

Critical Analysis of Social Constructivism: Myth or Reality for Peace and Security



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Abstract

Subjectivity is the mother of all social sciences. There is no universal truth, and no finality in social sciences. None of the theories can claim finality or objectivity. Nonetheless, theories try to explain the truth, holding water, either more or less. Theories, highlighting the intrinsic nature of humans [good and bad], the structure of international system (anarchic) or class struggle [bourgeois and proletariat] are both researchable and discernible. Social Constructivism, on the other hand labels all the theories as social constructions and itself constructs an endless desert of ideas, develops absurdity, and makes the truth less accessible and more mythical. Social Constructivism, instead of explaining the truth is making it blurred and doubtful. Instead of ensuring clarity, its own assumptions are constructing a mythical world. This analytical paper critically analyzes the social constructivists' assumptions and their critique on all the established beliefs in general and mainstream perspectives in particular.

Key Words: Social Constructivism, Realism, Liberalism

Introduction

Social Constructivism questions all the established beliefs in general and the mainstream perspectives of international relations in particular. Constructivists label these theories as socially constructed ideas, which frame the identities, behaviours and actions of the states. They stress on the power of ideas and argue that interests shape identities, which in turn shape the behaviours and actions of the states. Theories, however, only highlight why certain events happen and what are the underlying principles through which some undesirable circumstances can be avoided. Man is the child of rules and principles. Theories provide principles for ordering human activities. Constructivism, though highlights phenomenal faultiness and loopholes breathing in the laps of the mainstream perspectives. It however, pictures an absurd image, which in itself translates the constructivists' assumptions into a mythical construction. This instant paper discusses the social constructivists' objections about realism and liberalism and its own mythical construction upon the same foundations.

The term theory has its own history; its coinage is recent but its actuality is as old as human history itself. Humans have two peculiar features in common

- (i) Human's inquisitiveness & curiosity and
- (ii) Human's intellectual competence.

These two features compel and encourage humans to give response and encapsulate the causes of internal and external changes, in terms of natural processes and human attitudes. Philosophers in the Pre-Socratic era focused on the Universe and its nature and they defined it in terms of

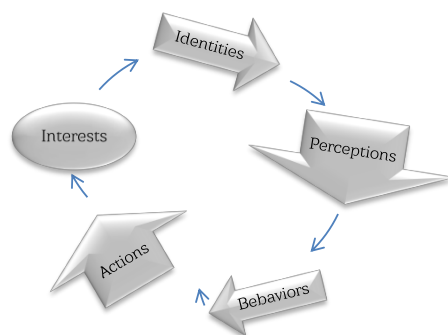
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substance i.e. water [Thales] and atom [Democritus]. Pythagoras followed this intellectual tradition and he defined the Universe, in terms of its structure and form. Socrates shifted the trend of the philosophy from universe to human ambience and he focused on human virtue, knowledge and ignorance. Plato further explained knowledge and held that worldly knowledge is nothing but an image and shadow. Aristotle further elaborated the philosophical understanding about knowledge and he connected true knowledge with sense perception and experience. These ideas gave birth to metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, logic, reasoning, natural science, morality, ethics, and political philosophy. These thoughts then gave birth to two schools of thoughts i.e. Platonists and Aristotelians that served as the foundations on which modern idealism (liberalism) and realism essentially rest.

Theories contain conjectural, understandable and generalized assumptions, which explain questions like “*how*” and “*why*”, in terms of predicting and explaining national/international changes, behaviours, attitudes, wars, economic & strategic competitions, and propensities & shaping of the international community ([Mansbach & Taylor, 2012, p.3](#)). Theories explain, describe, and predict the events and changes we encounter at national, regional and international levels. They explain the causes of clashes, competitions, cooperation, and prophesize the futurity ([Viotti & Kauppi, 2013, p.26](#)).

Theories are those devices, which show us “which facts matter and which do not” ([Lamy, Masker, Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2017, p.13](#)). Social Constructivism however questions the assumptions of all the theories and labels them as ideas, which have socially constructed the perceptions and conceptions of the people and hence, people believe them and they act upon them accordingly. Social Constructivists argue, theories shape social norms, “changing social norms” shape identities, identities shape perceptions and perceptions shape the behaviours & actions of the people (Mansbach & Taylor, 2012, p. 22). They further argue that a continuous process of pursuing interests shape identities, hence, identities are dynamic and learned rather than innate and static. Realists and Liberals, on the other hand assume that both the identities and interests are innate and unchangeable (Mansbach & Taylor, 2012). States don’t change their identities and interests; they rather shift their dynamics and narrow down them in their own favour. The United States is the member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, nonetheless, both its identity and interests are American and not European. The European is not a collective identity for the member states. It is rather a common platform on different identities, different nationalities, different interests and different countries. Neo-realists argue that identity and behaviours are driven by the ambience in which actors are positioned. Constructivists argue that identity is not static but is subject to progressive change (Blanton & Kegley, 2016). This analytical paper discusses the core assumptions of realism and liberalism and the counter-assumptions of social constructivism.



