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Limiting the Social: Constructivism and Social Knowledge in International Relations

Javier Lezaun

In their respective articles in the Spring 2002 issue of *International Studies Review* (4, No. 1), Theo Farrell and Jennifer Sterling-Folker demonstrate that the conversation between constructivism and traditional approaches in international relations (IR) has reached a stage of fruitful exchange and sophisticated analysis. Both authors persuasively address constructivism on some of the central issues and assumptions that confront IR scholars.¹

The fruitfulness of this debate for IR is sufficient to justify its continuation, regardless of the increasing looseness with which “constructivism” is being used today in many fields and disciplines. Claims about the theoretical incommensurability of constructivism and traditional rationalist approaches to the contrary, the practical truth is that, first, there already exists a substantial body of constructivist work in IR that engages with the central issues of the discipline, and, second, that scholars from opposing traditions find the challenge of constructivism productive, or at least thought provoking.

Theo Farrell’s outline of a constructivist approach to security studies is a good example of the contributions that constructivism can make to traditional IR concerns. Farrell traces the “culturalist” lineage of current constructivism and demonstrates that, paraphrasing Kenneth Waltz, constructivism is able to account for some big and important things in international relations. Farrell convincingly presents the contributions that this approach can make to some of the “puzzles” in hegemonic IR theories: the role of uncertainty in constituting the security dilemma, the interpretive construction of threat in “balance of power” theories, the causes of liberal democratic peace, and the isomorphism in mili-

¹Theo Farrell, “Constructivist Security Studies: Portrait of a Research Program,” and Jennifer Sterling-Folker, “Realism and the Constructivist Challenge: Rejecting, Reconstructing, or Rereading.”

tary development across the world. On this basis, he concludes that constructivism is now “a progressive research program.”

It is difficult to find any fault in Farrell’s programmatic outline, although we could deduce from it that there is little new or, by the same token, challenging in recent constructivist claims. Rather than confrontation or cooperation with rationalism, the fate of constructivism, in Farrell’s epistemologically conventional formulation, could easily be coexistence, if not outright subordination. As he himself recognizes, rationalist IR theories could develop auxiliary assumptions to incorporate much of the *content* of international relations that constructivist approaches describe. For example, John Ruggie has argued that neorealist and neoliberal authors have for some time introduced “ideational factors” as ad hoc, often undertheorized, determinative factors.² Moreover, we could read Farrell’s argument as implying an unequal division of labor between constructivist and rationalist (particularly neoliberal) theories. The constructivists would describe the historical processes of identity formation, while the rationalists would account for the actual *behavior* of international actors, by either incorporating these ideational factors into their models or using constructivist analysis to explain the historical *origin* of actors’ identities and interests. It is clear that this is not what Farrell wants to argue. As any constructivist would do, he wants to claim that this research program has something substantial and substantially different to say about *action* in the international system. But his tactical effort to make constructivism useful and commensurable to rationalist approaches blunts the edge of the challenge that constructivism can pose to traditional IR.

Jennifer Sterling-Folker tackles in her article the challenge of constructivism to the realist paradigm and does so by circumscribing, in precise and convincing terms, the explanatory reach of realism when left to its own devices. Drawing on the ontology of evolutionary biology and genetics, Sterling-Folker argues that realism is particularly good at explaining the *process* of institutional change, the boundaries and ultimate form of this process, but that it lacks analytical resources to account for the specific *content* of this change, the actual social reality produced through state action. Social construction will, so to speak, fill up the vessel of a realist explanation of the interaction process (group formation and its consequences). Interaction is fundamentally constrained by the biological constitution of the actors involved.

Realists will probably contest Sterling-Folker’s rereading of their explanatory scope and the division of labor that it entails, claiming that they are able to address the content of international relations, too. But, more important for my argument here, constructivists also have much to challenge in Sterling-Folker’s

²John Ruggie, “What Makes the World Hang Together? Neoliberalism and the Social Constructivist Challenge,” *International Organization* 52, No. 4 (1998).

reading of their own limitations. For example, Sterling-Folker's argument includes a certain reluctance to recognize the ontological status of the social and the limits that social practices and institutions impose on the realm of the possible. This is probably due to the fact that the social is in most cases reduced here to its ideational elements, sometimes even equated with the imaginary—as if society happened, primarily and fundamentally, in actors' minds.

