



Social Constructivist International Relations and the Military

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Abstract

Captured by Alexander Wendt’s now-famous maxim “anarchy is what states make of it,” social constructivism is the idea that the world “out there” is not given, as realists would argue, but rather, “socially constructed.” In doing so, social constructivism places a focus on the importance of “mutual constitution”: international politics is shaped by both structures, such as anarchy, or agents, such as states and other actors. Structures and agents influence each other. Moreover, social constructivism emphasizes social relations in global politics, and sees security and international politics as determined by ideas as well as material factors. The identity of agents such as states matter because identity helps determine national interests. As states interact with other actors in the international system, their ideas and identity can change over time, which can produce a more dynamic understanding of international relations. This chapter will take the reader through the key ideas of social constructivism – also referred to as “constructivism” in this chapter – showing how norms, culture, and ideas about identity shape actors, condition their relations with each other, and can impact the

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so-called “given” nature of international relations and transform understandings of power relations. Social constructivism can also help make sense of security and military phenomena, such as alliances and threat perceptions, or why states go to war. This chapter will also cover the different branches of constructivist thought and the main critiques of constructivism to highlight its key contributions and the problems it also raises.

Keywords

Social constructivism · Norms · Culture · Identity · Mutual constitution · Military · War

Introduction

In the “timeless wisdom” of realist thought, the story of international relations is that the world is structured by anarchy. This means that the absence of a central power over states produces a world of perpetual insecurity, or Hobbesian “state of nature” (see ► [“Realist International Relations Theory and The Military”](#) by Schmidt in this volume), with conflict and violence a constant possibility. Subsequently, states do what they can to secure themselves, which often means resorting to military force. Yet this dominant view of international relations was significantly challenged by Alexander Wendt in the early 1990s with the simple premise: “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt 1992, pp. 394–395). Wendt’s contention was that rather than see anarchy as a given condition of the international system, ordering relations and compelling states to behave in certain ways to secure themselves, anarchy, rather, depends on whether states “buy into” this view. Theo Farrell (2002, p. 50) explains this in the following way: “where actors are great powers, the social structure is an international system that gives meaning to great power and recognizes this identity in particular practices, such as the use of force against smaller states; through such practices, states – great and small – in turn shape the international system.” If the world is anarchic, Wendt argued, it is because states believe it to be so, and seek to secure themselves by the logic that anarchy produced. What if anarchy was *not* a given condition that ordered world politics? If it was not, then the international order and what security means could be something completely different. This suggests that there is something beyond the “timeless wisdom” of realism that offers only a tragic view of world politics that will never change.

The rise of social constructivist thought in international relations theory as part of the “fourth debate” (see ► [“International Relations and Military Sciences”](#) by Roennfeldt in this volume) represented one of those “break through” moments that challenged some of the orthodoxy and key assumptions that guided the discipline. Like its revision of anarchy as an ordering principle in international relations, constructivism also changed perceptions about the relationship between agents and structures, brought attention to how ideas matter as much as material factors, and how identity, norms, and culture shape global relations. This chapter will explore

what constructivism is, and its underlying claims and key influences, while comparing its core tenets to theories such as realism (see ► [“Realist International Relations Theory and The Military”](#) by Schmidt in this volume) and liberalism (see ► [“Liberal International Relations Theory and The Military”](#) by Silverstone in this volume). Throughout the chapter, reference will be made to constructivism’s epistemological (how we know it), ontological (what we know), teleological (what is the purpose), and methodological (the tools we use to study) standing, where it is located in IR theorizing, and what it can mean for understanding military phenomena (see ► [“Philosophy of Military Science”](#) by Sookermary in this volume). It will then consider some key criticisms of this approach and conclude with a short summary.

What Is Social Constructivism? Background and Key Claims

Social constructivism emerged out of key debates in international relations theory in the 1980s concerned with agents and structures and has come to be seen as the “fourth debate” in international relations theorizing, which pitches constructivist against rationalist perspectives (Fierke and Jørgensen 2001, p. 3). Although some debate exists over whether it is more of an approach rather than a theory (McCourt 2016, p. 476), its importance for international relations can be found in its emphasis on social relations between actors; how actors relate to each other shapes international politics. Constructivism has developed over the years and it is now possible to speak of it in terms of “generations.” The first generation is identified in the 1980s, where constructivism focused on agents and structures. The second generation’s focus on norms emerged in the 1990s and a third generation extends constructivism’s scope to bring in critical theory, emotions, and political psychology, among other approaches (See Steele (2017), Steele et al. (2019), and Kessler and Steele (2016) for recent advanced debates.) This chapter will concentrate on some of the main elements that have relevance for military studies.

