Constructivism: On Ontology, Epistemology, and Methodology**

Constructivism differs itself from neorealism and neoliberalism by highlighting and illuminating the ontological reality of intersubjective knowledge. It does not mean that constructivism negates the material world. Material world and intersubjective knowledge interact and influence each other. Both material world and intersubjective knowledge are not independent. They have relative autonomy. Material world does not totally determine how people, or states, behave. It only limits the possibility of interpretation and intersubjective world that people can construct. Material structure imposing constrain to both agency and social structure. Constructivists, thus, do not mean the unlimited possibilities of social

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4 Postmodern constructivism, however, believes about the ultimate power of human interpretations, intersubjective world. Material world only exist through interpretations. It can express itself and even limit the possibility of interpretation.
structure. Although people have power to interpret, they cannot freely interpret the material world and their own social world. There is limit of interpretation that is always shadowing the social world. Material world shapes and is shaped by social world.

Nevertheless, as Wendt said, “People act toward object, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them” (Wendt 1994, 396-397 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006). Material world offers possible meanings and people, in order to define the reality, abduct some meanings, relate them with other meanings, construct new meanings through dialectic discourses, construct intersubjective meanings by institutionalizing the meanings, and refer to previously constructed intersubjective meanings. The meanings that material world offer, thus, no longer belong to the material world. They have already been abducted. They become a social fact from which people construct and reify their intersubjective world. Intersubjective world then becomes the final arbitrer of meaning. A meaning is no longer a constitutive feature of material world. It has social contexts. A material object, thus, has various meaning, depending on the social contexts where it exist. “The meaning,” Wendt said, “arise out of [social] interaction” (Wendt 1994, 403 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006). Instead of negating the existence of material world, Constructivists incorporate them as one aspect of their theory. Constructivists’ project is to understand the reality by drawing “on the material, subjective and intersubjective dimensions of the world” (Adler 1997, 323 http://ejt.sagepub.com/, 13 November 2006). Normative or ideational structure is as importance as material structure.

All these, imply that constructivists are not anti-realists or anti-liberals. Their emphasis on intersubjective world makes them stand in different position from neorealists and neoliberalists. Neorealism and Neoliberalism believe in the determining power of material world over social world. For neorealists, social world is only a reflection of material world. States or statesmen may have dream or intentions, which are different from the behavior that the material world dictates. But, at last, they have no choice except following the dictate that material world imposes to them. At the neoliberalists’ side, relation between material world and social world skews to the material one. Social world may have internal discourse and make a modification over the meaning that material world impose. However, neoliberalists still consider that the power of material world is stronger than that of social world.

Constructivists’ consideration over social contexts distances them from universalism. Unlike neorealists and neoliberalists who ambitiously struggle to grasp the universal and objective truth that encompasses geographical space and history, constructivists (Katzenstein et al. 1998, 645-685 in http://www.jstor.org/,
7 December 2006) have no intention to formulate the ‘Big -T’ Truth claims. It does not mean that constructivism rejects all foundation of social science. Constructivism still has minimal foundation to evaluate theories. Constructivists still hold logical consistency as a standard of social science. What constructivists can achieve is no more than ‘small-t’ truth claims. They do not search for universal theory, but attempt to find typicality in many geographical spaces and periods of history. They only claim contingent generalizations, which subsequently make their claims always debatable and open to alternative interpretations (Price and Reus-Smit 1998, 272 in http://ejt.sagepub.com/, 13 November 2006).

Constructivists then admitted that their conceptualization about the world is not value-free. Unlike neorealism and neoliberalism, there is no neutral claim in constructivism. Social situation where constructivists live do affect their interpretations. Scholars do not live in a vacuum capsule that makes them sterile from values. No place without values in the world. Flying to the sky and using bird-eyes to picture the world structure do not make scholars—especially rational neorealists and neoliberalists—free from values. There is atmosphere of values in the sky that will pollute them. Even though constructivists do not intentionally attributes their interests into their theories, their interest will unavoidably be injected to their claims. Constructivism theory and theory that constructivists build, thus, are also socially constructed (Risse and Wiener 1999, 777-785; Risse and Wiener in Christiansen et al. 2001, 199-205). And so are other international relations theories.

Consideration over the importance of intersubjective meanings encourages constructivists avoid the explanation stance that rational neorealists and neoliberalists take. Following Max Weber, they take verstehen stance and attempt to understand and interpret the reality of human consciousness in social life. Constructivism does not build subject-object relation between researchers and what they try to understand. Researchers do not have higher position than what they interpret. Both researchers and human-social world are subjects. At one side, this stance enables the human-social world that constructivists interpret to express its own conceptualization. At the other side, it encourages constructivists to always be careful in order not to impose their inherent interests or cognitive-analytical models to human-social world they seek to understand (Adler 1997, 325-327 in http://ejt.sagepub.com/ 13 November 2006).

Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner differs three cluster of constructivism according to their ontological and epistemological stances. Conventional constructivism differs from rationalists (neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists) on ontological questions, but have similar conceptualization over epistemological questions. Critical constructivists differ themselves from rationalists on questions of ontology and epistemology. But unlike postmodern constructivists who reject all rationalists’ ontological and epistemological conceptualization, critical constructivism still acknowledge the possibility of social science.
However, although constructivism has distinct ontological, epistemological and epistemological arguments, it does not differs itself from rational neorealist and neoliberalists in its empirical research strategies. To understand and interpret intersubjective meaning, constructivists use the usual research methods, including discourse analysis, process tracing, genealogy, structured focused comparisons, interview, participant observations, content analysis, qualitative content analysis of primary sources (memoir, archival), statistical studies. In Constructivism, Finnemore and Sikkink said, “there is no single constructivist method or research design” (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, 394-396 in http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/, 13 November 2006). Constructivists only used bracketing strategy when analyzing evidences: first, bracketing agency and social structure, then bracketing material structure and agency, and at last, bracketing material structure and social structure; or the otherwise.

**On Material Structure, International Social Structures and States’ Identity**

Constructivists, as mentioned above, consider that material world shapes and is shaped by social world. State’s military power and the distribution of military power among states do not automatically constitute a certain international social structure. Even without any central governance that has authority over all states in the world, the international system does necessarily become a "competitive security system," as neorealists regard. It can also be an “individualistic security system,” as neoliberalists think, or a “cooperative security system” (Wendt 1992, 397, 399 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006).

Anarchy and distribution of military power do not predetermine states’ identities and relations among them. Strong military power that a state has can mean threatening power or protecting power for other states. Nuclear weapon in the hand of United States has different meaning for Taiwan from nuclear weapon in the hand of China. Treating states “like billiard balls of varying size” (Mearsheimer 1994/1995, 48 in http://www.jstor.org/, 18 November 2006) is not adequate to explain this reality. Although military capabilities and distribution of power always become intervening factors, they cannot adequately understand relations among states. Whether two states become ally or enemy can be predicted by only understanding the material military structure. States’ identities and social structure are also significant factors that determine relations among states. Similar identities and long-history of alliance between two states, for example, can be a basis of cooperative security system; but distinct identities and long-history of conflict can construct competitive security system.
Different from Neorealism that only believe in the predominance of material power (military and economic power), and Neoliberal Institutionalism that only acknowledge a relatively weak influence of non-material power, constructivism recognizes the importance of discursive power (knowledge, ideas, culture, language, and ideology) as well as material power. Both powers interact to construct the world order. Discursive power works by producing and reproducing intersubjective meaning. It enforces how the material structure, phenomena, states’ identity, relations among states, and any other social facts should be defined and understood. With discursive power, the same material expression can be manipulated to produce certain interpretation and silence other possible meaning. Through its discursive power, United States is able to present different interpretations for Pakistan and North Korea’s nuclear weapon. The former is unthreatening and the latter is threatening; Pakistan is not an enemy and North Korea is an enemy. These social identifications are not implied by material power or the distribution of material power. It is constructed through discursive power.

The anarchic international system, thus, does not necessarily constitute a self-help system for a state. A massive military practice of one state can be interpreted as a military threat for another state. However, it can also be a regional threat for some states. Each threatened state might upgrade its military armament, but they might also constructs a concert of security or collective security to balance the threat. As Wendt repeatedly said, “Self-help is an institution”. It also “depends on intersubjective understanding and expectations and on ‘distribution of knowledge,’ that constitute states’ conception of self and other.” It is not “a constitutive feature of anarchy” (Wendt 1992, 396-403 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006).

The possibility of individualistic and cooperative security system erodes the significance of balance of power concept in world politics. Because material power of other states does not automatically mean military threats, there is also no need to assume that every increase of material power of other states should be balanced by a state. The concept of balance of power, instead, as indicated by Stephen Walt—a realist—before the end of the Cold War, should be replaced with that of balance of threat (Walt 1985, 8-9 in http://www.jstor.org/, 12 January 2007). It means, what a state should balance is a threatening military power and not unthreatening military power. Whether a state becomes a threat or not depends on the type and role identities that it has. And international norms and institutions, which are also constructed through social interaction, supply the meanings that a state can refer to.

It consequently degrades the importance of relative gain that offensive neorealists emphasize 6 and makes cooperation among states be more likely. By identifying
the role identity of other states, a state will know with which states it should cooperate and impose assertiveness (Grieco 1988, in http://www.jstor.org/, 28 December 2006; Mearsheimer 1994/1995, in http://www.jstor.org/, 18 November 2006; Mearsheimer 1995, in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006). Although relative gain still becomes states’ consideration, it is not the only factor that determines the character of relations among states. As neoliberal institutionalists indicate, concern about relative gain can be a second consideration after consideration over absolute gain. State has material substrate of agency, including its intrinsic capabilities. It also has desire to survive and preserve this material substrate (Wendt 1992, 402 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006; Mearsheimer 2001, 30-31). However, because competitive security system is not the only possible international system, maximizing material power and accumulating relative gains as much as possible are not also the only possible way to meet such desire.

