Constructivist Approaches in International Relations Theory: Puzzles and Promises

Antje Wiener

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Antje Wiener[1]

Queen's University Belfast

a.wiener@qub.ac.uk

Abstract:

By raising the question of what made constructivism possible the paper discusses the puzzle and promises of constructivist scholarship in IR. It is argued that the communicative style which coined constructivism as a movement provides the key. Two puzzles are the focus, first, a lack of epistemological overlap, secondly, a disciplinary culture of consecutive debates which reached their high point of non-communication with the so-called Third Debate. However, while the constructivist movement gathered influence as a reference frame in the late 1990s, it is neither genuine to international relations theory nor does it originate in the 1990s. Why and how did constructivism manage to bring such a diverse group of scholars to one table? *Section 2* of the paper develops the argument and introduces the concept of framing to understand the puzzle of conversation in IR. *Section 3* recalls the emergence of constructivism, identifies the theoretical discussions and the significant conceptual moves. *Section 4* summarizes the value-added and flags 'norms' research as the core of constructivist political science.

Keywords: Constructivism, Norms, Theory, International Relations, Political Science

1 Introduction: Communication Out of a Paradigmatic Battle Field

The academic context of International Relations theory (IR) is usually framed as a history of consecutive debates, beginning with the first debate between idealists and realists, proceeding with the second debate between historicists and scienticists and reaching a high point of controversy with the infamous "Third Debate" between positivists and post-positivists.[2] It has been observed that it was the fourth debate, namely the exchange between rationalist and constructivists (see **Table 1**), which resembled an actual conversation among different theoretical positions in the discipline for the very first time. What had been perceived as debates had, in fact, little in common with the practice of discursive interaction or even deliberation with a view to be persuaded by the better argument of the conversation partner at any time throughout the first debates. In short, when paradigmatic competition was the issue, the discipline appeared more like an academic battlefield where participants took no prisoners.

Table 1: Framing Debates

Time	1920s - 1930s	1950s - 1960s	1980s	1990s
Frames	*First Debate*	*Second Debate*	*Third Debate*	*Fourth Debate*
Paradigms	Idealism vs. Realism	Scientific Behaviourism vs. Traditionalism	Post-Positivists vs. Positivists	Constructivists vs. Rationalists vs. Reflectivists
Communication	unilateral	bilateral	bilateral	Multilateral
Focus	Institutions vs. Interests	Science vs. History	Epistemology: Positivism vs. Post-positivism/Critical Theory	Ontology: social vs. material capabilities
Innovation	State system vs. Society of states	Behavioural explanation	Explanation vs. Understanding	Causal vs. Constitutive Explanation and/or Understanding

What is surprising is that the fourth debate could emerge from its battle-ridden disciplinary context, which was best known to students of the 1990s as a sequence of "interparadigm battles" (Lapid 1989). After all, third debaters kept with the practice of binary positioning as the dominant disciplinary practice in the 1980s. This style reflected the either/or-logic of cold war politics, and the central structuring element of modern philosophy, which has been long

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[2] See most explicitly Waever's observation of a 'state of war' (1997, 22), see also Lapid (1989), Whitworth (1989).

criticised by feminist scholarship.[3] In the 1990s, however, constructivism was able to break with the traditional battlefield behaviour. Indeed, constructivism turned into a buzzword in international relations and European integration theorising, so much so, that the notion of a "constructivist turn" (Checkel 1998) became widely accepted in the community. Constructivists were found to be "seizing the middle ground" (Adler 1997) and aspired to construct a compromise based on a "via media through the Third Debate" (Wendt 1999, 39-40). In short, the constructivist move contributed to "establishing the middle-ground" (Christiansen et al. 1999, 535-537, 542-544) between the mutually exclusive paradigmatic positions of the so-labelled rationalists and reflectivists, by taking a third position above a base-line of a binary relationship between positivism and postmodernism allowed for a web of communications to emerge (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Core Theoretical Positions
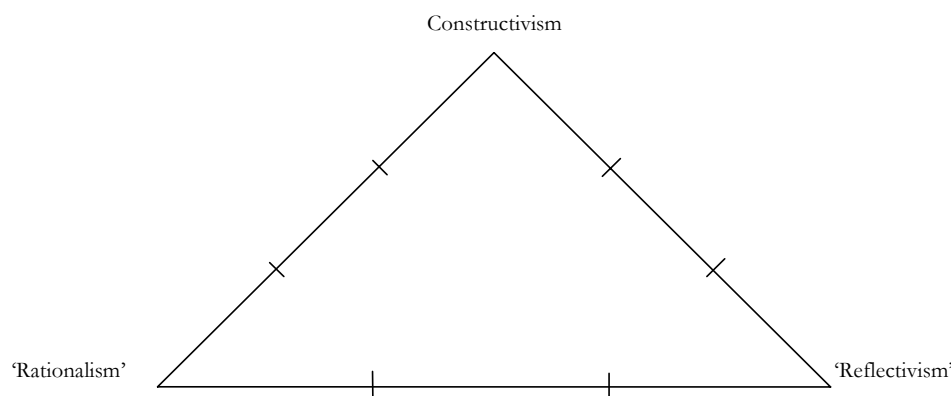
Source: Christiansen, Jørgensen and Wiener, 1999: 532[4]

The metatheoretical move of taking a third position while focusing on middle-range theorising, *i.e.* discussing the ontologies (identity, norms, ideas, discursive practices) created an opening for 'friendly' debates (Risse and Wiener 1999) which moved IR theory forward from the grid-lock of binary positioning. In the wake of this move, the popularity of constructivism as a label for a strong movement in international relations theory and theories of European integration still

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[3] See e.g. List and Studer (1989) the work of Judith Butler, Susan Hekman, Carol Pateman and many others, as well as in IR for example the work of Sandra Whitworth, Spike Peterson and Cyntha Weber, respectively.
[4] Note that this figure's baseline displays the binary approach to IR theorising as it has been constructed by rationalists. The opposition between 'rationalists' and 'reflectivists' was a construction of Robert Keohane (1988).

stands strong two decades after the first constructivist moves in the 1980s.[5] In the process, empirical research has produced detailed and comparative case studies, for example, on the impact of norms such as human rights, minority rights, citizenship rights or environmental standards; on changing strategic positions in global politics and games international actors play: on the role of socialisation in international organisations; on the diffusion of specific administrative cultures; and on the influence of different rationales on compliance with global norms, principles and procedures identified by international law.