Constructivism’s key influences come from sociological and philosophical perspectives on the nature of reality and phenomena, which brings knowledge, language, and social relations to the fore. The influence of Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1805) on constructivist thought can be seen regarding ideas about knowledge and objectivity, in that knowledge of the world is filtered through frameworks of understanding. For philosopher John Searle, language played an equally significant role. In Searle’s book *The Construction of Social Reality*, he opens with a puzzle that concerned him for a long time: “that there are portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement. . . things that exist only because we believe them to exist. . . like money, property, government, and marriages. . . These contrast with such facts as that Mount Everest has snow and ice near the summit or that hydrogen atoms have one electron, which are facts totally independent of any human opinions” (1995, pp. 1–2). Those facts that rely on human agreement (“institutional facts”) differ from “brute facts” (like mountains, for example), which do not need human institutions for their existence. A notable example that Searle uses to explain this is money. It is through

human agreement that a piece of paper, metal, or even cryptocurrency is seen as a form of “money,” which is assigned a certain value (Searle 1995, pp. 2–3) and recognized as a medium of exchange for goods and services. Its value also depends on the market, so it can go up and down, or buy more or fewer things, dependent on inflation, and other variables. The shared understandings given to objects are referred to as “inter-subjective” meanings, which Adler explains as “collective knowledge” (1997).

Identity, Ideas and Mutual Constitution

At the core of social constructivism is the idea that international politics – and indeed human relations – are “socially constructed” rather than “given.” Its core ideas are based around three ontological positions relating to **identity**, **ideas**, and **mutual constitution**.

First, unlike realist theory which sees actors as “like units” which respond to external phenomena in the same way, constructivists argue that *who* actors think they are matters. **Identity** informs preferences and interests, so to understand why certain states behave the way they do on the international stage, paying attention to how their identities drive their interests and actions matters. Identities are formed through shared meanings and understandings of the world, which then brings in culture, “intersubjective” or shared meanings and norms and values. For neorealists, who take a structural explanation of international relations and argue that anarchy shapes world politics, states are “like units” – distinguished only by their distribution of power and capabilities – states were primed to behave the same way because the anarchic structure “instructs” them so. Whether a state is democratic or autocratic, for example, does not seem to matter for neorealists such as Kenneth Waltz (see ► [“Realist International Relations Theory and The Military”](#) by Schmidt in this volume), because the anarchic structure is what is important for understanding state behavior.

For constructivists, a focus on identity makes it possible to consider more deeply how domestic factors, ideas, discourses, cultures, and norms shape the interests of states and the choices states make. (It should be noted here that social constructivism is often seen as part of a broader set of theoretical approaches that are concerned with identity and discourses, such as ontological security and securitization. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to adequately cover these approaches, the Baumann chapter in this volume discusses securitization; for works on ontological security that speak to international security and aspects of the military, see Mützen (2006), Krahmman (2018), and Mälksoo (2018).) How shared culture and identity matters in international security can be illustrated with the example of nuclear weapons. How is it that western states like the UK, for example, do not fear thousands of nuclear weapons that the USA possesses, but worries about states like Iran or North Korea, who hold far fewer nuclear weapons? Constructivists say that to understand these sorts of questions, one cannot simply turn to material factors like military power – these do not explain why some states are seen as threats and others as

benign. What makes the UK feel “safe” in the matter of the USA’s nuclear arsenal is that these states have a shared identity – centuries of connection, friendship, shared beliefs and language, and similar cultures. The UK and the USA are part of NATO, so share alliance membership, but have also stood “shoulder to shoulder” in conflicts like Afghanistan and Iraq in response to global terrorism, which both states understand to be an existential threat to their “way of life.” Meaning is socially constructed – this epistemological claim suggests that depending on one’s position and perspective, knowledge and meaning produce different interpretations (Guzzini 2005, p. 498).