Sterling-Folker similarly characterizes constructivism as dealing exclusively with identities, norms, understandings, sentiments, and subjective beliefs, while the material, the "real-out-there," is understood as belonging to the domain of the biological. Only in this light is it possible to understand the claim that human social activity "cannot be a limitation [on the socially possible] in itself since there are presumptively no biological boundaries to the social practices we imagine and to what we construct socially. In the absence of recognized boundaries on the imagination, there is no reason to anticipate any stasis or isomorphism to human social practices."

The unwillingness to recognize the *hardness* of the social leads Sterling-Folker and other critics of constructivism to a series of reductions. It leads her to the assumption that constructivism is good at explaining change but insufficient to account for stasis or stability. It is also the only reason why she must resort to the biological in her search for "boundaries on the socially possible." If the social has a dreamlike character, the bedrock for our causal explanations must be found elsewhere. But this need not be the case. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's famous dictum, "In the beginning was the deed," which Sterling-Folker mentions in her reading of Nicholas Onuf's work, does not imply that the social is something infinitely amorphous or inherently unstable.

Nor does the biological (which is sometimes conflated in Sterling-Folker's article with "the psychological," "the material," "the human body," or "an implicit perspective on human nature") comprise fixed facts and processes on which unproblematic explanations could be founded. Quite the contrary. I would expect that if IR scholars were to try to define what constitutes "the biological" and its role in international relations, the result would be additional controversies and disputes that would add nothing to the capacity of IR to explain the international social order. Sterling-Folker's key paradigms, evolutionary biology and genetics, are no exception in this respect. Would IR need to engage, for instance, in the ongoing debates over the nature of the gene and its role in inheritance or development, or over the specific mechanisms of selection? Or should IR simply import the latest popular (and simplistic) version of our knowledge of biological processes? And which one of the versions currently available should we choose? My point here is that what in theory and abstract terms might look like bedrock for IR could easily turn in practice into a quagmire.

To summarize, Sterling-Folker's call for a better understanding of "the interrelation of the biological, cognitive, and social" is worth consideration by any scholar. It is not clear to me how fruitful this daunting enterprise would be for

IR in its efforts to understand what is *characteristic* and *specific* to the international order. Yet her rereading of realism and of the role of social practices in determining the content of international reality is so convincing that if we also acknowledge the solidity of social boundaries—and aim precisely to understand how these boundaries are produced and sustained—there will be, in my opinion, very little left to be explained by approaches that ignore the role of social practices and knowledge in the international system.

As both articles clearly demonstrate, the debate over constructivism in IR has reached the critical mass and the degree of productiveness that make a certain approach valuable to any discipline. To the extent that this is true, the discussion within IR does not need to engage with (or import) debates over constructivism from other fields and disciplines. Nevertheless, it may be useful to offer, as an explicit conclusion, a few ideas as to how this program might proceed in the future, from the vantage point of a discipline like science and technology studies, which from its origin and for several decades has been shaped by different versions of constructivism.

First, in most social scientific disciplines, constructivism is associated with an interest in knowledge. In IR, this interest often has taken the shape of an *epistemological* debate, frequently pitting positivist against antipositivist accounts of theory formation and of the explanatory power of our accounts of the world. This is the sort of debate that Alexander Wendt has in mind when he encourages constructivist and neoliberal scholars to see their affinities “through the smoke and heat of epistemology.”³ While emphasizing epistemology, constructivists often have neglected *epistemics*—that is, how knowledge is produced and deployed in practical interaction *by the actors themselves* that constitute the international system.