Two Puzzles

In recalling the movement's emergence, substance and the challenges lying ahead, this article raises the question of what made the constructivist movement possible. In the following, I argue that much of its popularity is due to the communicative style, which coined constructivism as a movement. Does it, however, offer potential beyond its capacity to raise stimulating research questions? Why did interest in constructivism increase in the 1990s and how was it possible for constructivism to bring together scholars from such a broad range of intellectual backgrounds? The use of constructivist language by a set of scholars from backgrounds or bases as diverse as neofunctionalism, the English School, the Frankfurt School, the Copenhagen School or the Stanford School is puzzling on two grounds (Moravcsik 1999, Haas 2001, Dunne 1995, Risse 2000, Finnemore 1996, Long 1995). First, the research tools and conceptual assumptions of the scholars affiliated with the various approaches differ to the point of being mutually exclusive. Secondly, the discipline of international relations has been characterised by a culture of consecutive debates, which reached their high point of non-communication, disinterest and misunderstanding with the third debate. Why and how did constructivism, then, manage to bring these scholars to sit at one table?[6] To answer this question, I examine constructivism as a movement in the subdiscipline of international relations. This movement gathered influence as a shared frame of reference in the late 1990s (Checkel 1998), yet it is neither genuine to international relations theory nor does it originate in the 1990s.[7]

To understand how the movements' emergence from within the context of international

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[5] Note that while appreciating Onuf's 'World of our Making' (1989) as one of the founding constructivist works in IR, this article emphasises the role Kratochwil's (1984, 1989, Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986) and Wendt's early work (1987) especially the proposition to incorporate the Giddensian approach to 'structuration' into IR theory as a key step into the constructivist direction, played in moving away from the polarity of the Third Debate.

[6] See Gabriel Almond's argument for the opposite move, for example, to describe the situation in political science in the 1980s (Almond 1996).

[7] See for example the works of Simmel, Luhmann, Luckman and Berger and others.

relations theory was possible, I recall the theoretical questions raised by two major constructivist moves – one epistemological the other ontological – and identify the contents of the emerging tool-kit. The article proceeds in three further sections. *Section 2* develops the argument and introduces the concept of framing from proposed by the resource mobilisation approach in social movement theories to understand the puzzle of conversation in IR. *Section 3* recalls the emergence of constructivism with the debating culture, identifies the theoretical discussions which established constructivism as a frame facilitating communication and the significant conceptual moves which allowed for the inclusion of 'the social' into political science. *Section 4* summarizes the value-added and flags 'norms' research as the core of constructivist political science and the sign-post concept of its limited bridge-building capacities.

2 Interaction on the Middle Ground

Constructivists focus on middle-range theorizing and include the role of social factors in world politics. They usually produce more agreement with regard to ontological issues such as the general assumption of the social construction of things than with regard to the epistemological basis of the respective research question which needs to be asked (Fierke 2006). Constructivism's quality of facilitating theoretically informed deliberation among scholars has been characterized as "an attempt [...] to *build a bridge* between the widely separated positivist/materialist and idealist/interpretive philosophies of social science". (Adler 1997, 323; Checkel 2000; emphasis added AW) It has led to enhanced theorizing of the middle ground even though bridge building is not generally welcomed.[8] Despite reservations expressed towards the concept of 'friendly debates' and the call to evoke the tradition of 'fault-line politics' in IR instead,[9] the recurring reference to bridge building has been a marker of the movement (Zuern and Checkel 2005). It has become a key property of constructivism; yet, it may also turn into the prime obstacle to reaching new theoretical high ground. The primary interest of the following sections lies in exploring the role of constructivism as a movement within a particular context and as voicing a particular message. The focus is therefore on

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[8] This is most explicitly expressed by Risse (2000) who summarises extensive debates among rationalist and constructivist institutionalist discussions in the German Journal of International Relations.

[9] A number of scholars have suggested, for example, a classification of constructivist approaches according to their subscription to positivist assumptions, identifying them as 'modern' constructivists and, in the process evoking the camp mentality of the arguable helpful *debating culture* in international relations theories (IR), see e.g. Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner 1998; Waever 1997, 24; Smith 1999, and the critical response to Smith 1999 and Moravcsik 1999 by Risse and Wiener 1999.

interaction among constructivists, reflecting reference to theoretical and disciplinary parameters (*i.e.* experience; how situated within the disciplinary debates?) and formulating new analytical categories (what is the result of shared constructivist debates?).

How was it possible, then, for constructivism to have such an influential input on the debate in the discipline that two decades later, realists seek to be included in conversations with constructivsts?[10] For an answer to this query, this article will apply the constructivist methodology of constitutive explanation (Wendt 1998). I proceed in two steps. The first step identifies the constitutive aspects of this development. The second step seeks to explain why constructivism, and not, for example, reflectivism (as in the Third Debate) became so vital to the fourth debate. The explanation is elaborated by drawing on the concept of 'frames', which provides actors with a codified reference to a set of complex issues (Snow and Benford 1992). This concept has been applied in particular in social movement theories to explain the cyclic emergence of protest movements. In concluding, the article highlights the importance of two constructivist assumptions in further developing the mosaic of constructivist theorising. These include first, the importance of ideas as social capabilities which matter in addition to material capabilities; and secondly, the assumption of the dual quality of norms as both structuring and constituted through interaction. These two constructivist assumptions are key to the project of extending the communicative movement constructivism had initiated within international relations theory towards conversations across boundaries. Such conversations have begun for example with international lawyers. And a common yet rather contested interface between IR and international law is the constitution of the normative structure in world politics based on discussions about incorporating the good life or, resorting to positivism (Slaughter 2004, Reus-Smit 2001, Koskenniemi 2002). Here, an extension from the heretofore strong constructivist focus on organisation theory and language games which studied logics of action (consequentialism, appropriateness and arguing) towards the incorporation of normative theorising based on the principles of democratic constitutionalism (Tully 2006) will play a key role.