The second big claim of constructivism is that **ideas matter** – with rationalist theorizing, material factors take precedence. For neorealists, the relative material capabilities of states determine hierarchy and power in international relations. While constructivists do not deny the importance of material factors, they also argue that ideas also matter, and in some cases, matter more. An example of this can be seen in the rationalist understanding of behavior in warfare. While neorealists argued that attacking Iraq was not in the national interests of the USA and that containment was more effective (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003), neoconservative hawks determined otherwise. For neoconservatives, Saddam Hussein represented a threat because he was seen as an irrational actor that has been hostile toward the USA (Tunç 2005). His refusal to allow the UN weapons inspectors into Iraq during the buildup to war in 2003 was seen as irrational to many in the west. The superior military capabilities of the USA were a significant material advantage that *should* have compelled Iraq to avoid invasion. Yet Saddam did not want to appear weak to enemies such as Iran (Allen 2009).

Under a constructivist lens, the primacy of state survival in realist thought also undergoes reconsideration. In more historical examples, states that chose neutrality during times of war did so against strong material factors that would have potentially granted them safety and survival had they opted to join one side or the other. The realist reading of Thucydides’ account of the Melian Dialogue (431 BC) in the Peloponnesian War is seen as the classic illustration of power politics. The Athenians demand that neutral Melos side with them against Sparta. For the Athenians, the refusal of the Melians – the much weaker party – to submit and their preference for neutrality was an affront to their power. Only those with equal power could make such demands, and the Athenians make good on their threat to destroy the Melians, declaring that “might is right” and “the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides 1951, pp. 331–336). Realists have traditionally seen neutral states as weak and small, responding only to the external anarchic realm (Agius 2006). But a constructivist reading of the Melian Dialogue (Lebow 2001) shows how ideas rather than material factors played a role in the decision of the Melians, even if the outcome was grim (Agius 2006). Despite their position of material weakness, the Melians argued that freedom and justice are more important. During the First World War, Belgium, driven by a sense of honor, chose to fight Germany even though the Belgians risked and experienced catastrophic consequences (Steele 2008b).

Third, rather than see international relations as an anarchic realm where the lack of a central authority above states guarantees security, constructivism makes the

claim that agents and structures are **mutually constituted** or shaped by each other. As Onuf states: “Constructivism holds that people make society, and society makes people. This is a continuous, two-way process” (2013, p. 4). This matters because it suggests that international relations is more dynamic rather than fixed. Anarchy is not a given of the international system. Actors can see and interpret the world and approach it differently – therefore, “anarchy is what states make of it.” For Wendt, different “cultures” of anarchy were possible, which meant that the neorealist idea of a self-help system was limited to just a Hobbesian version that depended on military power for security. But Wendt also identified a Lockean culture that demonstrated some restraint in warfare and a Kantian culture that was guided more by cooperation (Wendt 1999). The logic of anarchy is but one way in which it is possible to imagine how the international system works.

This is a different way to think about and imagine the international realm beyond the narrow confines of rationalist power prescriptions. In this regard, although posited by Wendt as a “via media” (1992, 1999) or “middle ground” (Adler 1997) with rationalism, constructivism offers a different view of key concepts like power. **Power** in the constructivist sense is less concerned with material power but sees ideas and discourses as powerful; power can be exercised in different ways. In discursive terms, language can convey meaning and associations, and define what is considered within and outside the norms (see ► [“Poststructuralism in International Relations: Discourse and the Military”](#) by Baumann in this volume). Discourse has power because language can shape how we view phenomena – simple acts such as defining a conflict as one of terrorism, for example, then calls into effect a range of policy options associated with countering terrorism.

Contrastingly, neorealist prescriptions of power see it as hard, material, military power (such as large military forces or superior weapons) and are concerned with its distribution in the international system. Constructivism sees power in terms of what it does and means (Guzzini 2005); ideas have power (e.g., that democracies are “good”). Power is influenced by norms, ideas, and practices; in a constructivist reading, power depends on how it is used and what it means in the interaction of states. Whereas Morgenthau’s classical realism described *interests in terms of power* as a truism of international relations, in empirical terms, power might not be a driver for states interests and actions. Not all states interpret power in the material or hierarchical sense. Ideational or even soft power – the influence that is exerted that does not rely on “hard power” but rather attracts others to ideas and values (see ► [“Realist International Relations Theory and The Military”](#) by Schmidt in this volume) can be effective in global politics and choosing to go to war over ideas rather than material gains – or even to not take advantage of material gain and an increase in power, serve as examples. In this sense, power is a social category.

