

What have constructivists built? A look at the latest discussions on its 3rd generation

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Abstract. Since its introduction to the study of International Relations (IR), constructivist theory has undergone significant theoretical diversification, prompting both expansion and internal critique. This paper explores the evolution and current status of constructivist thought, particularly through the lens of what has been termed “third generation constructivism.” By tracing intellectual developments over the past decade, it addresses how the field has responded to earlier criticisms of fragmentation, lack of cohesion, and positivist co-optation. The paper then outlines how constructivism has been categorized into generational waves: first-generation theorists established constructivist ontology in opposition to rationalist paradigms; second-generation authors, like Finnemore and Hopf, developed norm- and identity-centered approaches; and the third generation has turned toward symbolic interactionism and the sociological “social self.” The third generation is framed as a corrective to earlier misreadings of symbolic interactionism, particularly those of Mead, Goffman, and Blumer. This generation has prioritized interpretivist methodologies and expanded constructivism’s scope by incorporating linguistic, culturalist, and critical reflexivist approaches. The paper argues that symbolic interactionism now serves as a conceptual anchor for contemporary constructivist research, enabling a richer understanding of identity formation, norm diffusion, and role-playing in international politics. Moreover, the third generation’s adoption of non-positivist methods marks a decisive break from earlier empirical rigidities. Ultimately, the study proposes applying symbolic interactionism to analyze how foreign policy is shaped by the roles adopted by decision-making elites, reinforcing constructivism’s strength as a reflexive, dynamic, and pluralistic framework for IR. This approach not only revitalizes the theoretical core of constructivism but also democratizes its applicability to both “high” and “everyday” politics.

Keywords. Constructivism, International Relations, third generation, symbolic interactionism, social self.

1. Introduction

Since constructivist theory was first applied to International Relations (IR), much has been discussed. Adler’s work in 1999 [1] provided a stable stepping stone for the theory to progress. Moreover, there is valid criticism in citing a lack of cohesion among constructivist authors, as was done most explicitly by Palan [2], followed closely by

Keohane and Keohane and Goldstein¹. These works surely were important to poke holes and see if the theory was structurally sound, as perceived by Adler himself. Indeed, much of the concerns from authors has been given light and in one form or another addressed.

My goal here is to briefly analyse how and when these gaps were filled, looking back at the past 10

¹ See, respectively: Keohane RO. *International Institutions: Two Approaches*. *International Studies Quarterly*. 1988 Dec;32(4):379–96 ; Goldstein J, Keohane RO. *Ideas and foreign policy : beliefs, institutions, and political change*.

years' works, thus answering the question proposed in the title, and hopefully illuminating a clearer path for further investigation.

Firstly, I would like to define from where the theory's works emerged, tied to the broader context of Social Sciences. Then, I would like to concentrate on the divergences and main breakthroughs made. Finally I would like to explore the state of the art of the theory and what steps could be made to further refine it.

2. The Basis of constructivisms

I will start this segment by addressing its own name. It is not a mistype. Although not considered as such, I would argue that there isn't "A" constructivism but various forms of it. Of course, in other theories of IR you do have divergences and different sources from which authors draw. But it seems that none vary as much with constructivists. Furthermore, I believe that although a critic, Palan [2] and his insights are a good starting point to delineate the borders of early constructivists, hence my use of his work in this paper.

2.1. Pioneers

Focusing on the pioneers of the theory - Wendt and Onuf - let us take a brief moment to analyse where each of them take their ideas from. Alexander Wendt, for Palan, had a "habit of 'building bridges'" [2], when trying to reconcile the rationalism of positivist and non-positivist currents.

2.1.1. Alexander Wendt

Wendt seeks to problematize the concepts of power and interest in IR, considering that they do not exist simply by themselves, and classifies materialists into two biases, these being authors whose thinking is centered on economic and military forces, and those who consider what the environment present contains "extensive cultural elements" [2].

Palan argues that for constructivists like Wendt, every social theory is constructivist, varying only the range they have, but for Wendt specifically it would be critical to use cultures as variables; Wendt is critical of purely constructivist IR theories. In a similar way, Romêo and Freire [8] describe Wendt as one who "sought to establish himself as a 'via media' within the broad debate between realism and liberalism". In view of this, Palan abstracts him as a "bridge builder", and that this habit would be costly and detract value from the theory.

Finally, it is impossible to discuss Wendt without discussing anarchy. The author is the main questioner of the static and timeless notion of international anarchy. For Wendt, the anarchic environment works through cultures that vary in time and space, but are centered around the three main contractualist authors: Hobbes Locke and Rousseau [6].