Following the earlier periods of theorising which has brought in concepts from law, science and economics during the various paradigmatic 'debates' in an predominantly Anglo-Saxon international relations theory (Dougherty and Pfalzgraff 1996, Waever 1998), more recently, constructivists have drawn on disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and philosophy. These

moves usually focus on individuals or groups of people rather than states, international organisations and non-government actors in world politics. Subsequently, while leaving paradigm battles over epistemological issues aside and by focusing on ontology, the analytical tool-kit of international relations theories has been enriched through the incorporation of 'structuration' (Wendt 1987), 'norms' (Kratochwil 1989, Katzenstein 1996, Finnemore 1996, Klotz 1996), 'logics of behaviour' (March and Olsen 1989, Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999), 'identity' and 'framing' (Keck and Sikkink 1998), 'intersubjectivity' (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986) and 'socialisation' (Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999, Johnston 2001, Zuern and Checkel 2005).

The following offers a view from the outside in to assess the moves constructivists undertook to get to this point. The methodological starting point for this exercise is provided by social movement theorists and their efforts to explain the ebb and flow of protest mobilization i.e. "temporal clustering" and "the cyclicity" of activity (Snow and Benford 1992, 134). Here, a shared frame is considered to explain the motivation to act. A 'frame' is defined as

> "an interpretative schemata (sic) that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action within one's present or past environment." (Snow and Benford 1992, 136-37)

These frames help individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label events" (Goffman 1974, 21; c.f. Snow and Benford 1992, 137). Their main function lies in focusing and punctuating, as well as in the attribution of blame and the articulation of a number of events into a simpler code. The importance of collective action frames is not necessarily based on changed capabilities such as new ideas. Instead, the success of framing is caused by ways of *presenting* issues. That is, "what gives a collective action frame its novelty is not so much its innovative ideational elements as the manner in which activists articulate or tie them together". (Snow and Benford 1992, 138)

This definition of a collective action frame suggests that the key of a frame is to communicate a particular understanding of a particular setting. With a view to the debating culture, which was established since the 1920s, the concept of framing offers an understanding of what the debates, and according to this paper's focus, the constructivist debate in particular, mean for the development of the discipline. This approach suggests that the specific elements of a debate

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[10] See e.g. Adrian Hyde-Price's presentation at the 35th Anniversary Conference of *Millennium: Journal of*

matter less when compared to how the debate is presented within the discipline. Based on this analysis from the 'outside' we can therefore conclude that constructivists are brought together by a shared interest in communication about constructivism. This is not necessarily an agreement about the specific meaning of constructivism as a Lakatosian research programme, as a (meta-)theory, or a new method, but it conceptualises the constructivist turn as a move to provide a frame which proved attractive to IR scholars. Taking this observation as a starting point for explaining the rising interest in constructivist approaches, means to ask the question of how are frames constructed? Do they result from strategic action, structural processes, or, both? To pursue these questions, the argument turns to the history of the discipline and the debates which set the framework for today's discussion about constructivism.

To summarize, I argue that the major grand theory debates and their cumulation in the current most communicative fourth debate which focuses on the value of a social constructivist research programme – as opposed to reflectivist approaches on the one hand, and rationalist approaches, on the other – present themselves as a series of movements. These movements have developed in cycles according to changes of context, ideas, and interests of the actors, *i.e.* the social scientists involved in the debate. It is striking to observe that while the first three debates were largely led in a non-verbal and little interactive manner with the third debate leaving people on less than speaking terms, barely bothering to read what the other camp produced. The current fourth debate is, surprisingly and distinctively, characterized by verbal interaction among various parties. Different from the previous debates, it was even found to be "stimulating" (Peterson and Bomberg 2000, 30). What explains this shift? The puzzle of friendly communication within an otherwise rather hostile context of paradigmatic battles can be explained by its role as a master frame in the social sciences, and, especially a collective action frame, which has been conducive towards communication among IR scholars of different stripes.

3 A New Style of Communication and the Launch of a Movement

The first debate in IR was largely constructed from a realist point of view cast backwards in history after the WW II; the second debate included more interaction impersonated by leading scholars in the respective fields of diplomatic history and the social sciences (Waever 1997, 10,

11 respectively); the third debate mainly consisted in a battle over paradigms which included little interaction but mass participation in each camp, finally settling at the poles of a line. By contrast, the fourth debate has moved away from the *incommunicado* situation at the respective poles and has developed a new interactive style of communication. This fourth debate was framed in a particular way. If it is true that

> "(m)aster frames are to movement-specific collective action frames as paradigms are to finely tuned theories. [...] master frames can be construed as functioning in a manner analogous to linguistic codes in that they provide a grammar that punctuates and syntactically connects patterns of happenings in the world." (Snow and Benford 1992, 138)

then constructivism may indeed offer something like a master frame. Over time this movement has led to the incorporation of theoretic bits and pieces from other disciplines following a functionalist logic. Thousands of pages of sociological constructivist writings later, one of the most seminal references of sociological constructivism which has coined a definition of norms underlying core hypotheses of constructivist work. Accordingly, norms are defined "to describe collective expectations for the proper behaviour of actors with a given identity" (Katzenstein 1996, 5). Building on this insight, the "liberal community hypothesis" now applies norms as structures, identity as given, and studies conditions of behavioural change that matter to international politics (Schimmelfennig 2003). The import of the concept of 'socialisation' defined as "the process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community" (Zuern and Checkel 2005, 1046) sustains this assumption about stable structures and adaptable individual behaviour.