Norms and Culture in Constructivist Thought

How are self-understandings and identity constituted in the international realm? To dig deeper into what makes an agent or what structures global politics,

constructivists look to norms and culture to make sense of what represents or guides behavior and how ideas of self inform that. For realists, the material structure of the world matters. But for constructivists, it is social structure that is important (Farrell 2002, p. 52). Central to constructivism are concepts such as norms, institutions, and culture. Norms are shared beliefs, knowledge, and practice about the world – in this sense, they are *intersubjective*, meaning a norm can be understood and shared amongst actors. Norms are also expectations about behavior (these are called “regulatory norms” because they define acceptable behavior). A key illustration here is the norm of human rights, which is widely accepted by actors (Katzenstein 1996). The constructivist focus on norms is important for understanding teleological aspects of its idea of international relations – that ideas can change world politics (Hopf 1998). For example, norms can challenge practices and beliefs that are seen to be no longer fit for purpose. Norms that challenged ideas like genocide, apartheid, the use of nuclear weapons, how to treat prisoners of war, how combatants are defined, and the role of women in armed forces emerge in opposition to existing norms. They do not simply replace “bad” norms but become established through what Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) call a “norm cycle” where new ideas and shared understandings emerge, become instituted and normalized. An example of this can be seen in the case of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which was created in 2002 to hear cases of war crimes. Even though it was opposed by the USA, which did not want to subject its military forces to external war crime trials, it is an example of a “constitutive norm” (which creates “new actors, interests and categories of action” (Björkdahl 2002, pp. 15–16). Even so, more recently there has been some rejection of the ICC by a few African states, signaling that some states are unwilling to accept its authority. A further example of norm erosion can be seen in the norm against the use of torture. In the context of the global war on terror, US efforts to extract intelligence from suspected terrorists led to the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” which was widely seen to have abrogated or contested the global prohibition on the use of torture (Steele 2008a; see also Birdsall (2016) who argues that it worked to strengthen the anti-torture norm).

The nuclear taboo is another example of a regulative norm (prescribing non-use), but it was also a constitutive norm (associating the taboo with the idea that “civilized” nations would not resort to using nuclear weapons) (Tannenwald 1999). In the 1980s and 1990s, efforts to wind back the proliferation of nuclear weapons – which by this stage had reached staggering proportions, particularly in the USA and USSR – prompted scientists and nuclear experts, civil society organizations, and other actors, to form what is called “epistemic communities”. Epistemic communities are described by Peter Haas as “networks of knowledge-based communities with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within their domain of expertise.” They share intersubjective knowledge and beliefs and a “common policy enterprise,” tackling specific problems in relation to their professions (2016, p. 5) to push for norm change around nuclear proliferation and to reduce the arsenal of the superpowers. This had some success. But the nuclear issue is also important because it shows how competing ideas about norms co-exist or contrast – for example, former US President Donald Trump tried to change the norm around the use of

nuclear weapons, arguing for the ability to use “low yield” nuclear weapons and the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review returned to the idea that nuclear superiority mattered (Tannenwald 2018). This was seen as a backward step and a challenge to the taboo norm that had developed over preceding decades. At the same time, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) had successfully pushed for the UN to adopt the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2020.

The scope of military conduct can also be institutionalized, and constructivism provides a way to understand such processes. An example here is in what is generally called the laws of armed conflict, such as the Geneva Conventions, which sets the rules for how victims of war are to be treated, and the Hague Conventions (1899 and 1907), which addressed the conduct of war, such as the types of weapons permissible in warfare. The Geneva Convention (1949) is an example of an “international regime.” It is a social institution with norms, rules, and procedures to govern how civilians and combatants should be treated in war. Comprised of a series of conventions that go back to 1864, it is now a part of customary international law, so it applies to all states during warfare. Violation of the Geneva Conventions constitutes a war crime. While realists would argue that decision to go to war are based on rational state interests, constructivists would argue that the Geneva Convention represents the idea that war is a social and cultural practice and driven by moral considerations. As Tannenwald says, “[e]ven as states pursue their interests, they do so within a normative structure” (2017, p. 17). Moreover, the Geneva Convention is an example of both a regulative and a constitutive norm, in that it not only proscribes state behavior but established a new international normative order, creating expectations for international behavior. All of this came about through processes of socialization and persuasion, where interested groups such as NGOs, epistemic communities, and other actors not only successfully changed the norm around the treatment of civilians and combatants in warfare but instigated this norm as part of identity, and how states define right behavior. Of course, norms can be subjected to revision or even reversed. When the Bush administration introduced the category of “unlawful enemy combatant” in the global war on terror, these individuals were not afforded the protections under the Geneva Conventions (Tannenwald 2017, pp. 18–20; see also Katzenstein 1996).

