To what extent can constructivism be used as a theoretical platform with which to reconcile 'traditional' and 'critical' approaches to international security?

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Contents

Abstract

This paper presents the degree to which constructivism can be accepted as a bridge between rational and reflective theories. Given the debate amongst scholars upon the limits of both theoretical frameworks[1], it is essential to have constructivism as a theoretical platform to complement their gaps through its core principles found in the primary literature of Nicholas Onruf, Peter Katzenstein, Christian Reus–Smit and Alexander Wendt, with a greater attention on the work of Wendt given his contribution to the social construction of anarchy and the creation of collective identities. To understand the limits of traditional and critical approaches to security, the arguments of neorealism and the "Copenhagen School" will be applied in the case of the end of the "Cold War". This volatile period will provide us with an explanation of whether the materialist arguments of neorealism or the ideational points of the "Copenhagen School" have sufficient explanatory value. For this, the primary literature of Kenneth Waltz on neorealism and Barry Buzan on the "Copenhagen School" will be used in the case study which draws information from various secondary literature sources. The conclusion of this paper is that despite constructivism laying too much focus on the interaction of states, rather than on the identities of individuals, it still contributes to the reconciliation of rationalist and reflective theories as its emphasis on the attribution of meaning to material resources explains the shift in the behaviour of states through their dynamic identities. The idea is advanced that the identities of individuals should be considered to understand more how the interests and actions of the intersubjectivity of states are shaped.

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[1] Cagla Luleci, and Erkam I Sula, "Survival 'Beyond Positivism?' The Debate on Rationalism and Refelectivism in International Relations Theory," *Politikon: The IAPSS of Political Science*, 30 (July 2016), 43 – 55.

1.   Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to find the extent to which constructivism can be accepted as a theoretical platform to bridge the differences between traditional and critical approaches to international security. The paper argues that constructivism, despite its deficiency of overemphasizing the importance states as the main principle unit of analysis, still provides a liaison between rationalist and reflective theories given its focus on the attribution of meaning to material resources and the change in the behaviour of actors through evolving identities. Within the conceptual background the main principles of conventional constructivism, hereinafter being referred to as constructivism, will be outlined. For the purpose of this essay critical constructivism will not be discussed as conventional constructivism serves the thesis of this paper through the way national identity determines the interests and consequently the actions of states. With the aim of uncovering the limits of traditional and critical approaches to security, the approach of neorealism and of the "Copenhagen School" will be applied in the context of the last decade of the "Cold War". The rationale for choosing this case has been to analyze in the following section the ability of constructivism to bridge these two theoretical dimensions, with neorealism emphasizing objectively on materialism and the "Copenhagen School" focusing on the subjective change in identities through the framing of security issues, in a period of rapidly shifting identities. The paper concludes with the advancement of the idea that the identities of individuals should be taken into consideration to have a better understanding how this shapes the behaviour of states and consequentially the collective identity of societal structures.

2.   Conceptual Background: Constructivism as a Theoretical Platform

As an emerging concept in the 1980s, constructivism has been seen as a useful method, rather than a substantive theory, in international relations. It has been applied in a variety of contexts, especially as a "broader social theory"[2] in the security dimension. The concept has been first postulated in Nicholas Onruf's work "*World of Our Making"* (1989) in which it is discussed that "people and societies construct, or constitute, each other".[3] From this argument, it is clear that international politics is not just materially but also socially constructed. Most notably, Alexander Wendt (1999) expanded upon this concept in his work "*Anarchy is What States Make of It"* by adding a layer of understanding to traditional realist approaches which assume anarchy to be unchanging and solely influenced by material structures in the international system, focusing rather in his framework of analysis that identity is socially constructed being subjected to potential change depending on the respective contexts states are in.[4] For him, a state can have a social and corporate identity being the result of "intersubjective understandings"[5]. While the former refers to the way the international society views a particular state, the later focuses on internal factors such as ideology or culture that shape a state's identity. In essence, the interaction between states and endogenous variables within them contribute to the creation of a collective identity.[6] The consequence of this is that "anarchy is what states make of it"[7] as our social world is "constructed and not given"[8] .