The constructivist move thus built on theoretical input provided by the third debaters on the one hand, and the import of analytical tools from the neighbouring disciplines of neo-institutionalism – especially organisation sociology (Powell and DiMaggio 1991, Thomas et al 1987), on the other. The shared view was "that Neorealism and Neoliberalism are 'undersocialized' in the sense that they pay insufficient attention to the ways in which the actors in world politics are socially constructed. This common thread has enabled a three-cornered debate with Neorealists and Neoliberals to emerge." (Wendt 1999, 3-4). This perspective facilitated a frame of reference for an increasing amount of work in international relations theory and in European integration theory as well. In early days when the debating culture was still moving according to the routinised practices of the paradigmatic battleground, constructivists were often distinguished from positivists by binary positioning. That is, they

were lumped together with those labelled as the 'other' from what was considered as the 'rationalist' or 'positivist' mainstream. Accordingly, they were assumed to fall under the "reflectivist" or "post-positivist" label (Keohane 1988). Wendt stresses correctly that in

> "this 'Third Debate' the field has polarized into two main camps: (1) a majority who think science is an epistemically privileged discourse through which we can gain a progressively truer understanding of the world, and (2) a large minority who do not recognize a privileged epistemic status for science in explaining the world out there. The former have become known as 'positivists' and the latter as 'post-positivists', [...] it might be better to call them 'naturalists' and 'anti-naturalists,' or advocates of 'Explanation' and 'Understanding' respectively. In any case, *the two sides are barely on speaking terms today*, and seem to see little point in changing this situation." (Wendt 1999, 38-39; emphasis added, AW)

The debating culture set the context for the constructivist turn and the clout it has come to develop. The theoretical debates within each camp of the third debate pushed the key conceptual concern which came to be the launching argument for constructivists to the fore. *Two moves* brought the debaters back to the table on the so-called middle ground.

Move 1: Epistemological Queries

The first move was epistemological. It highlighted the role of intersubjectivity in regime analysis. A key theoretical problem had been identified in a seminal article by Kratochwil and Ruggie as the contradiction between epistemology and ontology that is immanent to regime theory.[11] They argued that unless the constructed nature of norms was theoretically addressed, regime analysis would continuously face the problem of contradictions between (positivist) epistemology and a social ontology (norms). As they wrote,

> "The emphasis on convergent expectations as the constitutive basis of regimes gives regimes an inescapable intersubjective quality. It follows that we *know* regimes by their principled and shared understandings of desirable and acceptable forms of social behavior. Hence, the ontology of regimes rests upon a strong element of intersubjectivity. Now, consider the fact that the prevailing epistemological position in regime analysis is almost entirely positivistic in orientation. Before it does anything else, positivism posits a radical separation of subject and object. It then focuses on the

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[11] This section draws on Christiansen, Joergensen and Wiener 1999, 533-539, 542-543 as Wiener 2003.

'objective' forces that move actors in their social interactions. Finally, intersubjective meaning, where it is considered at all, is inferred from behavior. Here, then, we have the most debilitating problem of all: epistemology fundamentally contradicts ontology!" (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 764; emphasis in text)

The problem arose on the basis of a lacking match between the concept of regime as entailing converging expectations on principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures in a given area of IR (Krasner 1983, 2), on the one hand, and an epistemological framework that assumed actors' self-interests as given, on the other. As Kratochwil and Ruggie pointed out, the perception of shared norms was conditional on an analytical framework that allowed for an understanding of intersubjectivity. The neo/realist approach was not fit to conceptualize intersubjectivity and could *ergo* not adequately assess the role of regimes. They identified the theoretical challenge thus,

"[I]n many [...] puzzling instances, actor *behavior* has failed adequately to convey intersubjective *meaning*. And intersubjective meaning, in turn, seems to have had considerable influence on actor behavior. It is precisely this factor that limits the practical utility of the otherwise fascinating insights into the collaborative potential of rational egoists which are derived from laboratory or game-theoretic situations. To put the problem in its simplest terms: in the simulated world, actors cannot communicate and engage in behavior; they are condemned to communicate through behavior. In the real world, the situation of course differs fundamentally." (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 764-65; emphases in text)

Apart from denying the problematic situation, two solutions were on offer. One option was to adopt an *intersubjective ontology* that would be compatible with a positivist epistemology. The other was to *open epistemology* towards more interpretative strains. At the time, the last option appeared preferable (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 765-766). However, the constructivist turn and ensuing debates in the 1990s demonstrated that the other options had not been dismissed altogether. Indeed, the preference to combine a positivist position with an intersubjective ontology has become widely shared among constructivists.

Move 2: Ontological Move And Ensuing Constructivist Debates

The second move was ontological. It suggested that while the structural power of anarchy was key to state interests (Waltz 1979), it was not exclusively the result of material capabilities but

depended on state identities which were the result of interaction among states as well (Wendt 1992). This view stressed the relation between social interaction of states and the structure of world politics. It drew on Giddens' structuration theory (1979, 1984) as a second order or meta-theoretical approach to IR theorizing (Wendt 1987, 1991). More recently, others have contributed to refine sociological constructivism by elaborating on the cultural environment and the role of norms in security politics in particular (Finnemore 1996; Klotz 1995, Katzenstein ed. 1996, Jepperson et al. 1996). Subsequently, IR theorists developed different ways of approaching the impact of norms on international relations. It is possible to roughly distinguish two constructivist positions. The first group of scholars drew on insights from the macro-sociological institutionalism of the Stanford School around John Meyer and from organisational sociology (DiMaggio and Powell 1991, March and Olson 1989) thus taking a distinctly sociological constructivist perspective which is now labelled 'modern' or 'conventional' constructivism (Finnemore 1996, 2001, Katzenstein ed. 1996, Hopf 1998, Checkel 2005). The major goal of this program is to take the impact of social factors such as ideas and, more specifically, norms seriously. This view maintains that while symbolic interaction constructs meaning, it is assumed that social reality does exist beyond the theorists' view. Following this logic, sociological constructivism stresses the importance of empirical work in order to approach the world out there. More recent work takes this perception of norms further, seeking to assess the process of interaction empirically, for example by studying processes of "arguing" (Risse 2000, Mueller 2004) or "persuasion" (Checkel 2001).

