



The Theory of Constructivism in International Relations

Soran University

Faculty of Law, political science and administration

Mahdi Mostafa Faqi Ahmad

University Email: mahdi.ahmad@soran.edu.iq

Word Account: 2,706

Date: 11/10/2020

Abstract:

Constructivism offers a different understanding of international relations in terms of power, the balance of states and the nature of international relations. (Hopf,1998:3). Realism and other theories have been challenged by constructivism over the past two decades. After the cold war, constructivism has been appeared considerably and wants to replace rationalists which include both neo-realists and neo-liberalists in international relations theory. There are different views among experts regarding the theory of constructivism. Some of them argue that it has appeared as an alternative to rationalism theory especially after the cold war which the new global system has appeared and neither neo-realists nor neo-liberalists could predict and analyze the transferring of the global political system from one system to another.(Burchill and et al,2009:196). On the other hand, it is argued that constructivism could not offer an alternative to other international theories and the way of understanding of international relations. Constructivists believe that there is a strong relationship between social theory and politics and the same thing of social theory can be practiced for world politics. It has been argued that as norms and rules shape the individual behaviors, in the international level the norm and rules can form the structure and the behavior of international actors. The aim of this essay is to argue the key claims of constructivism and their major views regarding international relations theory to find out whether this theory has provided a more satisfactory explanation regarding understanding of international relations.

1. Definition and short history of constructivism

It is generally believed that constructivism is a theory of international relations which claims that :

(1) States are the main factors in international relations. (2) The structure of international relations is based on social theory and norms rather than material.



(3) States and their interests are an important part of the structure of international relations.(Maysam: 1)

Onuf was the first theorist who introduced the concept of constructivism as the theory of international relations in 1989 ,later on this theory has been expanded by other constructivists such as Kratochwil and Wendt. (Zubfuss,2004 :20).

After the cold war, the new theory has been appeared in international relations by the name of constructivism. This theory has challenged both rationalism and positivism about their understanding of international relations. Constructivism has its own way of analyzing political issues in the international environment.(Roberts,2007 :188).

It can be said that four factors have had the significant role in appearing constructivism as a theory of international relations which are:

First: There was kind of motivation and stimulation among the constructivists to prove their conceptions and their way of analyzing the political issues in international relations . Therefore, they challenged other theories and their supports such as rationalists which include neo-realists and neo-liberalists.

Second: The end of the cold war and appearing the new global system was sudden event which was not predicted by none of the neo-realists and neo-liberalists. Appearing the new global system has shown the opposite view of critical theorists regarding their expectation which they claimed that the theory can be practiced in any model. Indeed, the situation of after cold war has brought a good opportunity for appearing the constructivism as a new theory in international relations.

Third: After the cold war many young theorists have appeared who have their interpretation and ideas regarding international relations theories, new political situation and none government organizations(NGO). Indeed, these new theorists have been replaced rationalists who failed to understand and analyze the new global system.

Fourth: Despite the failing of main rationalist theories in terms of international politics, the new constructivists have enhanced their ideas and have started debate according to their methods in an enthusiastic way. (Burchiall and et al ,2009: 195- 196)

2. Constructivism according to Wendt

Alexander Wendt has had a considerable role in improving the constructivism as the international relation theory.

Wendt believes that the nature of international relations is not anarchy itself but states make it. The states as decision makers can decide whether the international stage is conflicting or cooperative. In his famous essay " anarchy is what states made" he explained that the states



play the significant role as the main actors about the nature of international relations. This would mean the stability or instability of international environment depends on how states behave and how they decide about dealing with the international environment(Stanton,2002: 8).

Despite the claim of realists which argue that the human being desire power naturally as individuals and at the level of international relations also states struggle together in order to obtain their objectives, constructivists believe that states as the main factor and decision makers are responsible about the nature of international relations in both anarchy and stability.(Weber,2010: 63)

If there is anarchy in international relations ,as realists believe, then all countries should be aware and ready for the possibility of happening the war at any time because some states may use force against others. Therefore, the nature of international relations will be instability because all states rely on self-help instead of cooperating together.(Waltz ,1979:102).

Wendt argues that international relations are made socially rather than historically and self-help is not a necessary feature of anarchy in international relations as neo-realists believe. The same statement is true about neo-liberalists and their claim about the nature of cooperation in international relations.

It can be said that all constructivists have agreed that norms and values are important in shaping and forming the international relations as well as material structures . This means beside other factors, normative can play a significant role in determining the structure of International relations.(Burchill and et al ,2009:188). According to constructivists, the international relations can be understood better by their way that emphasize on the effect of values ,norms and ideas on states and they behave. In fact.because originally states and nature of international relations have been created by mankind and their desire, it can be analyzed by social theory. Constructivists argue that if researchers want to understand the reality of states and their behavior, they must take into consider ideas,values and beliefs of mankind which states are based. In another word, states are affected by the ideas of mankind and their willing.(Slaughter : 4).