Likewise, understanding sovereignty means recognizing the principle of non-interference in another state’s internal affairs, recognition of a state as an entity and associated rights that come with that: “all states recognize each other as sovereign, despite the huge differences in their ability to exert internal control and exercise international power” (Farrell 2002, p. 54; Wendt 1992; Hopf 1998). But norms are never static and this meaning has also changed over time – for instance, with the rise of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), sovereignty as an institution has become contingent on states fulfilling certain criteria – such as not committing human rights abuse. Norm shift around the idea of sovereignty can be seen in the pillars of R2P that say that if a state cannot or will not stop human rights abuses within its own territory, other states have a compelling reason to intervene. An example of this can be seen in the case of Libya in 2011, which is broadly hailed as a successful R2P intervention. As Luke Glanville illustrates, while there were

favorable conditions to ensure a successful R2P intervention (Gadaffi had made clear threats that evoked calls for genocide, the League of Arab States wanted international action and Libya had few allies), “[E]ven those states that refused to endorse the resort to military force. . . recognized the weight of the imperative to protect Libyan civilians. . . even if they disagreed over the means with which to do so” (2016, p. 193).

Likewise, culture plays a significant role in international security. Not all states respond to external phenomena in the same way, which invokes a need to consider how domestic and cultural factors shape the identity and interests of actors. Culture can refer to symbolic or evaluative standards that guide relations and provide meaning. This is particularly relevant to military studies in terms of understanding the strategic culture of specific states: culture can have an important influence on how states see security, how they interpret threat and train and organize their military forces. Germany and Japan, for example, had antimilitaristic strategic cultures after the Second World War which impacted their military engagement and organization (Berger 1996; Hagström and Gustafsson 2015). The strategic cultures of states are not the same: they are guided by “perceptions, beliefs, ideas and norms” that determine how states view the international system and how they use military force and priorities (Neumann and Heikka 2005, p. 6). Even among “security communities” such as the Nordic states, different strategic cultures can be found because they are informed by a range of historical and cultural experiences, with different experiences of war and conflict, membership of alliances, and other factors (see special issues of *Cooperation and Conflict* (2005) and *Global Affairs* (2018) for further discussions).

Seeing the world in this way – as mutually constituted, driven by the interests of actors which relies on their ideas of themselves and others, and their approach to phenomena – brings about different possibilities in international relations and security. In this sense, under a constructivist lens, key concepts like sovereignty and power can take on different meanings compared to how they are understood in realist frameworks or defense-oriented establishments.

Social Constructivism and Military Studies

Constructivism can produce richer understandings of the very basic questions that construct military studies: enemy perceptions, how identity drives threat/amity/cooperation in international relations, how states and actors respond to threat and the meanings that certain types of warfare involve, the stories told about war and what it means to be secure. Rather than see security and conflict in the same way, actors will interpret and pursue security based on the ideas, norms, identities, and values that have meaning for them. How militaries assess and interpret threat can be related to culture, intersubjective meanings, and social networks and understandings. Constructivists also emphasize how domestic norms and values play a role in how states and their militaries approach conflict or understand the causes of conflict. While states may choose to participate in war – or not – for strategic or material

reasons, it is often ideational justifications (i.e., related to justice, values or existential threat) that provide the compelling argument for or against war.

This also goes to the foundation of questions of the causes of war. As Farrell tells us, liberals and realists do not agree on what prevents war – is it democracy (as liberals would contend?) or alliances (as realists would argue?). Constructivism can explain how identity shapes interaction in the international realm – for instance the assumption that when states regard each other as liberal democracies they are less likely to go to war with each other. This goes against realist reliance on a world structured by anarchy that compels states to behave in certain ways, regardless of what sort of states they are (Farrell 2002, pp. 66–67).