This is surprising, particularly because knowledge is a key notion, and often an unquestioned assumption, in the IR theories that constructivism aims to challenge. Some sort of “knowledge in common” among international actors is a premise of rationalist theories, but “rationality” itself—as that which makes rational interaction possible—is generally left out of the theoretical reach of rationalist approaches. Constructivism often has not followed the *dynamics* of knowledge production and stabilization in the international system. The reason for this neglect might be because many constructivists resort to an oversocialized, rule-following, norm-governed actor as an alternative to the rationalist explanations for the stability of the international system. There is little room in that model for exploring the contingent acquisition and use of knowledge in interaction. Many constructivists have substituted the internalization and application of norms for knowledge as the engine of social agency.

³ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, No. 2 (1992), p. 425.

A more explicit analysis of the role that social knowledge plays in the practices of international relations and in the identities of their actors might help us to understand some of the conundrums of constructivism: the relationship between agency and structure, or the balance between contingency and stability. If we study actors' knowledge as produced in particular contexts of interaction, we may understand in precise practical terms how and when actors' understanding of the world is contingent. At the same time, knowledge about the world is clearly a *stabilizing* element in any kind of social order—it provides the assumptions on which routine interaction rests. A greater emphasis on knowledge might help us grasp in more specific terms the tension between contingency and structure.

Second, a concern with the production and operation of knowledge in the world is inseparable from the political constitution of the international social order. Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie made this point clearly in 1986, when they pointed out that “in the international arena, neither the processes whereby knowledge becomes more extensive nor the means whereby reflection on knowledge deepens are passive or automatic. They are intensely political.”⁴

It is unfortunate that those IR scholars, who have paid the most attention to the dynamic process of knowledge production, persuasion, and communication often have done so at the expense of dealing with power and the political. Influenced by Habermasian notions of communicative action and of a “common lifeworld,” Thomas Risse has argued that an emphasis on communication and knowledge in interaction implies that the “relationship of power and social hierarchies recede in the background.”⁵ Another body of work concerned with the role of knowledge in international relations, the epistemic communities literature, has been similarly reluctant to address the power dynamics that underlie the establishment of expertise and epistemic authority.

It might be more useful for IR constructivism to explore how knowledge and power are mutually constitutive or the processes by which epistemic legitimacy and political legitimacy become intertwined in the international system. For many IR scholars, this turn might smack of “postmodernism.” Nevertheless, it could also place constructivism in a better position to address the discipline's core interest in power politics. It might eventually prove that there is no a priori contradiction in being a constructivist *and* a realist at the same time.

Third, what human actors produce through social interaction is not simply ideas, understandings, or identities (Theo Farrell's “unobservables,” or the immaterial elements of reality in Sterling-Folker's argument), but also facts and arti-

⁴Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie, “International Organization: A State of the Art on the Art of the State,” *International Organization* 40, No 4 (1986), p. 773.

⁵Thomas Risse, “Let's Argue!: Communicative Action in World Politics,” *International Organization* 54, No. 1 (2000), p. 7.

facts, objects, and spaces—cases in which “construction” is more than a metaphor. That is, constructivism needs to address also the production of the *material* fabric of international society, along with actors’ ideas and knowledge about it. The field of science studies has engaged for some time with this dimension of the social, and this engagement has proven fruitful in understanding social order.⁶ An obvious point of intersection of science studies and IR is the study of particular artifacts and technological systems that profoundly shape the course of international politics and constitute the international system as we know it. Donald MacKenzie’s study of nuclear missile guidance is a particularly central example of this body of work.⁷

In any case, these are all questions to be resolved in the practice of *doing* IR, and methodological challenges are in this sense as important as ontological ones. I argue that constructivism is *not* a paradigm that describes fixed relationships between the social and the material, or between agency and structure. After all, these are questions to be answered for each particular case by empirical evidence. But constructivism can tell us what to look at when we are trying to understand actions and structures. It can direct our analytical efforts toward constitutive elements of international order that often have been overlooked in traditional IR. The more sophisticated our constructivist instruments, the richer the image of the international system we will be able to produce.

⁶For a seminal treatment of the issue, see Bruno Latour, “Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in Wiebe Bijker and John Law, eds., *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

⁷Donald MacKenzie, *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990).