3. Constructivism and the nature of international relations

Constructivism efforts to give a better understanding of international relations by its method which is based on social theory. According to constructivism the priority is for social features instead of material. This means social factors are important as well as material factors in understanding and analyzing the international relations. In many international theories, the power of economic and balance of power have been focused on whereas in constructivism this view has been rejected. Constructivism argues that the international relations did not



happen suddenly or as a coincidence but it has been created by thought and logic of mankind themselves. Therefore it is important that the nature of international relations be analyzed based on social theory which includes all human actions.(Timothy:1-4).

The neo-realists believe that the states must behave conflictually and neo-liberalists claim that they should behave more cooperatively. Alexander Wendt argues that the nature of international relations depends on how states deal with it. Constructivism wants to make a balance or a bridge between both neo-realists and neo-liberalists about understanding of international relations. The neo-realists believe that “logic of anarchy is a process that leads to cooperation” whereas, neo-liberalists argue that “logic of anarchy is structural and leads to conflict”. Constructivism has a different view about the logic of anarchy which believes that the logic of anarchy is that how states think and behave. In another meaning, if states decide to cooperate together on different issues, the international relations and its nature will be peaceful and cooperative. However, if states behave in the opposite way and do not cooperate and depend on self-helping idea, the logic of international environment will be conflicting. Constructivism has agreed that states are the main factors of international relations but the way of looking of constructivism at international relations in terms of anarchy is different with both neo-realism and neo-liberalism.(Weber,2010: 62- 63). Constructivism agrees that states and the structure of international relations are not made by nature or even God, but they are made by human themselves. Because of this, this structure is not unchangeable or constant but it is possible to change in a new system and developed in a new model.(Timothy:5)

According to constructivists, the international anarchy is not an unavoidable phenomenon but states have created this feature and it can be solved and developed in a different way. Constructivists have not agreed with the view of rationalists who depend on rationalism and protecting interests in the form of self-help. According to the realists point of view, states should behave rationally in the international stage in order to obtain and protect benefits and perhaps they need to do competition and struggle sometimes. On the other hand, neo-liberalists emphasize on this point that states should work and cooperate together in international relations. Constructivists agree to some extent with rationalists. For instance, they all agreed that states are the main actors of international realm but they do not agree with this point that the nature of international relations in conflictual or cooperative.

It is argued that neo-liberalists are more optimistic about the nature of international relations. They argue that states can cooperate and do negotiate together in order to find out solutions for their problems and struggles. The problems can be solved in a safe way by dialog instead of competition. According to neo-liberalists, even weak powers can obtain their goals and objectives through the negotiation process with greater powers and by this way they can achieve even more than they want. However, it is discussed that in reality mostly greater



powers impose their conditions on the smaller powers so that they cannot get benefit from this situation as neo-liberalists claim.

However, the neo-realists are well known as more pessimistic in understanding of international relations. They believe that the nature of international relations is anarchy and states do conflict and competition in order to protect their interests. Both neo-realists and neo-liberalists are well known as rationalists because they analyze international relations according to reality.

Constructivists try to make a balance and bridge between different theories and they include variety methods and approaches.(Zubfuss,2004: 3- 4)

4. The major views of constructivism

There are three major areas and views which all constructivists (modernistas and post-modernists) are agreed about and make them different with other theorists of international relations.

Firstly: The norm, ideas and values which international relations have, can play a significant role in shaping and guiding the international politics. Constructivists believe that these norms and beliefs which are held by humans, can affect their behavior. It can be said that by having these ideas and their way of thinking, constructivists can be separate from other theorists who emphasize on the material as the structure of international relations. .(Finnemore. M and Sikkink.K: 5)

Secondly: The international structure which has made by states as the main actors, can shape the behavior of actors. For instance, when rationalist theories such as neo-realism and neo-liberalism focus on power and interest in international relations, it can determine the way they behave in international realm in order to obtain their objectives. This subject has been explained by Wendt in his famous article "anarchy is what states made". Wendt argues that states are responsible about the nature of international relations because it has been made by them.

Thirdly: The structure of international relations which guides actors how to deal with different issues, conflict or cooperate with each other, is made by international actors. This has opened the door for constructivists to claim that because this situation and structure has been made by actors and human during the history, it is not constant that actors have to follow , but it is possible to change and find another alternative instead.(Guzzini and Leander,2006).



5. Positivists and post-positivists in constructivism

There are positivists and post-positivists in constructivism theory. Positivists argue that constructivism is a positivistic social scientific theory. This would mean that science can be practiced in social science as well as other science and the nature of states and international system can scientifically be looked at.(Stanton,2002:11).

Positivists want to look at issues in a real way and analyzing them based on cause and effect whereas post-positivists instead of focusing on cause and effect, are more critical about the possibility and raising questions about how different phenomenon happened and why(Behravash,2011 :5).

The positivists argument has been built on scientific methods and they believe that social science can be studied as an objective, while studying of the social world as an objective has been rejected by the post-positivists (Guzzini and Leander,2006:25).