Constructivism is relevant to military studies in numerous ways. Consider the shared norms that define military conduct and the institutions that have evolved around military practice; from the Geneva Conventions to the classic texts on warfare that are part of military training, a process of social interaction is taking place where norms are learned, and culture and identity are shaped. Recent efforts to ensure gender equality in militaries represent a normative shift, affecting operations and culture. In military exercises with other nations, states share practices and ideas and in doing so, learn from each other. This social learning aspect differs from realism's prescriptive approach that says nations will follow the strongest militaries to develop their strength and technological prowess – with the anarchic structure of the international system guiding this logic. For liberals, the belief that liberal ideas such as democracy and the free market are ideas to be shared to make the world a better place suggests a transfer of ideas rather than an exchange of ideas. How militaries assess and interpret threat can be related to culture, intersubjective meanings, and social networks and understandings. Constructivists also emphasize how domestic norms and values play a role in how states and their militaries approach conflict or understand the causes of conflict.

Constructivist ideas are present when attention is turned to alliances and security communities. Writing in the 1950s, Karl Deutsch differentiated between amalgamated and pluralistic security communities, with the former referring to a security community with a shared government, and the latter involving an integrated yet separated political structure. Trust, collective identity, shared norms, and intersubjective meanings are important for alliances and security communities, helping to ensure collective vision and purpose (Adler and Barnett 1998). States may join military alliances to bandwagon with stronger powers, as realists tell us. But some states refuse to do this, even if it is in their material interests to do so (see the example of neutral states in this chapter). Moreover, military alliances are increasingly not just about physical security but about binding together states with shared interests, identities, and norms. As Koschut (2014, p. 525) explains, this can “transform the behaviour of states from a self-help manner to trust-building.” Think here about realist logic at the end of the Cold War – with the demise of bipolarity, NATO should have gone the same way as the Warsaw Pact. After all, these were Cold War institutions whose purpose was now over with the end of superpower politics. But NATO transformed itself into something more than a military alliance. Its 1999 Strategic Concept altered the organization from a Cold War alliance to something

more akin to Deutsch's idea of a security community that was based on common values, norms, and identity, making democracy and human rights central. It brought former Warsaw Pact nations into its fold and strengthened convergence around normative issues such as human rights through social learning (Gheciu 2005; Fierke and Wiener 1999). Moreover, how NATO made this successful transition and ensured its survival relied on the dominant ideas about how the Cold War ended. Where liberals would declare that the west "won," proving capitalism and democracy were the only workable ways to organize societies, in a constructivist reading, the end of the Cold War was largely down to the changes that were taking place in the former Soviet Union under Gorbachev (Risse-Kappen 1994).

Constructivist explanations of different phenomena related to the military can highlight how norms and identity come into play. The growth of Private Military Companies (PMCs) or Private Military Security Contractors (PMSCs) in the 1990s and their increased use in conflicts has been a consequence of a range of different factors: increasing neo-liberalization, cuts to defense budgets and a desire for states to outsource security. Norms and regulatory instruments around the use of PMSCs and in what capacity they are used have emerged with the view to regulating them (Percy 2016, p. 221). A constructivist lens on PMCs, however, reveals how questions of national identity can also be central to their use. Hilde van Meegdenburg argues that in the case of Denmark, the use of PMSCs has been limited because it is not seen to align with Danish values. Denmark exhibits of "soft" form of neoliberalism compared to that of the USA or UK, affecting views of the role of the market in terms of outsourcing security; moreover, Denmark has "hard" commitments to international humanitarian law which "is likely to have tempered" direct engagement of PMSCs (2019, pp. 35–36).

Criticisms of Social Constructivism

While constructivism has made significant inroads into IR theorizing, it does not mean that it is unproblematic or immune from criticism. Critiques of constructivism tend to come from three areas: rationalist criticisms, issues over how constructivists see identity, and finally, criticism that constructivism is apolitical.