The second group of scholars consider the world 'out there' as constructed in itself, thus employing a view that seeks to understand the ways in which the world is constructed. Taking the issue of 'construction' as their core, these constructivists work with the Wittgensteinian focus on the role of language as constructive towards norms and rules, and/or apply the two basic assumptions of critical theory *i.e.* reflexivity and the oughtness of societal change. They have accordingly been labelled "consistent constructivists" (Fierke 2006, Zuern and Checkel 2005) and "critical constructivists" (Hopf 1998, Reus-Smit 2003), respectively. Following the concept of language games, consistent constructivists assume that interaction is not reduced to 'speechless' but communicative behavior. Instead, action is conceptualised to include the practice of speaking a particular language (Kratochwil 1989, Fierke 1998, Zehfuss 1998). The assumption is that beyond mere utterances, language constitutes meaning within specific contexts. If successfully performed, speech acts cause a particular meaning that, in turn, leads to rule-following. This version of constructivism seeks to explore the constructive power of

language interrelated with rules that are inherent to a specific social context (Hollis and Smith 1990; Onuf 1989; Kratochwil 1989; Fierke 1998; Buzan et al. 1998).

As Reus-Smit stresses, "[C]onstructivism is divided, however, between those who remain cognizant of the critical origins and potentiality of their sociological explorations, and those who have embraced constructivism simply as an explanatory or interpretive tool." (Reus-Smit 2003). Thus, critical constructivists would emphasise the role of intersubjectivity and the implications of contingent and contextual interaction for both societal change and the advancement of theory (Schwellnus 2006, Niessen and Herborth 2007, in press). They focus on theorising interaction with regard to the normative structure and its institutionalised principles and procedures in world politics as the core of any debates about fair and democratic governance in beyond-the-state contexts (Koskenniemi 2002). Taken together, however, all three constructivists strands, i.e. conventional, consistent, and critical constructivists share the observation of the construction of identity and interest that makes behavior in global politics relational rather than rational. This interface coins the general constructivist theoretical perspective that challenges both neorealist and neoliberal positions. While it is placed at a particular *shared time* given the larger trajectory of IR as a discipline, the actual theoretical input of constructivist debates is generated from *different places*, and indeed *communities* of IR scholars with their own intellectual path-dependencies. For example, debates in the UK, Scandinavia, Germany and Canadian IR have contributed to developments in constructivist thinking.[12]

Table 2: Communication and Methodological Focus

(-) shared methodological focus (+)		
(+) **width of** **communication** **(-)**		Fourth Debate *multi-lateral*
	Second Debate *Bilateral*	
	First Debate *unilateral*	Third Debate *bilateral*

The point of this brief review is to stress the intersubjective nature of constructivism itself.

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[12] For a good overview see Waever 1998; for the development, change and perception of intellectual debates on a global level see Berger and Luckman 1966, 1991.

Theorizing does not develop out of context. Instead, the respective political culture and the participants of a debate bear on the way theories, or, for that matter research programs are shaped, too.

Establishing The Middle Ground

The constructivist move allowed for a focus on the middle ground between 'rationalist' (neo/realist) and 'reflectivist' (postmodernist, poststructuralist) positions that held diametrically opposed epistemological assumptions. The move towards a third position in distance to both of the above (see **Figure 1**) allowed constructivists to develop positions in distance to yet in conversation with both of these incommensurable theoretical standpoints. This is exemplified by the fact that most constructivists do, indeed, take great pains in pointing out aspects of commonality with and distinction from both extreme poles. For example, Adler stresses that constructivists "juxtapose constructivism with rationalism and poststructuralism" to then "justify its claim to the middle ground."[13] That is, constructivists do not exactly "seize" the middle ground as a territory which has become available as the result of an interparadigm dispute (Christiansen et al. 1999, 2001). Instead, constructivist debates are part of a process that is best identified as establishing the middle ground. This process expands according to a logic of arguing over theoretical positions. Constructivists share the practice of distancing themselves from the rationalist and the reflectivist poles, respectively. This shared practice forms a distinguishable starting point of all constructivist approaches. While constructivists do not share one epistemological position, they agree on the relevance of ontology over epistemology. Consequently, constructivist positions do not converge on a third point of the theoretical triangle, but form a semi-circle over the two incommensurable poles of rationalist and reflectivist approaches. On the centre stage in 1990s, this process of theoretical positioning has largely focused on juxtaposing constructivist thinking with the two corner positions. Wendt, for example, positions himself thus

> "[G]iven my idealist ontological commitments, therefore, one might think that I should be firmly on the post-positivist side of this divide, talking about discourse and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing and objective reality. Yet, in fact, when it comes to the epistemology of social inquiry I am a strong believer in science - a pluralistic science to be sure, in which there is a significant role for 'Understanding,' but science just the same. I am a 'positivist'. In a sense this puts me in the middle of the

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[13] Adler 1997b, 321; see also Risse 1999, 1; Christiansen et al. 1999, 532

Third Debate, not because I want to find an eclectic epistemology, which I do not, but because I do not think an idealist ontology implies a post-positivist epistemology." (Wendt 1999, p. 39-40)

He points out that his substantive argument is "philosophical" and as such "cuts across the traditional cleavages in IR between Realists, (32-33) Liberals, and Marxists, supporting and challenging parts of each as the case may be. Readers will find much below that is associated usually with Realism: state-centrism, the concern with national interests and the consequences of anarchy, the commitment to science. There is also much associated with Liberalism: the possibility of progress, the importance of ideas, institutions, and domestic politics. There is a Marxian sensibility in the discussion of the state." (Wendt 1999, p. 32-33)

This semi-circle emerges as each constructivist position is formed by the distance to each pole on the baseline. This position is defined by three aspects. First, a preference of ontology over epistemology, second, a distinction from the incommensurable positions of rationalism and reflectivism, yet the ability to engage in talk with both, and, third, the variation in preferences for methodological tools (e.g. identity, speech-act, learning, persuasion, discourse). In a word, all constructivists keep a distance from the poles, they allow for variation amongst themselves, and they share the crucial role of ontology. The positions on the semi-circle which result from these theoretical preferences do keep with the principle of the theoretical triangle (see **Figure 1**), however, since their distance to the poles varies, so does their position on the semi-circle. Subsequently, the interface that ultimately results from positioning forms the shared middle-ground that is established by and through constructivist debates.[14] The new theoretical space provided by this process involves any chosen point on a half circle above the hypotenuse. The image of this semi-circle is key to constructivist theorizing because it allows us to assess the process of situating positions that emerged from debates within the middle ground. Different from the practice of "seizing" the middle ground—presumably, a strategic act of territorial conquest—the metaphor of establishing the middle-ground thus reflects the process of arguing about differing positions.