From Onruf's argument, it is further clear that the interests of actors are formed by "ideational or normative structures"[9]. Expanding upon this, Wendt argues that, besides material structures, the behaviour of actors is influenced by intersubjectivity as they take part in collective meanings which characterizes their "relatively stable, role–specific understandings and expectations about self"[10]. These intersubjective structures can shape the interests and behaviour of actors through "imagination,

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[2] Matt McDonald, "Constructivism," in *Security Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Paul D. William and Matt McDonald, , (London: Routledge, 2018), 49.

[3] Nicholas Onruf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Colombia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 38.

[4] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, 46: 2 (1992), 403 – 407. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764.

[5] Ibid., 411.

[6] Alexander Wendt, "Collective identity formation and the international state," *American Political Science Review*, 88, 384 – 396, https://doi.org/10.2307/2944711.

[7] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," 424.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Peter J. Katzenstein et al. "International Organization and the Study of World Politics," *The IO Foundation and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, 52: 4 (Autumn 1998), 675.

[10] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," 397.

communication and constraint"[11]. In the case of imagination, non–material structures influence the way that actors think about their actions in terms of their limitations and possibilities. The institutionalization of norms and ideas conditions the perception of actors of what is feasible. As for communication, individuals have their behaviour justified by appealing to "established norms of legitimate conduct"[12]. Ideational and normative structures can also constrain the conduct of an actor significantly given their degree of institutionalization or the context of the linguistic justification.

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[11] Christian Reus–Smit, "Constructivism," in *Theories of International Relations*, ed. Buchill, Scott et al., (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 198.
[12] Ibid.

3.   Case Study: Traditional and Critical Approaches to Security at the end of the "Cold War" era

The peaceful end of the "Cold War" did not only shape the world order but also the debates surrounding the theories of international relations. This has been especially the case of Kenneth Waltz's neorealism which has been dominant during the "Cold War", however, failed to explain the change in the "Cold War" system.[13] In essence, Waltz has outlined three ordering principles of the international system. He considered that the system is dominated by anarchy, that units in the system are differentiated as they strive for survival and that capabilities are distributed in the system.[14] When applying these principles in the last decade of the "Cold War" it becomes clear that the "U.S. and the Soviet Union" were in an anarchic environment as both were in a security dilemma, given the ensuing arms race from the expansion of their relative power with the vertical proliferation of "nuclear weapons" which guaranteed their survival through "nuclear deterrence"[15] and "coercion".[16] However, there is no straightforward explanation to the "fall of the Soviet Union" at the end of the "Cold War". Neorealists have attempted to explain this phenomenon by focusing on the decreases of the Soviet relative power, in terms of domestic economy and politics, which has suffered in the middle of the 1980s and was not able to support its military expenditure.[17] Nevertheless, such an explanation is not able to explain the reasons behind the decisions of the Soviet Union to put its national security and in turn its survival in danger[18] which stopped it from having its hegemony maximized.[19] One can, therefore, argue the main issues that arise from the principles of neorealism is the inability to explain how states are perceived as hostile or friendly as well as the changes done by these units in the international system.

Given the lacking predictive power of Waltz's neorealism, more 'critical' approaches to revolutionary changes in the international system can be undertaken. The "Copenhagen School" can provide insights into the performative function of language in the process of securitization or de-securitization. It does not focus on what security means, as an objective and subjective phenomenon, but

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[13] William C. Wolforth, "Realism and the End of the "Cold War"," *International Security*, 19: 3 (Winter, 1994 – 1995), 100 – 105, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2539080.

[14] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison–Wesley, 1979), 88–89.

[15] Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better," *London Institute for Strategic Studies*, no 171 (1981): 1 – 35, https://doi.org/10.1080/05679328108457394.

[16] Tod S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 203.

[17] Coit D. Blacker, *Hostage to Revolution: Gorbachev and Soviet Security Policy, 1985–1991.* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993), 144 – 206.

[18] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* 126.