Rationalist critiques relate to constructivist methodology and epistemological claims. These criticisms are predominantly about where constructivism claims to fit in IR (as the "middle ground" between rationalist and reflectivist approaches) and its methodological commitments. Conventional constructivists like Wendt see similarities between constructivism and rationalist perspectives and methodologies. One of the big problems for rationalists, (When considering critiques of constructivism, it is important to note that those critiques are guided by the underlying epistemological and ontological positions of rationalist or other forms of theorizing.) for example, is that ideas and norms are hard to "test" empirically (Moravcsik 1999); they are intangible things that are difficult to measure or quantify, and it is hard to know if they played a significant role in affecting behavior (Farrell 2002, p. 60). What if behavior was due to factors other than norms or ideas? This criticism over

methodology, it should be noted, does not wholly apply to the conventional strand of constructivism, which Wendt says can employ positivist scientific methods to verify or falsify claims (Wendt 1999); for example, to know something about a state's military culture, one could look to opinion polls, regulations, training manuals, and the curricula at military academies that can provide data or information about how ideas and norms inform approaches to military organization and culture (Farrell 2002, pp. 60–61).

Second, there is a division between what is generally called conventional and critical constructivism (Hopf 1998), largely over questions of state centrality and treatment of identity. Wendt tends to view state identity in a singular way which can omit its complexity. Critical constructivists prefer to examine state identity in terms of its wider story (Fierke and Jørgensen 2001). For example, when considering what national identity means for a state like the UK, critical constructivists would include “forgotten” experiences or identities that make up its multicultural society, rather than just define British identity as white. Critical constructivists would seek to include different identities in how they understand “the nation” and present a more complex picture of what identity means and how it is contested and can be deconstructed (Fierke 2001). Critical constructivists pay greater attention to issues of power and dominant discourses that construct “national identity.”

Third, critical scholars argue that constructivism is deeply flawed because it is apolitical, does not adequately analyze categories such as norms, or simply resurrects rationalist ideas. Identity and culture can be problematic categories and distract from other factors that can explain international relations, such as capitalism or patriarchy (Kurki and Sinclair 2010). And while the focus on norms is important, there is an overwhelming tendency to examine “good norms” – there's often the assumption that norms are “good” or ethical without critically analyzing what makes them “good” and what they mean for international change (Erskine 2012; Kowert and Legro 1996). Moreover, for some, constructivism is problematic because it is seen as apolitical and its efforts to form a “via media” with rationalism bring the state back in (Weber 1999; Zehfuss 2002). Constructivism's overwhelming focus on the state and state agents obscures other actors and processes. Conventional constructivism is not interested in “replacing one reality of world politics with another. Rather it seeks to explore how the current reality evolved” (Farrell 2002, p. 59).

Summary

Constructivism has provided a broader approach to understanding international relations and security beyond rationalist frameworks. Doing so has opened up the field to bring in different explanations of global politics that can delve deeper into how culture and identity play a role in determining state interests. Moreover, one of constructivism's strongest contributions has been in relation to the agency-structure debate, showing how mutual constitution provides a different reading of world politics and international *relations* but also opens the possibility for change. In this sense, constructivism is really at its core a social theory of international relations

because the focus on identity and interactions show how clashes and cooperation manifest in the global arena.

While arguments remain about constructivism's ontological commitments and efforts to build a bridge between rationalist and reflectivist approaches, its relevance for military studies can be widely seen in terms of how it can broaden thinking about how to see and respond to other actors in terms of security and cooperation. Understanding how ideas about danger and threat are socially constructed, and how states form social relations in the international system is a key starting point in discussions about global security. The way in which issues are constructed and interpreted as threatening can also depend heavily on identity and views of the external realm. While some of the major criticisms of constructivist thought should be at the forefront when considering security and military problems through this lens, the potential to see the world in more dynamic terms is one of constructivism's leading contributions. This dynamism, it should also be noted, may not always be "positive" – ideas about security can also regress or become less normative or progressive. Nonetheless, constructivist approaches to identity, norms, and ideas about the world and its social relations can impact understandings of what it means to be secure.

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Further Reading

- Katzenstein, P. J. (Ed.). (1996). *The culture of national security. Norms and identity in world politics*. New York: Columbia University Press. (One of the foundational texts that covers chapters on security and strategic culture, albeit from a mainly conventional perspective).
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Wendt's book is vital reading for all constructivist scholars and his ontological and epistemological position on constructivism is set out more fully here. For military studies scholars, his three cultures of anarchy help capture how conventional constructivism relates to military affairs and international security).

Zehfuss, M. (2002). *Constructivism in international relations: The politics of reality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (A vital critique of conventional constructivism that uses the case study of Germany and the debates to join in military interventions outside the NATO area).

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