In sum, the constructivist move to a position in distance to yet not isolation from the baseline constructivists constituted not one but *various middle-ground positions*. While these positions differ amongst themselves, they take on the task of dealing with contradictions between

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[14] The Thales theorem of an angle inscribed in a semicircle is a right angle, represents this dialogue over theoretical approaches most accurately as one of establishing the middle-ground on a semi-circle in which the shared assumptions are represented by the interface of all triangles (Christiansen et al. 1999, 536, Wiener 2003).

epistemology and ontology that was once identified as a major challenge for IR scholars. While IR used to be a discipline structured by a first uni-lateral and then increasingly bilateral debating culture, the constructivist turn has facilitated a new style of multilateral communication. It thus allows for a discussion about theory which considers theory building to develop according to a *mosaic* (Diez and Wiener 2003) which is neither over-shadowed by either a Kuhnian battle for a singular valid *paradigm*, nor by the construction of Lakatosian epistemologically opposed camps which agree to disagree because of *incommensurable* theoretical assumptions. The most striking example of this development has been provided by constructivist debates among German IR scholars which involved rational choice and critical scholars alike, debating cooperation, the role of institutions, arguing and bargaining, and different logics of action beyond the state.[15]

Table 3: Types of Action and Logics of Behavior

Type of action	Logic	Rationale	Approach	Import from
Habitual	Appropriateness	Functionalist	Neo-/Realist, behaviourist	Organisation sociology
Communicative	Arguing	Functionalist/Normative	Conventional constructivist	Social philosophy
Strategic language games	Consequence	Functionalist/Constitutive	Consistent constructivist	Philosophy
Mutually constitutive	Contestedness	Normative	Critical constructivist	Democratic theory

Specifically the logic of arguing offers rational and normative elements as independent variables to the analysis of processes of cooperation (despite the assumption of anarchy). This has been successfully demonstrated by research on the influence of human rights norms in world politics. This research stresses the (rational) decision of actors who share particular norms, to make an argument with a view to persuade less convinced actors through socialization (communication, learning, arguing). This type of analysis involves the definition of global social norms such as, for example, respect for human rights, action that is constituted by and contributes to the construction of these norms, as well as the process of socialization which is initiated and shaped by these norms (Sikkink 1993, Risse et al. 1999, 12, Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 898). The following section identifies the details of the constructivist move as a

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[15] Among the effects of constructivism as a communication frame, the most convincing examples of ongoing conceptual debate is found in the German IR journal *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*. See Risse 2000, for a summary of this debate.

discussion despite ongoing "de-construction by our friendly ontological or epistemological neighbors". (Risse and Wiener 1999, 776).

The Value-Added: Stations on the Bridge

In the early 1990s, it had become clear that the pure rationalist and/or reflectivist positions singled out by a keynote address delivered at the 1988 American Political Science Association meeting were no longer sufficient to explain or understand world politics (Keohane 1988).[16] This article finds that the constructivist turn is characterized not only by growing talk about the middle-ground and bridge-building processes in the discipline but, indeed, by an increasing number of conversations among the various approaches to world politics. It was argued that the constructivist turn happened due to first, the historical context in world politics (binary perspective of world politics was challenged by end of cold war), secondly, the cultural environment (debating culture of the discipline) and thirdly, last but by no means least, in the wake of the third debate's critical questions about the value-added of positivist theorising which was unable to capture regime change in the late 1980s (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, Walker 1993, Onuf 1989). A key result was the shift away from the – silent – debates among mutually exclusive theoretical positions towards a generally more open attitude towards conversations about ontology and methodology. It was demonstrated that this shift did not occur at one point in time, but as a gradual process including a number of, often parallel, moves.

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[16] But see Keohane 1997 where he distinguishes between the 'normative optic' of lawyers and the 'instrumental' optic of political scientists as the two typically different approaches which devide interdisciplinarity in international relations and international law. Here, the reflectivist position in political science – which speaks more clearly to procedural approaches to the law – is ignored and political science is exclusively 'rationalist' i.e. 'instrumental' (Keohane 1997).

Figure 2: Stations on the Semi-Circle
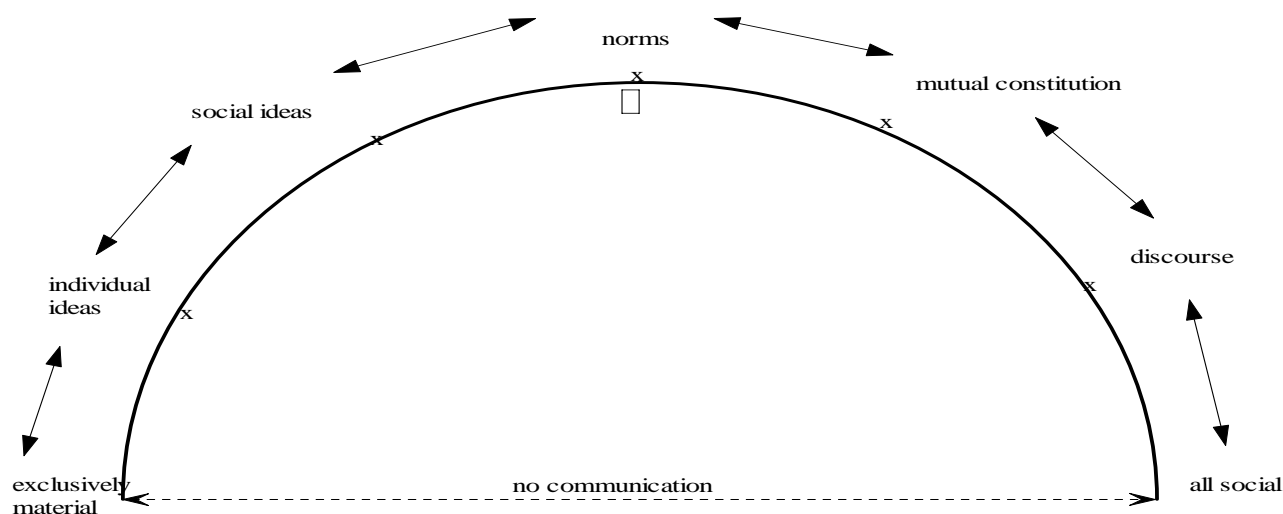
Source: Wiener 2003, 258, 260

The steps towards the constitution of this semi-circle are motivated by both epistemological and ontological concerns to begin with. Over the past decade, however, the ensuing conversations encouraged by the constructivist frame present a much more specific pattern of approaches and analytical categories than often critically acclaimed. The following chart summarizes this conceptual and methodological value-added of the constructivist turn.