It has been argued that positivists rely on science and believe that by depending on science, issues of the world can be understood and analyzed better. Indeed, by using cause and effect laws and good methods, the uncover truth and issues can be discovered by scientists and what they recognized , can be relied on. On the other hand, this point of view has been rejected by the post-positivists and it has been argued that there could be error in the methods which scientific followed. Post-positivists have suggested that it is better to use multi method and ways in order to gain our goals and they believe that nothing can be achieved perfectly even through science.(Trochin,2006)

While positivists believe that individuals should rely on empirical science and experiment by following accurate methods, the post-positivists argued that there is only a small difference between scientific reasoning and common sense.(Jfermiller,2011)

6. Conclusion

In this essay the key claims of constructivism have been discussed regarding international relation theory. Constructivism has challenged other international theories such as neo-realism and neo-liberalism and it has appeared as a new international theory after the cold war by its own method and understanding of international relations. There are argument among experts with regard to this question that has constructivism could offer a better understanding of international relations or not.

To some extent the claims of constructivism which focus on norms,value and ideas in analyzing of international relations , seems logical and rational. Despite the claim of rationalists who believe that international relation is based on reality of cooperation or conflict, understanding of constructivists of international relations which based on social theory ,seems more logical. Constructivists discuss that there is nothing by the name of



anarchy, conflict and cooperation itself in international relations but they have been created by international actors. In fact, actors such as states can decide about the nature of international relations to be cooperating or conflict. As Wendt explained in his article "anarchy is what states made", the international actors can make decisions about the peace and war, conflict or cooperation in international relations.

Many examples can be seen in international relations that actors decided about the nature of international relations to be conflict and struggle or peace and cooperation. For instance, during the cold war, after a long time conflict and competition together, the USA and the former Soviet Union decided to accept each other and do not look at each other as enemy anymore. Because of this, the nature of international relations changed from competition and threaten to cooperation and negotiation and both great powers changed their view about each other. (Timothy: 17). In this example it can be seen clearly that the actors themselves decided about the nature of international relations according to their interests. Therefore, the structure of international relations is possible to change and transfer from one system to another and it can be developed.

It is argued that the claims of constructivism regarding international relations are rational and they have provided a satisfactory explanation and alternative to other theories of international relations about the way of understanding and analyzing the international relations by emphasizing on the norms and values which play a significant role in shaping and forming the structure of international relations beside material factors. It is important that these norms and values be understood which states are based on because they act according them in international relations.

References

Behravash.M (2011), Constructivism, An Introduction .[online]available from<
<http://www.e-ir.info/2011/02/03/constructivism-an-introduction>> [20 October2019]

Behravash.M(2011), The Thrust of Wendtian Constructivism .[online]available from<
<http://www.e-ir.info/2011/03/09/the-thrust-of-wendtian-constructivism>> [20 October2019]

Burchill. S and et al (2009), Theories of International Relations. Published by Plagrave Macmillan, fourth edition.

Finnemore. M and Sikkink.K(1998), International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. Published by the MIT Press.[online]available from<

<http://en.bookfi.org/s/?q=&t=0>> [15 October 2019]



Hopf.T(1998), The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory. Published by the MIT Press.[online]available from<
<http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/courses/PoliticalScience/661B1/documents/TedHopfPromiseofConstructivisminIRTheory.pdf> > [16 September 2019]

Jfermiller(2011), Positivism, Post-Positivism, Constructivism.[online]available from<<http://jlmillersnotes.wordpress.com/2011/07/22/positivism-post-positivism-constructivism/>>[25 September 2019]

Lim.C, Constructivism and International Relations .[online]available from<
<http://www.slideshare.net/tclim988/international-relations-constructivism-pt1> > [18 October 2018]

Roberts.P (2007), Political Constructivism. Published by Routledge, London.[online]available from< <http://en.bookfi.org/s/?q=&t=0>> [23 October 2018].

Slaughter.A, International Relations , Principal Theories.[online]available from <
http://www.princeton.edu/~slaughtr/Articles/722_IntlRelPrincipalTheories_Slaughter_20110509zG.pdf >. [23 October 2019]

Stanton.Jr(2002), What Are We Making?, The Constructivist Approach to International Relations Theory. [online]available from<<http://www.google.com/custom?q=Constructivism+and+International+Relations&hl=en&client=pub-9610475601287698&cof=FORID:1%3BGL:1%3BLBGC:336699%3BLC:%230000ff%3BVLIC:%23663399%3BGFNT:%230000ff%3BGIMP:%230000ff%3BDIV:%23336699%3B&ddomains=world-newspapers.com&oe=ISO-8859-1&prmd=ivns&ei=o9mDUKGyHsi40QWMv4GYBA&start=10&sa=N>>[24 October 2012]

Trochim.W(2006), Positivism and Post- Positivis. [online]available from<
<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/positvsm.php>>[25 October 2019]

Weber.C (2010), International Relations Theory. Published by Routledge, London and New York, third edition.[online]available from<<http://en.bookfi.org/s/?q=&t=0>>[16 September 2019]

Waltz.N (1979), Theory of International Politics. Published by McGraw-Hill

Zebfuss. M (2004), Constructivism in International Relations, The Politics of Reality. Published by Cambridge University Press.[online]available from<
<http://en.bookfi.org/s/?q=&t=0>>[16 September 2019]