The Politics of Constructivist International Relations in the US Academy

Introduction

Brent J. Steele, *University of Utah*

Constructivism emerged in the 1980s as a perspective for studying international relations. Although incredibly diverse and thus a challenge to precisely and comprehensively characterize, most constructivists are united by their foregounding of the "social" and the sociological of global politics. This is a foregrounding of the relational contexts between the actors of international relations, where people constitute and are constituted by their environment. Those using constructivism see institutions, identities, and understandings as being formed, reformed, and engaged in intersubjective temporal and spatial contexts (Steele 2007; Barkin 2010, 4).

It has been nearly three decades since some of the first generation of constructivist works appeared. Following these pioneering studies on agents and structures (Wendt 1987), norms (Kratochwil 1989), and the importance of discourse and language (Onuf 1989), the 1990s brought forth what some have titled a second generation of constructivists, who were impacted by the "fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union" (Onuf 2001, 242). These studies, with a focus on enduring security communities (Adler and Barnett 1998), peaceful structural change (Wendt 1992), the end of apartheid (Klotz 1995), and the adoption of human rights norms by nation-states (Keck and Sikkink 1998) reflected the defining trends of international politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As such, these trends provided an opportunity for constructivists forming their agendas in the 1990s to denote "holes" in the conventional realist enterprise—how norms and argumentation and "identity shifts" could lead to cooperation or synthesis or even peace.

This established a form of constructivism that was able to take its place in an international relations subfield of political science that, more and more, looked for scholars to test their propositions against rival perspectives like realism and liberalism. Thus, constructivist analyses of the 1990s sought to amend constructivism from its more philosophical foundations so that it could be amenable to empirical "testing" against these other perspectives (Klotz 2008). To a certain extent, these inroads garnered attention from even realist scholars, with Stephen Walt famously placing constructivism as one of the three "competing paradigms" of IR theory alongside (literally, in pillar form) realism and liberalism (1998, 38). Stefano Guzzini declared in another study around the time: "What a success story! Hardly known a decade ago, constructivism has risen as the officially accredited contender to the established core of the discipline" (2000, 147).

One may thus conclude that constructivism has slowly, but surely, taken its place as a key part of the international relations field. Indeed, even in the US academy, and especially within political science programs, which seem to have been a more difficult environment to "break through" for newer paradigms, recent surveys of IR scholars indicate that constructivism is both being taught by, and identified with, a broader number of US-based academics (Oakes, Maliniak, Peterson and Tierney 2011; 2014). Further, constructivism receives a plurality (alongside liberalism) of responses over realism and Marxism by scholars self-identifying with a perspective of international relations.

Nevertheless, we need to further explore exactly how this emergence may have happened (and whether it is accurate), if the surveys and claims can be examined more deeply to interrogate the figure of an accepted constructivism, and whether there needs to be a broader or more skeptical set of reflections on what constructivism means in the US academic context. Indeed, constructivism is united as much by its internal disagreements as it is by engagements with "rival paradigms." Although still favorably disposed to the referents utilized in the 1990s via media constructivist studies, many constructivists of the 2000s would critique both of the aforementioned transformations found in 1990s constructivism that were otherwise responsible for its success—its somewhat favorable focus on liberal norms (Barkin 2003; Barder and Levine

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2012), and its more neopositivist reframing for the purpose of testing "constructivist" propositions. This, too, reflected the times of a somewhat depressing international realm where war, famine, genocide, and financial ruin seemed to have replaced the more optimistic developments of just a decade before. The result was a more chastened, less certain, and more skeptical cohort of constructivist scholars studying those developments.

One of the stories of constructivism, then, is linear and progressive—the story of a research program or perspective that was first proffered in sophisticated philosophical terms and expressions, then soon refined in a series of studies so that its merit could be assessed by its correspondence with the world out there. Yet there is also a cyclical story to tell of constructivism—one where each emerging generation of constructivism has challenged the anomalies, shortcomings, complexities, or transformations of preceding constructivist works. The professional challenges this presents were a primary focus for Thomas Kuhn in his examination of paradigmatic transitions, where generational dynamics play out through "personal and inarticulate aesthetic considerations" (Kuhn 1962, 158).

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This symposium serves as a discussion and disclosure on some of the *broader* dynamics one finds, through time, in the academy. Thus, this is not just a story about "being" a constructivist, or even about constructivism in international relations and political science, or even just about constructivism in the US academy. Rather, it can be considered a good case illustration that is suggestive, but of course not determinative, of how academic trends develop, and the dynamics that scholars encounter within and from those trends as they attempt to carve out a space for their research and teaching on international politics. The symposium illustrates how perspectives—amorphous though they may be—get embodied, politicized, promoted, co-opted, transformed, or flat-out ignored. It brings to the fore ethical considerations about how we should reflect and generalize (or not) about our development as scholars in a particular field. It also suggests what responsibilities we have to the profession as reviewers, to our colleagues as fellow scholars, to our communities as political and policy experts, to the students we train in international relations and political science, and finally as mentors to one another, including junior scholars and our graduate students in our perpetually evolving contemporary academic contexts.