[19] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 32 –33.

rather what 'security' does.[20] The securitization occurs when certain issues are "framed as a security problem"[21] receiving a special agenda with specific procedures of decision making and justifications. Through "speech act" a securitizing actor can convince an audience that an issue is an existential threat or not.[22] Throughout the last decade of the "Cold War", the meaning behind "nuclear weapons" changed the identities of both superpowers and as a result their interests and behaviour. Being seen at first as protective, given its deterrence value, and threatening, through its coercion value, the utility of the accumulated large stockpiles has gradually decreased over time resulting from policy changes in the Soviet Union and the U.S. With the "Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) I" there has been a cutback in the total number of "nuclear warheads" on both sides.[23] This has shown the ability of the Soviet Union to negotiate and employ new ideas to balance the ideological rivalry[24] and the attitude of the U.S. to change its policies of containment, focusing instead on integrating the USSR in the international community.[25] It can be said that this arms control treaty, and not material structures, has influenced the thinking of both actors with a set of norms and principles that could spread ideas through discourse power which ultimately led to the termination of the "Cold War".[26] Nevertheless, while it becomes certain that the "Cold War" could have ended if both parties did not perceive the other as an enemy[27], the "Copenhagen School" lacks an objective explanation to the security dilemma resulting from material capabilities, which created a system of competition, as it focuses on subjective ideational structures that securitize threats.

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[20] Ole Wæver, "Securitization and Desecuritization," in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie D. Lipschutz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 46–86.

[21] Barry Buzan et al.,"Security: A New Framework for Analysis," (London & Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1998), 75.

[22] Ibid, 6.

[23] "The Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Republics on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms," opened for signature July 1991, https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf.

[24] Charles Kegley. "How Did the "Cold War" Die? Principles for an Autopsy," *Mershon International Studies Review*, 38 (1994), 12.

[25] President George H. Bush, "Commencement Address at Texas Agricultural and Mechanical University" (speech, Texas, May 12, 1989), Miller Centre, https://millercenter.org/the–presidency/presidential–speeches/may–12–1989–commencement–address–texas–am–university.

[26] Alexander Wendt, "Collective identity formation and the international state,", 389.

[27] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," 399.

4. Analysis: The extent of Constructivism bridging the gap between Rationalist and Reflectivist Theories

When applying rationalist and reflectivist theories in the "Cold War" context it is evident that there is a gap of understanding international security dynamics. While neorealists focus extensively on the existence of an anarchical system in which states fight over material capabilities, the "Copenhagen School", as a critical approach, lays too much emphasis on discursive power being used in the securitization of issues. It goes without saying that both theoretical approaches do provide explanations to the occurrence of security issues, however, their overemphasis on the respective aspects of their theory makes them to some degree fallible. Since constructivism acknowledges the existence of material resources, upon which meaning is attributed in a system of shared knowledge, it can be said that neorealism receives an additional layer of understanding. Considering that for constructivism structures consist of social relations besides material ones, it can be contended that the anarchy during the "Cold War" was built upon the basis of the social identities of the U.S. and the Soviet Union rather than the presence of "nuclear weapons" as material capabilities. Building upon the principles of neorealism, constructivism can explain why both parties have perceived each other initially as a threat and later undertook a more amical bilateral relationship. From a constructivist account, nuclear states achieve the identity of a nuclear power through the imitation of the posture of nuclear states that are already established.[28] While the role of "nuclear weapons" has not changed since both parties were deterred from attacking the other, there has been an alteration in the meaning behind "nuclear weapons" with the "START I treaty" which has decreased their utility. This exemplifies that an imaginary war was fought between these two superpowers since the possession of "nuclear weapons" was seen as evil by their adversary. From this, a bridge of reconciliation can be created with the "Copenhagen School" explaining how the behaviour and interests of both superpowers have changed as a result of their evolving identities. Given that their previous behaviour only intensified the confrontation, through the ensuing security dilemma, which proved to be counterproductive[29], it was necessary for them to change their mindsets. With identities being prone to change, the shift in the collective meanings of "nuclear weapons" has shaped the military and way of organizing war for both superpowers[30] through the institutionalization of ideas and norms. The "START I" treaty shows the commonalities between constructivism and the "Copenhagen School" in terms of the ways the interests and behaviours of states are influenced by the

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[28] Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3. (1997)): 73 – 76, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539273.