2.1.2. Nicholas Onuf

Palan [2] describes Nicholas Onuf as audacious, because unlike other constructivists, his concerns go beyond simply addressing the social construction of the international system; Onuf is concerned about the impossibility of having an IR theory as constructivist. Palan adds that "[f]or Onuf, 'constructivism' serves to rationalize the more unusual strategy of 'reconstituting' IR based on a new interdisciplinary paradigm. Rather than examining substantive claims of realism, Onuf relocates the burden of his examination analysis for a new plan and instead opts to examine the categorical preconditions that make up social interaction. But where conventional critics of realism, [...] [who] rely on the often hidden assumption that they, and they alone, possess a certain superior knowledge of reality, therefore unwittingly replicating realist assumptions, Onuf is careful on this point. Your own theory, as he says, is also a form of construction" [2].

Therefore, Onuf is not a victim of the trap that Wendt is. Onuf is better able to circumvent constructivist assumptions by not taking pre-interactional structures as given. This is possible because Onuf does not use Mead's theory of the self, but rather draws on sources such as Émile Durkheim.

2.2. Generational and Critical Differentiations

It is already consensus that constructivists can be divided in generations, as detailed with most care by Adler-Nissen in the paper titled "The Social Self in International Relations: Identity, Power and the Symbolic Interactionist Roots of Constructivism" [3] as well as the review by Kessler and Steele [4]. The latter authors highlight the end of the Cold War as a generational divide.

Before the end of the Cold War, first generation authors such as Wendt, Onuf and Kratochwil emerged who focusing on criticizing positivist theories. After the war cold, the concepts of norms and identities become relevant, introduced by Jørgensen and Fierke². Those in turn came along with Hopf, Finnemore, Adler³, amongst others.

² See: Fierke KM, Jørgensen KE. *Constructing international relations : the next generation*. Abingdon: Routledge; 2015.

³ See respectively: Hopf T. *The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory*. *International Security*. 1998 Jul;23(1):171-200.; Finnemore M, Sikkink K. *Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics*. *Annual Review of Political Science*. 2001 Jun;4(1):391-416. ; Adler E. *Communitarian international relations : the epistemic foundations of international relations*. London ; New York: Routledge; 2005.

But what prompted the second generation and their ideas to sprout in the first place? The answer, I believe, lies in a much broader categorization: the conventional and the critical constructivists. As Hopf [6] describes, the first disagreements within constructivists pertaining to the understanding of interests. Both aim to analyse identity as an element for the (re)production of practices.

However, radicals go further, also taking into account the way in which identities are formed. According to the author “[c]ritical theory’s approach to identity is rooted in assumptions about power. Critical theorists see power being exercised in all social exchanges, and there is always a dominant actor in that exchange. Unmasking these power relations is a large part of critical theory’s substantive agenda; conventional constructivism, on the other hand, remains ‘analytically neutral’ on the issue of power relations”. This served as a platform from which to criticize what Kessler and Steele called the “new orthodoxy” [4].

In short, the main issue of the so called “conventionals” was their insistence of, as Palan put it, building bridges with positivist thought.

2.3. The Third Generation

Now that we have covered the first and second generations, we can move on to the problematics that prompted the third generation to develop. Looking at what was discussed in the previous chapter, we can point out a few commonalities present amongst them. Firstly, there was a great emphasis on norms, rules and institutions. Secondly, many authors drew inspiration from the field of linguistics. Thirdly, their sources in general are multifaceted and at times non-compatible with each other, therefore creating the confusion and fragility mentioned by Palan [2], and why I prefer to discuss constructivisms as opposed to “A” constructivism. It is possible to accept - as will be demonstrated - that the first two characteristics have been fully dealt with. The third problematic hasn’t been totally solved, but instead has reached a point of “benignity”⁴.

Adler-Nissen [5] defines the first and second generations as being flawed in two instances. The first mistake was the interpretation of the social self as a psychological or individualistic phenomenon, rather than sociological. Similarly, Adler [1] states that the first constructivist analyses did not emphasize “the importance of socio-cognitive factors”.

The second error presents itself in the poor use of

the potential that social self brings to the IR discussion. Wendt, for example, employs in his analysis a reduction of the self to mere actors, who behave, generally, in universal institutions and cultures. This disregard for mundane interactions prevented further nuances in practice following a neorealist logic, as put by Adler-Nissen [6].

2.3.1. Symbolic interactionism and the social self

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological approach, whose main premise is to explain the behavior of individuals, through interpretations of socially constructed meanings. Balzacq details that symbolic interactionism suffers from a “paternity crisis”, as there are many authors who can be considered founders of the approach, such as George Mead, Robert Park, the Chicago School, and finally Heraclitus, David Hume and Adam Smith [7].