To these and other purposes, the symposium showcases insights from four mid-career international relations scholars. These contributors reflect upon, analyze, and organize their perspectives on constructivism in the US academy. All four scholars were trained in US political science PhD programs, and all four were placed in supportive tenure-track positions in the US academy following graduate school. They are thus familiar with the expectations, standards, professional norms, opportunities, and constraints related to practicing constructivism in that context. Each contributor focuses on one aspect of the politics of constructivism—publications and journal outlets (Zarakol), reviewing manuscripts as a constructivist (Struett), graduate programs and placement in the academic market (Subotic), and finally the identity politics within a research program like constructivism and ways to organize constructivism going forward (Hayes). Each of the contributors places special emphasis for his or her investigations and claims by utilizing the Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project (TRIP) survey organized by Susan Peterson and Mike Tierney of The College of William and Mary (Oakes, Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney 2011; 2014). The symposium participants each sketch their understanding of what exactly constructivism is for them and within the US academy. As a result, there are four interrelated functions this symposium hopes to serve.

First, the symposium's function is *dialogical*, organized to foster dialogue amongst constructivists and, moreover, between political scientists regardless of their epistemological and methodological commitments. The Hayes and Struett contributions are especially illustrative in this respect. For Hayes, dialogue can happen by thinking about constructivism's place and space "below, between, and above," in ways that perhaps will make constructivism less mysterious, less threatening, and more inviting. And of the few modifications to the peer review process that Struett advises, the one he does *not* advocate for is further division of constructivists (on the one hand) and positivists (on the other) from reviewing each other's work.

Second, the symposium serves what might be titled a *metrical* purpose, revealing some creative methods and measurements utilized by the four primary contributors for the prevalence, status, and presence of a research program in the US academy. The symposium thus can serve as a model for how one can investigate the migration or evolution of other perspectives within the academy (including other subfields of political science). Specifically, the contributors direct readers to the settings—journals, graduate programs, and department rankings—where the politics of the US academy often play out. These settings present not only the outcomes that reflect the status of different approaches to political science and specifically IR, but also locations where the means of re-production of those approaches do (or do not) take place. While no symposium can cover all the important questions about a topic like the politics of constructivism, this symposium hopes to provide even in its brevity a systematic and comprehensive

examination of constructivism's presence and status in the US academy to date.

Third, the symposium provides what can be called a *reflexive* examination (Amoureux and Steele 2016), focusing on the three interconnected practices for what we do as scholars—research, teaching and service—as well as how these practices relate and are shaped by what we study. Specifically, one of constructivism's strengths has been its resistance to separating the world "out there" from the world of scholarly practice, disclosing as it has how the two are interconnected (and interdependent) in a myriad of ways. Some would even argue that constructivism's place was secured by the hole left in the (for some) surprisingly relatively peaceful ending to the Cold War. Constructivism could and did provide an account for how this happened (Wendt 1992), as well as explaining the particular dynamics responsible for the emergence and diffusion of human rights norms throughout the 1990s (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Constructivist works have additionally, through a trenchant series of studies, assessed the violent, costly, and emotionally-charged events of the 2000s, including the global war on terror (Solomon 2015; Ross 2014) and the global financial crisis (Widmaier 2010). Because constructivism centralizes the dynamics of identity, intersubjective understandings, and processes of socialization (and disciplining) through societal norms, it proves useful for assessing the politics of both the world out there, and the academic practices we perform as scholars that perpetuate, or alter, our own disciplinary milieus.

Fourth, the symposium not only engages what constructivism has been, what it currently is, and where to locate its expressions, but also how we can think about it moving forward. The four primary contributors approach the politics of constructivism in the US academy based on their readings of the TRIP data as well as their decades of experiences within that academy. But, like the emphasis one finds in constructivism, they move the discussion past their subjective accounts to the intersubjective spaces and places where constructivism gets negotiated. Yet one challenge for the pluralism of constructivism is that, as mentioned earlier, it proves difficult to effectively characterize. I have attempted to do so in this short symposium introduction, and the way I, and the contributors that follow, articulate constructivism will no doubt foster some disagreement—likely from those who identify as constructivists themselves. Thus, there is a need to both acknowledge the identity processes at work in identifying who is or is not a constructivist, and then to think about a more effective and (ideally) inclusionary way to articulate constructivism going forward. Jarrod Hayes in his essay attempts to do just that. Again, though, this is about more than constructivism—as Ayse Zarakol notes, if a more mainstream approach like constructivism's place is tenuous (at best) in the US academy (as found in a survey of the top journals in the field), the prospects for more critical approaches within that setting are even more troublesome. The symposium is not even limited to the field of IR, as Subotic examines how other subfields of political science treat constructivism, and Struett engages the treatment of constructivism (and constructivists) via the review process one finds in field-wide US political science journals.