States’ identity then will reduce uncertainty in international system. Its relatively stability can be a basis for a states to predict each other behavior. Through this, states could relatively overcome the prisoner’s dilemma. It is correct, as often argued by neorealist, that cheating can be obstacle in building and maintaining cooperation (Grieco 1988, 600-624, in http://www.jstor.org/, 21 December 2006). But, by identifying other states’ identities first, a state can predict whether or not its partners will cheat it and decide whether or not it will cooperate with other states. States’ interest to gain long-term benefits then encourages them to develop and preserve their ‘good’ reputations and identities. Once the issue of relative gains is overcome and states realizes about the importance to preserve identities, cooperation among states is more likely and can be built on a stronger basis.

This point makes constructivism to encompass neoliberal Institutionalism in understanding the reality of international institutions. Although neoliberal institutionalists underscore institutions’ capability to “reduce certain norms of uncertainty and alter transaction costs,” they cannot give strong guarantee that prevents states to commit in cheating. Neoliberal institutionalists are not consistent on the questions of what institution can do over the predetermined self-interest states. Joseph Nye acknowledgements of “complex learning” process, Robert Jervis notes on the “changing conceptions of self and interest” and Robert Keohane calls on the “sociological conceptions of interests” assert the possibility of transformations of identity and interests (Wendt 1992, 399 in http://www.jstor.org/, 13 November 2006). Yet, if self-interest identity is a constitutive feature and the nature of state, it will be impossible for international institution to change such identity. What international institution can do is only constraining such interest so that it does not break out the institutional cooperation. Institution can build reward-punishment mechanism to prevent the act of cheating and provide long-term rewards. However, that mechanism only
reorientates states from short-term gain to long-term gains, but it does not change the inherent character of self-interest states. Cheating, thus, is more likely to happen in Neoliberal Institutionalism than in Constructivism.

As “a relatively stable set or ‘structure’ of identities and interests” that “are often codified in formal rules and norms,” international institution has enough discursive power to internalize identity—and consequently to change identity—into states. International institution is not only able to constrain state’s self-interest, but also internalize new or other interests into the state. International institution has international norms from which states can derive logic of appropriateness. States or statesmen can define their situation and decide what will they do amid the situation by referring to the international norms. Martha Finnemore shows how international institutions and norms of humanity can change states’ attitude over humanity issue and, thus, their behaviors. “Multilateral norms,” Finnemore writes, “create political benefits for conformance and costs for nonconforming action” (Finnemore in Katzenstein ed. 1996, 153-185). And Thomas Risse-Kappen tells how democracies not only situates the member states “do not fight each other,” but also “develop a collective identity” among the states and facilitate “the emergence of cooperative institutions for specific purposes” (Risse-Kappen in Katzenstein 1996, 357-399).

It does mean that states internalize international norms without any consideration. Domestic politics is another factor that shapes states’ identities. Statesmen are not like white paper, which can be easily colored with international norms. Localization process bridges discursive interaction between domestic politics and international institutions. It can manifest in the form of prelocalization (resistance and contestation), local initiative (entrepreneurship and framing), adaptation (grafting and pruning), or amplification and ‘universalization’. This process explains why some transnational ideas and norms find greater acceptance in some states than in others (Acharya 2004, 240-254 in http://journals.cambridge.org/, 13 November 2006). There are always discursive contestation and cooperation between identities.

The existence of state’s domestic politics and identity, thus, implies state’s relative autonomy in front of international social structure. With its material capabilities and discursive power, state even can project its identity across its national border. Through repetitive practices, state can reify or mystify its identity and then construct international social structure. State and statesman are not passive actors. They color and are colored international norms and institutions. This constructs dynamic relations between state and statesman as agencies, at one side, and international norms and institutions as social structure, at the other side. Self and social structure are mutually constructed.
Dynamic relations between material structure, international social structures and domestic politics generate multiple identities in world politics. Unlike neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists who assume a single and relatively static self-interest identity, constructivists argue that states have multiple and dynamic identities. A state can be a democratic, capitalist country, developed country, and so on; at the same time, a state can be an ally or partner for another state, and be competitor or enemy for the others.

**Conclusion**

International politics and economy are much more complex than what neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists theorize. It is a complex world where many factors interrelated and affect each other. There is no independent factor that serves itself as a sub-structure. Material structure, international social structures, and domestic politics, all together construct the world’s politics and economy and construct relations among states. Material and discursive power play and direct the drama of international relations.

Complex world needs complex theory to understand. Constructivism offers itself to meet such demand. The Constructivist Turn does not only color and construct the debates in international relations theories, but also construct the international social system.

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