Social Constructivism

Constructivists consider identity as an ideational construction, rather than “material or geographical” ([Nau, 2019, p.136](#)). They argue that interests shape identities, identities shape

perceptions, and perceptions shape behaviours & actions of the people. Constructivists believe that collective knowledge, which the participants construct through various sources of communication, gives birth to collective identities. Participants develop collective identities *en masse*, (i) to convince and persuade each other and (ii) to learn from each other. These collective identities explain the participants and tailor their behaviours. Constructivists argue that “International Anarchy is what states make of it”, hence it is not “a fixed material condition” (Nau, 2019, p127-128). Constructivists put that “ideas, beliefs and values” have the power to control the interests and identities of the states and the resultant makeover of the international system. States make rules, which on one hand identify the key players and on the other hand, they support the interests of those key players. States themselves make ideas, rules, and institutions. They deal the international anarchy according to their particular discernment and understanding. Constructivists consider, factors like “shared rules, practices, meanings, identities, and norms” as the level of analysis, because these factors affect the behaviours of the states and fulfil their interests (Lamy et al, 2017, p106-108).

Realist Perspective

Realism has a long historical background; however, its entrance into the ambit of global politics is new (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2017). Classical literature, especially the Thrasymachus dialogue in Plato’s republic, and the Thucydides “History of the Peloponnesian War” highlight the tracks of realism. Thrasymachus answers the Socrates argument of political justice with a counter-argument that, “justice is the advantage of the stronger”, meaning the powerful “determine what justice is” (Jackson, 2005, p. 17-18). Thucydides highlights the following four core assumptions of the realist perspective in antiquity (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2017, p. 76-77):



Modern philosophers like Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1579) further prune the roughly branched tree of realism and present both their thoughts and the realist perspective in a refined shape. These two modern political philosophers consider power and security as the cores of international relations. Machiavelli puts that leaders must pay full heed to acquire more power, even during peacetime. Those leaders, who are heedless about power and security, will certainly lose power. Thomas Hobbes also highlights the importance of power and he puts that power is the desire of all humans. This desire is perpetual in nature and its only end is the blow of death (Mansbach & Taylor, 2012, p11). These clear and pruned ideas tacitly strengthened the foundation of modern day’s realism. The term realism though coined in modern history, however the ideational pedigree of this term has a long and well-recorded historical background. After the devastations of WWI & II, the realist perspective became a more phenomenal term in both the academic and governmental circles. Modern theorists like Kenneth Waltz tried to further prune the already flourished tree of realism and to ensure more clarity in

its assumptions. This new debate transformed realism into neo-realism or structural realism. Kenneth Waltz highlights three elements for explaining the international system.



According to neo-realism or structural realism, the structure of the international system is anarchic in nature i.e. there is no central authority to control and order the sovereign states. States are the principal and powerful actors in this decentralized structure. National interests and core objectives shape the behaviour of each state. Unlike, the decentralized structure of the international system, the domestic structure of sovereign states is hierarchical and well ordered. All states are "functionally similar sovereign states". For Kenneth Waltz, distribution of capabilities is important for international consequences like "war and peace, alliance politics and balance of power" (Lamy et al., 2017, p. 81). Realist perspective considers national interest, self-help, balance of power, statism, zero-sum game and security matters more real and human nature-oriented than collaborative and cooperative efforts. Constructivists argue, these features are constructed terms and states behave according to the meanings they have assigned to these constructed terms. In a nutshell, for classical realism, the level of analysis is individual i.e. the bad nature of humans. For neo-realism or structural realism, the level of analysis is international structure i.e. the anarchic structure of international system. For constructivism, the level of analysis is the ideational construction, instead of material means.

Liberalism

As discussed above, both classical and neo-realism, respectively consider the human bad nature and the structure of international system as responsible factors for realist's worldview. Unlike realism, for liberalism the level of analysis is the good nature of humans. Liberalism shows a cooperative and collaborative image of human nature. Liberals see the world as a cobweb, based on interdependence and cooperation and not as a billiard ball, what realists consider. Liberals argue that states, being rational can develop an ambience of mutuality, cooperation and peace in a world ruled by international law and morality, which in turn can ensure a harmonious world among the key players (Lamy et al., 2017).