Readers may find the symposium useful precisely because of the generational context of these four contributors. Having been trained in the early 2000s in US political science PhD programs, and working in the US academy during the tumultuous end to that decade, Professors Hayes, Struett, Subotic, and Zarakol examine the TRIP data fully cognizant of the pressures today's scholars face. These are a set of pressures—not only disciplinary, but also in the neoliberalization and budgetary streamlining of US higher education, fiscal—that one suspects many graduate students and junior scholars can more readily, and tangibly, appreciate. In their analyses, the four contributors relate what being tethered to a perspective (like constructivism) that colors their professional experiences has entailed for publishing, reviewing manuscripts, and establishing their research programs in their respective institutional settings, all important building blocks to a career in international relations and political science within a tumultuous decade for higher education.

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The symposium concludes with a set of reflections by Professor Nicholas Onuf. Onuf's foundational text *World of our Making* is where the term constructivism was first issued to characterize a philosophical view that "people always construct, or constitute, social reality, even as their being, which can only be social, is constructed for them" (1989, 1). Onuf's active research agenda in the intervening decades has continued to develop what he calls his "thoroughgoing philosophical ideal[ism]" through today (Onuf 2014). Onuf argues that the story of constructivism in the US academy, especially in political science departments, is really part of a broader story regarding IR's waning influence within the US field of political science. While IR's trajectory looks mixed in the US academy, at the same time, Onuf argues, IR has globalized. Onuf provides some suggestions to US political science departments for strengthening not only IR, but also helping the further development of constructivism and constructivists in the US academy. ■

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SYMPOSIUM CONTIBRUTORS

Jarrod Hayes *is an associate professor of international relations at the Georgia Institute of Technology. His areas of scholarly and teaching interest focus on the role of social orders in shaping international security and environmental practice. His scholarship appears in the* European Journal of International Relations, Foreign Policy Analysis, Geografiska Annaler B: Human Geography, German Studies Review, Global Environmental Politics, International Organization, International Studies Quarterly, Nonproliferation Review, *and* Security Studies. *Cambridge University Press published his first book*—Constructing National Security: US Relations with India and China—*in 2013. Jarrod may be reached at jarrod.hayes@gatech.edu and on Twitter @jarrodnhayes.*

Nicholas Onuf *is Professor Emeritus, Department of Politics and International Relations, Florida International University, and Professor Associado, Instituto de Relações Internationais Pontifica, Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. Over a fifty year career, he has been affiliated with sixteen universities on four continents. He is the author of six books, two with his brother, Peter Onuf, and editor or coeditor of four others. With Andreas Gofas and Inanna Hamati-Ataya, he is working on a handbook of the history, philosophy and sociology of International Relations. He may be reached at at onufn@fiu.edu*

Brent J. Steele *is the Francis D. Wormuth Presidential Chair and Professor of Political Science at the University of Utah. He previously worked at the University of Kansas from 2005–2013, and earned his PhD in 2005 at the University of Iowa. He teaches courses on US foreign policy, international security, international relations theory, and international ethics. He is the author of* Alternative Accountabilities in Global Politics: The Scars of Violence *(Routledge, 2013);* Defacing Power: The Aesthetics of Insecurity in Global Politics *(University of Michigan Press, 2010) and* Ontological Security in International Relations *(Routledge, 2008). He is also the coeditor of three books, and has published articles in a number of international studies journals, most recently in the* European Journal of International Relations *(forthcoming),* Critical Studies on Terrorism, International Relations, International Politics, *the* Journal of International Political Theory, *and* Critical Studies on Security. *He is currently working on a project investigating restraint in global politics, a special journal issue on "Centenary Politics" and collective memorialization, and several projects on the next generation of constructivist IR. Brent can be reached at brent.steele@utah.edu.*

Michael J. Struett *is associate professor of political science in the School of Public and International Affairs at North Carolina State University. His main area of research is on the role of international law and international institutions in shaping outcomes in world politics. He is the author of* The Politics of Constructing the International Criminal Court *(Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and coeditor of* Maritime Piracy and the Construction of Global Governance *(Routledge 2013). Michael can be reached at mjstruet@ncsu.edu.*

Jelena Subotic *is associate professor of political science at Georgia State University. She is the author of* Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Balkans *(Cornell University Press, 2009), as well as numerous articles on human rights, transitional justice, identity politics, and the Balkans. Her recent research has focused on narrative analysis and ontological security in International Relations. Jelena may be reached at jsubotic@gsu.edu.*

Ayşe Zarakol *is university lecturer of international relations at the University of Cambridge and a fellow at Emmanuel College. She broadly works on East–West relations in the international system, with a focus on stigmatization and social hierarchies; problems of modernity and sovereignty; rising and declining powers; and Turkish politics in a comparative perspective. In addition to her book* After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West *(Cambridge University Press, 2011), she has published or has work forthcoming in journals such as* International Organization, Cooperation & Conflict, International Studies Quarterly, International Theory, Review of International Studies, European Journal of International Relations, and International Relations, *as well as in more policy-oriented outlets (such as the* Journal of Democracy) *and edited books. Ayşe may be reached at az319@cam.ac.uk.*