Table 4: Conversations on the Semi-Circle, Contributions to the Constructivist Turn

Station	All material	Individual Ideas	Social Ideas	Norms	Mutual constitution	Discourse	All social
'tool'	Material capabilities	Individual ideas	Ideas, beliefs, world views	Dual quality of norms	Structuration	Speech-acts, language games	Text
Approach & Import	Neo-realists, behaviourists	Rational choice, neo-institutionalism	Neo-institutionalism, liberalism, Sociology	Political theory, international public law	Sociology	Philosophy, Interactionism	Post-modern, post-structural
Convers-ation	*ideas station*	*materialist & social ideas station*	*ideas station & mutual constitution station*	*social ideas station & mutual constitution*	*norms station & discourse station*	*mutual constitution & all social*	*discourse*
Debate	**First, Second, Third**	**Fourth**	**Fourth**	**Fourth**	**Fourth**	**Fourth**	**Third**

The steps away from the pole position are identified on two levels, one is metatheoretical, the other ontological. Thus, the metatheoretical step away from the baselines consists in considering a third position which is both distant from yet in relation to each of the poles. In turn, the

ontological steps are reconstructed as steps away from either of the two poles towards the inclusion of a new ontology. For example, the step away from the 'all material' pole towards the 'individual ideas' station on the semi-circle was taken by research on ideas moving away from the rationalist pole (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 6); and the step towards the ontology of 'constitutive practices' (Wendt 1992; Biersteker and Weber 1996) signalled a distance to the 'all social' pole. Both steps theorised specific ontological changes which were considered important for analyses of world politics. Another step went further away from the 'all material' pole than the neoliberal institutionalist step towards the middle-ground. It theorised ideas as social factors and worked with the assumption of a constitutive impact of a socio-cultural environment on interest formation (Jepperson et al. 1996). In the process a third 'social ideas' station emerged. This third step has come to be dubbed 'sociological', 'modern' or 'conventional' constructivism. It involved a series of empirical studies on the role of ideas, principled beliefs and norms in world politics (Katzenstein ed. 1996; Risse, Ropp, Sikkink eds. 1999). This step would fall closely into Adler's perception of constructivist theorising towards seizing the middle-ground. It most definitely comprised a step away from the rationalist pole, via the neoliberal institutionalist individual ideas station towards the constructivist middle, at the same time, it involved a step away from the 'all social' station without losing touch, however.

Some of the recent summaries on constructivism seek to distinguish between modern and 'other' constructivists (Katzenstein et al. 1998). Pushing a large number of studies including Wendt's step away from the pole into a camp which was often negatively defined by a method defined as 'outside-naming' by social movement theorists.[17] In the meantime, the step from the reflectivist pole has equally built stations on the bridge. Thus, the observation of the key role of language games in the explanation and understanding of conflict analysis has stressed the social ontology of speech-acts (Fierke 1998, Zehfuß 1998), as well as the role of discursive nodal points and/or metaphors in understanding policy and polity change (Diez 1999, Huellsse 2003, respectively). This fourth step is labelled the 'discourse' or 'language station' on the semi-circle. A further observation states the crucial link between norms – as enabling or constraining structural factors – with the social (Giddens 1979). After all "rules and norms link individual autonomy to sociality" (Kratochwil 1989, 70). This station focuses on the social ontology of norms. It shares the structural impact of norms with the sociological constructivist position, on the one hand, and the constitutive impact of interaction towards the evolution and change of norms with the

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[17] For the method, see Jenson 1993, for the practice see e.g. Keohane's various efforts to label others.

discursive station, on the other. Accordingly, it is identified as the 'dual quality of norms' station (Wiener 2007).

4 Conclusion: Constructivist Promises and Challenges

Summary

The article analysed the emergence of the constructivist debating culture from a paradigmatic battle-ground as a puzzle. It first situated the approach in its context of emergence, beginning with the two core assumptions that, first, the value-added of constructivism includes more than its ontological parts, and, secondly, that debates about constructivism create a frame for discussion, which facilitates exchange between different theoretical positions. To that end, it first offered an insight into the context, i.e. the debating culture of the discipline of international relations as the environment in which constructivism emerged as part of a cyclical movement of debates. It then recalled the key theoretical moves which pushed the debates about theorizing the middle-ground to the fore. To do so, it thirdly, presented the more specific debates among constructivists as conversational steps away from two mutually exclusive pole positions. In search of the value-added of constructivist approaches in political science, the article took the route of situating constructivist debates within its context of emergence. It asked how and why a converging interest in the impact of social factors emerged, and demonstrated that communicative interaction through constructivism as a frame took a central role in the growing fascination with constructivism. This said it was ultimately shown that the debates over constructivist approaches did, indeed, succeed in generating an impressive tool-kit, which allows for robust assessments of the social in world politics. While the ontological focus on *ideas, norms*, and *interaction* is widely shared among constructivists and beyond (see, for example, Haas 2001), the conceptualization and operationalisation of these categories continues to spur debate among political scientists.