The historical development of human knowledge about human nature bifurcates philosophers into two groups i.e. rationalists and empiricists. Rationalists consider humans as rational beings, act according to their peculiar capability of reason. For rationalists, *a priori* or knowledge based on reason is the key to human progress. Empiricists, on the other hand believe on *a posteriori* or experienced-based knowledge, derived from senses. The Enlightenment Movement of 18th century is considered as a turning point in the European history. This movement emphatically highlighted the importance of human reason, which in turn translated the Age of Enlightenment into the Age of Reason. The lineage of human reason rests in Greek thoughts that humans are rational beings, capable to discern the universal laws, ordering the nature and human communities. The Enlightenment period highlighted this assumption and supported the liberal

understanding “that individuals are rational human beings, able to understand the universally applicable laws governing both nature and human society” (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2017, p. 83).

Neoliberal Institutionalists, like structural realists comply with the understanding that states interact in international system, keeping in view their national interests and the anarchic structure of the international system. They however, argue that regional and international organizations rendering collective benefits and mutual collaborative behaviours of the states can overcome international anarchy and can in turn establish an environment of win-win game. Liberals argue that all-out cooperation is possible because humans are rational and they can live in an ambience of cooperation, mutuality, and peaceful co-existence, using their ability of reason. In a nutshell, liberals consider international “institutions and norms” as paramount tools for taming the powers of the states and for ensuring peace and security in the world ([Mcglinchey, Walters & Scheinpflug, 2017, p27](#)).

Constructivists Counter-Construction: Myth or Reality

Constructivists take language as a case to attack the mainstream perspectives. They argue that ideas have power and that states interact or react in international ambience, according to their constructed understanding. If constructivists take the word ‘idea’ & ‘ideational construction’ as a mean/case to attack the mainstream perspectives, then the word idea itself is a construction of [i-d-e-a] letters. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word ‘idea’ is derived via Latin from Greek [idea], meaning ‘form or pattern’, which comes from the base *idea in*, “meaning” ‘to see’. Plato first tacitly propounded the ontological and epistemological background of the word idea in his theory of form. According to this theory, the worldly knowledge is nothing but an image and shadow. Aristotle further elaborated this theory and he connected the worldly knowledge with sense perception and experience. According to Aristotle, the worldly knowledge is based on experience hence, it is true. If the ideas of Plato and Aristotle are ideational construction, then the word idea itself is a construction. Secondly, how constructivists know that all these ideas are constructed, because the word construction itself is constructed and hence, based on *a priori* knowledge. To use the Aristotle’s Third Man argument, to deconstruct the established constructions and to construct an objective-based and truth-based construction, then there is a need of a model for comparison. The new construction needs to be compared with an objective reality. If there is an objective reality, then that objective reality needs to be derived from a higher objective reality and the process goes on in infinitum. Reality for one man may be pretence for the other and vice versa. Constructivists, mostly criticize the ideational construction of realism and liberalism in English language, which *en masse* is a construction, in terms of *lingua franca*. Most of the languages are the products of interactions and hence most of them are constructions, therefore, how constructivists know that what is construction and what is deconstruction? For criticizing the already constructed terms, there is a need of another language and that language will also be a new construction. If, constructivists argue that there is no objective reality, then with what thing they compare an ideational construction? Moreover, if, there is no objective reality, then what is the objectivity of this assumption? No one claims the finality of truth “Final truth belongs to heaven, not to this world” ([Russell, 1927, p. 3](#)).

Interests and Identities

Social Constructivists consider interests as the chief motivators behind the creation of identities. Common interests create shared identities, constructivists argue. Common interests cause cooperation between and among the states is discernible, however, common interests give birth to shared identities is illogical. Common interests cannot create common identities; they rather pool the behaviours of the states. The European Union is a cooperative ambience and not a common identity. Yes, all are Europeans; nevertheless, identity based on nationalism still exists. Brexit is a glaring example of national identity. Countries in the European Union have their own respective identities, in terms of French, German and Britain etc. In the same manner, UNO is an international forum for international cooperation to ensure peace and security in the world. It is

not a shared identity of the member states. All the member states have their respective geographical and cultural identities. Identities, in terms of ideology, religion, culture and nationality do not change due to interests, nor do they remain in perpetual change. Turkey is the member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), nevertheless, the religious, cultural, ideological and national identity of Turkey does not change due to the common interest of collective defence among the members of the NATO. Turkey, repeatedly pleaded for the European Union membership, however it did not become the full member of the Union, not because of the lack of its common interest with the Union members but because of its heterogeneous nature, in terms of its different understanding, different ideology, different culture and different identity. China, Russia and the United States are the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council; nonetheless, both China and Russia are the strategic rivals of the United States. All the three states have different ideological backgrounds, different cultural lineages, different understandings about the global issues and different identities. In compendium, interests, do not shape identities, they rather shape collective collaborative environments.