Here, I will focus solely on Mead. According to Griffin, Mead understands that the construction of the world in which we live is through our communication (symbolic interaction) with the individuals who form our communities. Such interaction, however, is not just talk, as the author explains that “The term refers to the language and gestures a person uses in anticipation of how others will respond. The verbal and nonverbal responses that the listener then provides are equally generated in anticipation of how the original communicator will react. [This] continuous process is [...] a complete conversation” [8]. In other words, actors are in a constant process of action and reaction, based on the expectations of their listeners.

We interpret actions, which unfold in specific places, time and space, before deciding what our reaction will be. By continually interpreting and evaluating actions, and where they occur, individuals acquire intersubjective knowledge of expected behavior in the context, as explains Balzacq [7]. This process is common to all members of the group, who form shared meanings based on such knowledge, and this becomes the basis for social cooperation between individuals. Furthermore: “[...] [shared] meanings are embedded in mental activity [(the act of interpreting)] and manifest themselves where common symbols are formed. When embedding roles, the self perceives what others tolerate or do not tolerate. Therefore, roles enable the self to understand its ontological nature” [7].

Mead understands the self as social rather than biological. For the author, understanding the self is the key to symbolic interactionism. The self is formed as a consequence of its capacity for self-reflection, built from the understanding of its ontology. Balzacq expands on this by saying: “the self establishes objectives, proposes [(to itself)] means to achieve them, and eventually evaluates the results. The self emerges from a double process: the stage of representation¹¹ and the game stage” [7].

⁴ One could even argue that not solving it completely enriches the discussions, as no one source becomes hegemonic enough to mute out the rest, while maintaining a rigid boundary to what is and isn’t valuable.

For Mead, the first stage is internal, and is where the self is able to reproduce the perspective of others, and based on this reproduction, the self adorns its role (or identity), taking into account the expectations that the external environment projects. Therefore, the self can only be complete when the internal and external are joined.

Herbert Blumer inherits Mead's position as a thinker of symbolic interactionism, and goes on to command the Chicago School [7]. Blumer introduces three main questions to the approach. Firstly, the author brings up free will, considering that the being can reason and work in the means that he considers most suitable to achieve his objectives. Secondly, Blumer amplifies the problematization of meanings, saying that "individuals act according to the apparent meanings of physical objects; meanings are developed from social interaction; meanings are continuously structured by the interpretation of individuals, during their interaction" [7] Finally, Blumer adds to the concept of interaction joint actions, which add up to form society, and joint interpretations, in which individuals are capable of interpret actions in similar ways, consequently leading to social constructions.

Balzacq extends this idea by stating that: "[...] meanings arise from interactions. In return, meanings are recreated through individual self-reflections on society. The interaction channel allows individuals to create their own world, a social world. The concept of 'social world' leads to common concern across time and space in a specific sphere (political, economic, military, etc.)" [7].

Given what these authors have already discussed, It becomes clear that this is a cyclical process of construction and resignification of things - tangible and intangible - based on interactions and reflections. These symbolizations get socialized due to the self behaving primordially in a social nature, and prompt further interaction between peers. **Fig. 1** shows this more clearly:

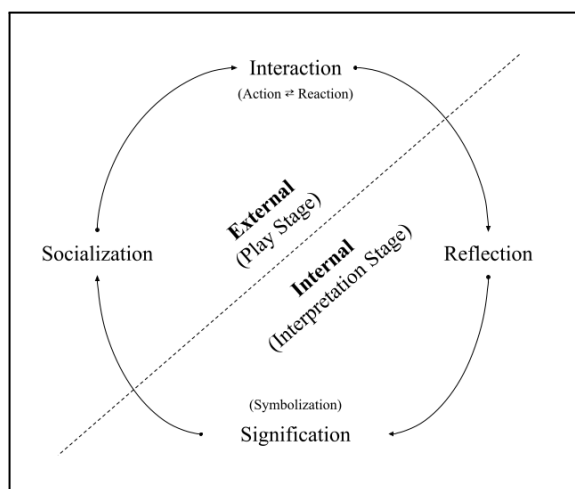


Fig. 1 - The process of symbolic interactionism

3. What the 3rd generation has to

show

Now that the core of the third generation is established, let us examine the strides made on works from the past ten years which develop and observe on the theory.

3.1. Symbolic interactionism seems to be reaching consensus

There seems to be a consensus that the firmest source for constructivism is symbolic interactionism and the theory of the social self. What is interesting to note is how plural their applicabilities are. For example Alder-Nissen uses symbolic interactionism to analyse stigma and identities [9]. This time, the author uses Goffman's work⁵. She later developed on this with the purpose of "rescuing" the symbolic interactionist roots of constructivism [3], and arguing for its resurgence in the research agenda. Alekseeva and Verkhovskaya gave their view on the matter, explaining that symbolic interactionism "[...] knocks 'high politics' off its pedestal, makes it trivial, and therefore makes it open to criticism. In other words, the understanding of decision-making processes is becoming more democratic and less totalitarian in nature; in a sense, 'big politics' is being 'humanized'. constructivism thus reaffirms the social nature of science" [10].

