

Social Constructivism and International Relations

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Introducing Constructivism as an approach to IR

- Constructivism's arrival in IR is often associated with the end of the Cold War, an event that the traditional theories such as realism and liberalism failed to account for.
- By having a dominant focus on the state, traditional theories have not opened much space to observe the agency of individuals.
- Realization that it was the actions of ordinary people that ensured the end of the Cold War, not those of states or international organisations.
- Constructivism's arrival in IR is often associated with the end of the Cold War, an event that the traditional theories such as realism and liberalism failed to account for.
- Alexander Wendt (American political scientist) introduced this approach to the study of IR through his book 'Anarchy is what the states make of it: The social construction of power politics' (1992).

few more points.....

- Social constructivists:

Alexander Wendt, Nicholas Onuf, Emanuel Adler, Peter Katzenstein and others.

- Constructivism is a social theory of International Politics that emphasizes on social construction of world affairs as opposed to the claim of Neo-realists that international politics is shaped by the rational choice behavior.
- People acting as individuals or as social groups construct the world in which they live and act according to these constructions.
- A post positivist approach to knowledge which believes that there can never be any objective reality separate from the ideas, beliefs and assumptions of the observer.
- This approach is reflective and constitutive in nature and not merely explanatory.

Basic Assumptions of Constructivism

- Realities are socially constructed.
- States exist within a world of our own making.
- States are social rather than material.
- Social interactions shape the interests and identities of the states.
- The key structures in the state system are intersubjective rather than material.
- Emphasize on meanings assigned to material objects rather than the mere existence of the objects themselves.
- Norms, identity and ideas are key factors in constructivist theory.

Other major arguments....

- Constructivists argue that agency and structure are mutually constituted, which implies that structures influence agency and that agency influences structures.
- Agency can be understood as the ability of someone to act, whereas structure refers to the international system that consists of material and ideational elements.
- They argue that states can have multiple identities that are socially constructed through interaction with other actors.
- States that conform to a certain identity are expected to comply with the norms that are associated with that identity.

- Regarding social norms the constructivists cluster them into three areas. (1) Normative behavior – how an extant norm influences behavior within a community. (2) Socialization – how an extant norm or a nascent norm from one community diffuses and is internalized by actors outside that community. (3) Normative emergence – how an idea reaches intersubjective status in a community.
- Regarding national interests they argue that it includes four objective interests of survival, autonomy independence, economic well-being and collective self-esteem.
- Identity is not fixed, rather, it is generated through the interactions of the international community.

Conclusion



- Constructivism can be seen as an attempt bridge between rational and reflective theories
- Looks at the role of things like identity, interests, norms and how they shape actions and understanding of the world
- Provide important alternative perspectives for analyzing foreign policy

THANK YOU