International Anarchy

Neo-realists or structural realists consider that the lack of central authority at international level is the responsible factor affecting the behaviours of the states. Kenneth Waltz assumes that the anarchic structure of international system is responsible for cynicism and competition among the states (Blanton & Kegley, 2016). Neo-liberals also comply with this structural understanding of the international system. They however, argue that cooperation and international institutions can overcome the anarchic morphology of global politics. Constructivists, on the other hand, question international anarchy and consider it, as "International Anarchy is what states make of it". The term anarchy is a very recent term. However, states behave in the manner today, as they behaved in the manner yesterday. The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta are considered as the first systematically recorded war in human history. At that time, there existed any concept nor any construction of international anarchy, then why they behaved like enemies for each other and allies for allies. It was the anarchic structure of that time international system, which encouraged both Athens and Sparta to entangle into a full-fledged war. As discussed above, the ideational construction of international anarchy [as constructivists argue] is a more recent coinage. Nonetheless, the thirty years sectarian war in Europe, the First World War and the Second World War were all fought because of the lack of international arbiter or central authority [international anarchy] and not because of any social construction. The League of Nations and the subsequent United Nations Organizations were also established before the social construction of international anarchy, to establish an international regime for ensuring peace in the world. Structural realists only highlight the causes of international competitions and the aggressive behaviours of the states. Neo-liberals on the other hand support international cooperation and interdependence to cut down to size both the competitive and aggressive behaviours of the states. Humans are rational they do not behave upon only the reflexes like animals; they instead behave upon the experience they experience, in terms of the past and present. For animals' reflexes play an important role, for humans, experience is more important (Russell, 1927). Theorists develop theories, keeping and considering the previous experience in mind. They develop theories to guide the people; they do not construct ideas to compel them. For to guide needs pacifism and to compel, force.

Behaviours & Actions

Social Constructivists argue that perceptions shape the behaviours and actions of the people. No doubt, perceptions play important role in shaping the behaviours and actions of the people. Nonetheless, experience modifies behaviours and actions and volition makes them more heterogeneous and less homogenous. Neither states, nor leaders follow the same *modus operandi*. For one leader, regime changing is important, for other, power balancing. Again, for one state, global ambitions and military influence is important, for other only economic stability and

independence. For Hitler, “even if the union were a matter of economic indifference, and even if it were to be disadvantageous from the economic standpoint, still it ought to take place” ([Hitler, 2018, P. 14](#)). The behaviours of the states are not shaped by common identities, but by the respective interests of the states. States don't behave, keeping in view their common identities, but they instead chase their national interests and national interest is the extension of self-interest, which is as old as human itself. For humans, behaviours and actions are neither shaped by common identities, nor perceptions, but by self-interest, self-aggrandizement, likes, and dislikes. In compendium, neither perception, nor common identities shape the behaviours and actions of the states. These are instead the national interests [the intrinsic nature of humans] of the states, which shape their behaviours and actions. Behaviours are the productions and representations of the humans' intrinsic qualities like trepidation, fear, hope, desire, despair, trust and distrust. These qualities can neither be detached from humans, nor can these be constructed. Yes, they can be modified; however, modification and construction do not have the same ontological and epistemological connections. For modification, is to bring a slight change, for construction, is to develop a new transformation. For example, a man's fear can be modified; however, it cannot be constructed because fear is the natural quality of a man. Humans are different, in terms of shapes, sizes and appearances; they however have the same intrinsic features. Intrinsic behaviours can be modified into learned behaviours, however, the resultant learned behaviours depend on intrinsic features and intrinsic features cannot be constructed, these are rather DNA coded. Again, the Law of Effect, the Law of Exercise, Law of Recency and the Law of Intensity all can modify the behaviours and resultantly the actions of the people. They however, neither depend on identity, nor can they result new construction.