Interestingly, Linh [11] perceives symbolic interactionism as being multifaceted, due to its multidisciplinary design. For him, there is a culturalist perspective, where cultural symbols act as primary units that constitute common understandings and meanings. The second "angle" would be the semiotics and linguistics, drawing from Barthe, where "every symbol must first be an image. The category of Symbol refers to the part where the Image goes beyond itself (literal meaning) and always contains abstract values (implied meaning). Image can be said to be a 'common symbol' as Symbol is the 'super symbol'. In general, the Image and its implicationz [(sic)] (polysemantic) are two inseparable poles on the symbol spectrum" [11].

Lastly, the already covered sociological perspective, which the author also draws from Mead, Blumer and the Chicago School [11]. He then, in the same article, uses this triad to analyse international connection and integration. Although very cunning, this would need more research on.

Another interesting articulation comes from Michel [12], who does not cite symbolic interactionism nor Mead directly as an inspiration, but who seems to follow similarly. He, like Adler-Nissen [3], points out to the flawed reading of symbolic interactionism by early constructivists and its abandonment by the second generation, but points towards Butler and

⁵ See: Goffman E. Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. American Sociological Review. 1963 Oct;29(5).

Bourdieu as sources.

In the same vein of criticising previous generations and works, Jaeger actually breaks with symbolic interactionism, citing its noble but ultimately underpowered attempt. Specifically, he mentions that “[it] is therefore not surprising that, rather than attempting to refine the old models, more recent entrants on the constructivist scene have proposed new ones that leave behind some of the very premises from which the old ones had begun in reaction to the neo-neo synthesis of the 1990s. Most notable among the new contenders is perhaps the ‘practice turn’ inspired by (albeit not limited to) Bourdieu’s (rather than Giddens’ or Habermas’) sociological theory” [13].

Despite these critiques, third generation authors seem to prefer symbolic interactionism.

3.2. Overcoming Universalisms

Even though Wendt has been heavily criticized over the years, his work is still highly used as an introduction to constructivist thought. Adler-Nissen remarks this on both her works [3][9], as earlier constructivists remained in rather static norms-based constructs, simply halting before any attempt of bringing more complexity was made. Another aspect adjacent to this is, for example, when she mentions the rejection of (the search for) self-esteem as universal and complete, proposed by the social identity theory (TIS). Symbolic interactionism sees shame and embarrassment as equally important for international politics. They help us understand why States behave given a social context, and the “role” they play.

In this manner, the interaction between States can be analyzed with greater accuracy, including the center-periphery relationship (insider-outsider) regarding standards. In general, states that permeate the periphery, but consider themselves part of the center - or at least want integration without breaking hegemony - behave in line with the behavior of the central powers. The standards they will follow will be guided from top to bottom (top-down), and are followed so that the actors perceive themselves as in tune with the rest of the system, since every interaction - for critical constructivists - is based on which actor holds the power.

In a similar position, both Michel [12] and Jaeger [13] bring up the simplistic and crude view of authors like Wendt, who end up replicating more positivists than developing constructivist thought. Linh [11] is perhaps the most incisive of them, by bringing non-western sources and perspectives into the fold.

Lastly, there is a general effort to utilize non-positivist methodological stance. Alder-Nissen [9], for example, focuses on qualitative

interpretative research, followed in a similar stance by Alekseeva and Verkhovskaya [10] and Michel [12]. Jaeger [13] has a more critical reflexivist approach utilizing hermeneutics.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have developed on the strides made by constructivists to improve on what the theory can do. As mentioned before, it is an open-ended discussion rather than an enclosed system, and arguably is at the forefront of IR theoretical work. Therefore there are many possibilities left to experiment with.

The most recent works seem to have established a very stable symbolic interactionist tripod of Mead, Goffman and Blumer, with some such as Michel attempting to incorporate Judith Butler’s work.

Furthermore, there is a genuine care to rethink ideas and question paradigms, even if they are inside constructivism itself. Perhaps the very nature of the theory asks for an intersubjective review of itself.

Finally, considering all the aspects discussed in this paper, I would like to propose the application of symbolic interactionism to study the relationship between conduct of foreign policy based on an examination of the identity (or role) that the dominant classes and decision-making elites adorn, and the relationship they have with the external environment, materializing the means and ends to be adopted. so that your roles are fulfilled.

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