[29] Ken Booth, "Cold Wars of the mind," in *Statecraft and Security: The Cold War and Beyond*, ed. Ken Booth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33.

[30] Gray S. Colin. *Nuclear strategy and national interest.* (Hamilton Press: Texas, 1989), 218 – 222.

intersubjectivity of states through discursive power. Communication allowed both parties to justify their actions by attributing meaning to certain issues which they securitized or de-securitized translating changing identities, therefore, into policy change. This is evidenced by how both superpowers enacted "Cold War" policies, that led to the vertical proliferation of their "nuclear weapon stockpiles", when constructing their adversary as a threat, however, changed their behaviour through the de-securitization of these weapons through the "START I treaty", altering as a result the anarchic environment from a system of competition to one of cooperation. With these points in mind, constructivism does construct a bridge between these two theoretical approaches as it attributes meaning to the material resources that are emphasized in neorealism and shows how this meaning brings change in the behaviour of actors as outlined in the "Copenhagen School" in which issues are securitized and de-securitized through "speech act".

Without a doubt, constructivism has provided a solid bridge of understanding between both theoretical frameworks of rationalism and reflectivism. Nevertheless, when looking closer at constructivism there are some aspects that make the reconciliation between traditional and critical approaches to security harder to achieve. The main point of criticism is that Wendt's arguments provide a very state-centric approach to the international system as states are being seen as integral actors. The fallacy in this claim is that the theory does not include a human nation which is essential for the primary concept of constructivism to form a middle ground between both theoretical platforms. The focus on the international system as a construction resulting from the interaction of states with each other leaves out the possibility of the change in the interests and identity of states being dictated by the social interaction within it. Of course, constructivism entails that states, besides a social identity, also have a corporate identity which does emphasize internal factors such as ideology or culture, however, their formation is not properly discussed leaving, therefore, gaps of understanding in the ways identities of individuals, such as elites like Gorbachev, are established. This makes the connection between traditional and critical approaches to security through constructivism fallible.

5.   Conclusion

In conclusion, constructivism can be seen as a true bridge between traditional and critical approaches to security. As a broad theoretical framework, constructivism has the ability of informing scholars better of security issues without needing to sacrifice ontological assumptions as it adds a layer of understanding to the traditional arguments of neorealism on material structures and it forms the basis for critical approaches, such as the "Copenhagen School", with its focus on the change in behaviour and interest through ideational structures. Neorealism would be incomplete without the principles of constructivism as the dispersion of relative power does not predetermine the identities of states, since military power can have a different understanding depending on the existent social context. The same can be argued for the "Copenhagen School" which by itself only provides a subjective take on security issues, which only exist if they are formed through their framing with discursive power. These deficiencies in both rationalist and reflectivist theory are evidenced when applied in the volatile context at the end of the "Cold War". The applications of both theories show that the focus on their respective theoretical principles is not sufficient to provide a strong understanding of the dynamics during this period. While neorealism is unable to explain the termination of the "Cold War" through the decrease in the relative power of the Soviet Union, the "Copenhagen School" becomes subjective through its focus on discursive power neglecting the importance of objective material structures, as without them there would be nothing to attribute ideas to. With these limitations in mind, constructivism provides a solid bridge between them by complementing what the other theoretical platform lacks, explaining that the behaviours and interests of the superpowers have been shaped by the identities attributed to "nuclear weapons" which have increased and decreased in utility on the basis of the changing social context. Nonetheless, while constructivism does provide a reconciliation between traditional and critical approaches to security, it lacks a focus on the changing identities of individuals by paying too much attention to states as units of analysis. It goes without saying that the adaptation of the human centrism element from the "Copenhagen School" takes out the core state-centric assumptions of neorealism, however, by taking internal factors that shape the identities of individuals into consideration questions on international security phenomena can receive better answers.

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