Universalism vs. Particularism

This world is a home of different compartments, different rooms, different courtyards different individuals and different mentalities. Differences, in terms of minds and morphologies are the only governing principles of human affairs. There is only one consensus-based academic concept, on which all the members of intellectual community are agreed and that is **“individual differences”**. Individual differences specify the essence of human characteristics, which differentiate individuals from one another. People are different from one another, in terms of their interests, actions, behaviours and individualities. Differential psychology studies individual differences from the angle of traits, influencing the personalities and behaviours of individuals ([Williamson, 2018](#)). These individual differences graduate into different compartmentalization, fragmentations and particularisms, in terms of different religious beliefs, different social fabrics, different ethnicities and different nationalities.

Religious Relativism

People follow different religions in the world. Religious differences give birth to different understandings and different problem-solving techniques. These differences can't be clubbed into a universal religious inclusiveness. Even economic and political contours are framed according to religious beliefs. Among the community of different religions, Universalism, in terms of truth searching and conceptual understanding is more mythical and less factual. To deconstruct the established beliefs and construct a universal body of knowledge and understanding is not only difficult but is impossible and inapplicable as well.

Cultural Relativism

This world is the mother of those individuals, who belong to different cultural lineages, ethos, beliefs and understandings. Differences, in terms of religious and social norms establish different cultures. People belonging to the same culture, belong to the same traditions, the same values and the same identities. A person's beliefs and behaviours are shaped not by constructed common identities but by his/her own cultural cults and customs. The deconstruction of established cultural belongingness and establishment of a universal cultural entity is neither easy, nor

possible. No doubt, the world is becoming more and more interconnected and cross-culture relationship is speedily emerging at global level. Nonetheless, genetically hardwired cultural footprints neither can be replaced, nor can they be deconstructed.

Ethical Relativism

As mentioned above, cultural cults and customs shape the behaviours and actions of the people. What moral and ethical values are right and what are wrong can neither be justified by arguments and academic debates, nor can they be replaced by mere rejections or objections. Even majoritarian agreements on multiple issues can't shrink the evergreen tree of morality established and acceptable by all. The theory of ethical relativism stresses that morality is what a cultural norm supports it. A touchstone for gauging the right and wrong aspects of actions are the traditions, norms, customs and ethical values of a specific culture. In other words, universalism, in terms of moral standards is not possible. Each society has its own values, its own traditions, its own customs, its own practices and its own moral values ([Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, J & Meyer, 1992](#)). The deconstruction of these ethical values is a day dreaming. Due to modernization and economic development, old ideas and ideals, cults and customs, beliefs and behaviours, and values and relatives are more forcefully re-clubbing and reemerging. Samuel P. Huntington rightly argues,

"Spurred by modernization, global politics is being reconfigured along cultural lines. Peoples and countries with similar cultures are coming together. Peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart. Alignments defined by ideology and superpower relations are giving way to alignments defined by culture and civilization. Political boundaries are increasingly redrawn to coincide with cultural ones: ethnic, religious and civilizational".

Conclusion

Social Constructivism questions the established beliefs of both the mainstream perspectives i.e. realism and liberalism. Constructivists though highlight an important aspect for intellectual debate and discussion. Nonetheless, only argumentative identification and logical criticism cannot solve a problem. Argumentation and criticism is an easiest job in intellectual debates. While constructive criticism and problem-solving discussion is considered as the hardest and difficult job in intellectual discussion. A fruitful discussion is one, in which the problem is both identified and diagnosed. Social constructivists, however, instead question the all but answer nothing. The only difference between neo-realists/neo-liberals and constructivists is that the former believe in material structure and the later stress on ideational structure ([Burchill, Linklater, Devetak, Donnell, Nardin, Paterson and True, 2013](#)). In other words, this intellectual debate is swimming in the same ocean of differences, highlighted by the empiricists and rationalists, in terms of *a posteriori* and *a priori* respectively. Hence, there is nothing new but only the revisiting of the old i.e. knowledge based on sense perception and knowledge derived from theoretical deduction. Secondly, viewing all the established beliefs and behaviours through the lens of social construction only is not a holistic approach. Ignoring the social, religious, geographical, national, intrinsic and genetic factors does not frame a clear picture. Particularism, in terms of religious, social, cultural and ethical understanding is more evident. Universalism, in terms of new construction and amalgamation of all the established beliefs into one is not possible. Social Science can't be dealt with like physical and natural sciences. The idea of general laws and metatheory is not possible in social sciences. Lack of the capacity of generalization, of the convergence of multiple paradigms, of the relationship between the theory and practice and too much human subjectivity is the beauty of social sciences ([Fiske & Shweder, 1986](#)). Contextualism and hermeneutics play important role in the domain of social sciences. In simple words, social science is not a physical or natural science. It is social i.e. Theoretically informed, accommodating all in all.

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