Outlook

Pending on whether considered by positivists, rational choice theorists, conventional, consistent or critical constructivists, or, indeed poststructuralists, the interdisciplinary ontological imports

have been moulded into their new home discipline. Notably such 'concept picking' – constructivist or otherwise – often proceeds akin to the practices of a magpie, a bird always in pursuit of the most shining tools things it finds in other habitats regardless of their actual value within their original habitat.[18] Not unlike other interdisciplinary work constructivist theorising often consists in "picking up the eye-catching shiny bits" (Warburton 2004, 1, c.f. Fowles 1975) of other theories and incorporating them in their own approaches. The process involves taking an element out of a specific context (c1) in which it has been conceptually rooted to include it in a new target context (c2). Pending on the transfer from c1 to c2, the genealogy of the concept is either recognised or discarded. In the former case, meaningful interdisciplinary conversation is possible and transdisciplinarity is a potential, in the latter case, the concept is likely to be groomed to fit within another discipline, i.e. the new home of IR theory. This will often not be conducive towards enhanced transdisciplinarity, i.e. the contribution of enlightenment beyond disciplinary boundaries (Albert 2003), yet, it has proved helpful for a gradual shift towards theorising the social construction of politics in a global environment (Kubalkova et al. 1998, Christiansen et al. 1999, Wendt 1999, Guzzini 2000, Fierke and Joergensen 2001, Wilmer 2002, Brunnée and Toope 2000). Similarly, constructivists are out to search for other disciplines' tools having an obvious appeal of shedding light on homemade problems regardless of their application and emergence within their own disciplinary habitat. To be sure, this inter-disciplinary movement has been conducive to debate about analytical scrutiny among international relations scholars, and European integration theorists, for that matter. However, bringing in conceptual bits and pieces from the outside was always a win-win game. While winners and losers might consider themselves more or less squarely within the middle ground, so far, this has not mattered much in position and influence within the discipline.

The *litmus* test for constructivist research is however likely to shift from an ability to engage in conversation about research methodology and ontology towards demonstrating a generalisable capability of these approaches based on more rigorous empirical studies on the one hand, and, a better development of normative theorising based on the advanced capability of middle-range theorising, on the other. Both will prove necessary for studies which lead beyond studying Western communities' behavioural patterns and the diffusion of norms based on the perception

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[18] According to the Oxford English Dictionary the bird is defined thus "magpie, n. and a. A. n. I. Simple uses. 1. a. A common bird of the northern hemisphere, Pica pica, of the crow family (Corvidae), having a long pointed tail, black and white plumage, and a noisy chattering call, proverbial for its habit of taking and hoarding bright objects and regarded by some as a bird of ill omen" (2001) at http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00299668?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=magpie&first=1&max_to_show=10 , emphasis added AUTHOR <assessed on 28 October 2006>

that somehow the world will come round to adopt the fundamental norms of Western liberal democracies (Schmitter 1993). To avoid studying world politics beyond-the-state and beyond Western modernity, the constructive limits of conventional constructivism need to be scrutinised and the critical potential enhanced. One focus of coming theoretical and empirical challenges would be Koskenniemi's suggestion to discuss the possibility of the 'good life' beyond modern state boundaries is likely to substantiate the importance of research on norms. This research would build on two dimensions, including research *about norms* (norms as ontology), on the one hand, and research which takes a *normative perspective* on the role norms ought to play in world politics and international law (epistemological approach), on the other. Here it is vital to enhance critical conversations on the bridge without loosing the epistemological perspective, even if this means that friendly conversations may no longer carry the day as bridge-building will take theoretical investigations only so far (Wiener 2003, Zehfuss 2002, Zuern and Checkel 2005). The assumption that norms entail a dual quality means that they are both structuring and social constructed.

In today's partially transnationalised world norm interpreters who may or may not turn into norm-followers include both state and non-state actors. Studies in international relations have analysed state behaviour based on elite participation in international negotiating situations, on the one hand, and non-state advocacy groups seeking to enhance compliant behaviour of states pointing to the legitimacy of international norms, on the other. Conventional constructivists hold that members of a community especially, liberal states of Western communities consider the same norms as appropriate. They expect community members of a given identity to consider the same norms, principles, and values as appropriate. However, persistent divergences in the interpretation of the normative structure of world politics caution against generalising the relationship between norms and political behaviour in world politics. While behaviourist approaches are interested in studying variation in state behaviour in relation to norms as intervening variables, reflexive approaches focus on the meaning of norms as the dependent variable. As Reus-Smit observes, "[T]he 'new liberalism' abandons the political in two ways; it expels normative reflection and argument from the realm of legitimate social scientific inquiry; and it embraces a rationalist conception of human agency that reduces all political action to strategic interaction." (Reus-Smit 2001, 574)

The conventional constructivist paradigm of powerful norms entails two leading assumptions. First, a community of civilized nations expects to generate norm-diffusion among its

members as each member shares the community's given identity. Secondly, political carrots such as, for example, membership in an organisation or a community, on the one hand, or financial aid especially in relation with development policy strategies e.g. overseen by the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, on the other, enhance compliant behaviour. This approach addresses norm-following behaviour as an indicator for norm diffusion in world politics. However, the majority of case studies focuses on a unequal power relations, i.e. involving Southern norm-followers and Northern norm-setters within the United Nations community, or, Eastern accession to Western political conditionality in the case of the European Union. Conventional constructivists thus work with the assumption of stable norms in a community with a given identity that structure behaviour. This approach follows a functionalist logic based on smooth governance. In turn, consistent constructivists and critical constructivists are more interested change based on interaction. They study irregularities, frictions and conditions to improve conditions of democratic governance i.e. based on the mutual recognition of norms which would be crucial. If interaction constructs meaning, the interpretation of norms is conditioned by those who participate in the norm-setting debate. It follows that the meaning of norms will differ pending on which actors contributed to discuss the rule in practice. That is, normative meaning stems from interactive international relations that are both carried out in the legal and in the political realms of world politics, respectively, with both spheres increasingly overlapping under conditions of transnationalisation. Here, critical constructivist work on the dual quality of norms will reveal the ultimate epistemological distinctions and, indeed, barriers between those who work with a functionalist interest in the role of norms as structuring behaviour, on the one hand, and those who work with a reflexive approach that understands norms and actors as mutually constitutive, on the other.

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