

B.Pol.800

Constructivism in International Relations

Summer semester 2019

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Office hours 9 May, 6 June, 4 July, 4.30-6.00 pm each, and upon request.

Time and place

Tuesday, 16 April 2019	10:00-12:00	Introductory session	VG 1.103
Friday, 10 May 2019	8:30 – 12:00	Block seminar	VG 1.102
	14:00 – 17:30		VG 1.103
Friday, 7 June 2019	8:30 – 12:00	Block seminar	VG 1.102
	14:00 – 17:30		VG 1.103
Friday, 5 July 2019	8:30 – 12:00	Block seminar	VG 1.102
	14:00 – 17:30		VG 1.103

Course description

Constructivism is a perspective in the social sciences that highlights the constructed nature of social reality. Material structures are not ontologically given but acquire meaning for actors through intersubjective understandings that they construct in dynamic processes of interaction between structures and agents and among the agents themselves. Constructivism originated in sociology and in International Relations developed as a theoretical alternative to rationalist perspectives on world politics, including Neo-Realism and Neoliberal Institutionalism in the late 1980s and 1990s.

This seminar introduces students to the core ontological, epistemological and theoretical assumptions of Constructivism and acquaints them with the variety of research that shares these assumptions. The seminar is structured in three parts. In the first part, we develop the core tenets of Constructivism as a theoretical perspective and contrast it with rationalism. In the second part, we review key concepts of Constructivist International Relations research. In the third part, we examine applications of Constructivism in selected empirical domains.

Course objectives

In this course students learn:

- to develop a solid understanding of the core ontological, epistemological and theoretical assumptions of Constructivism, as used in International Relations scholarship;
- to describe and apply key concepts associated with Constructivist International Relations theory to contemporary world politics, and to be able to relate these concepts to Constructivism's core assumptions;
- to reproduce selected Constructivist arguments as they are advanced in state-of-the-art empirical International Relations literature, and to start developing the ability for critical assessment
- to enhance students' writing and oral presentation skills.

Course assessment

The module B.Pol.800 'Advanced Introduction to International Relations' (*Aufbaumodul Internationalen Beziehungen*) – consists of two seminars that you complete in parallel during the semester and for which you receive one final grade. The assessment of this seminar is via a presentation (10 min) and a portfolio. The portfolio assessment includes two models (Model A and Model B), one of which is chosen in each seminar.

Model A entails a problem sketch (1-1.5 pages) and a literature review (7 pages). *Model B* entails two problem sketches and an essay (ca. 6 pages). Complete portfolios have to be submitted in electronic form to Tobias Lenz (email noted above) at the end of the semester. The submission date is **30 August 2019**, and the final portfolio can be submitted either in English or in German.

Students must register for the module **via FlexNow** in order to receive a grade for the course.

A *problem sketch* formulates an answer to one of the seminar's guiding questions in 1-1.5 pages on the basis of the required reading for the respective week. Problem sketches submitted to me during the course of the semester will benefit from feedback.

A *literature review* summarizes and assesses the state-of-the-art on a specific topic. It can be based on one of the guiding questions or address a seminar topic in more general terms. It must engage the required and the additional reading for a specific week and include four more pieces of academic literature (generally journal articles). Thus, it entails some independent literature search.

The *essay* gives a well-reasoned answer to one of the questions on the syllabus by engaging relevant literature that goes beyond the literature mentioned on the syllabus. Rather than focusing on what other people say, as in the literature review, the structure and flow of the argument is dictated by

your own answer to the question; other scholar's work help you to develop your own point rather than being relevant in and of itself.

More detailed information can be found in the document "Handreichung für Studierende im Modul B.Pol.800 (Aufbaumodul Internationale Beziehungen)", which can be downloaded from the Stud.IP folder "Documents".

Presentations entail introducing an answer to a seminar question in 10 minutes. The presentation should be based on not more than two slides and be held as free speech (with some notes jotted down on a small piece of paper, if you so wish). It should be grounded in the required reading plus one additional reading.

Teaching arrangements

This course is designed primarily as a reading and discussion course. For each session, students are assigned one text that they are *required* to prepare based on one or several guiding questions. Preparing means that students read the assigned readings carefully, mark and/or extract central ideas and arguments, note down your own ideas as well as issues that you do not understand, and sketch out – in bullet points – your answer to the guiding question(s). Such preparation is time-consuming! Expect to spend three to four hours on *each* text – and even more if you have difficulty reading English. Yet you will soon realize that such preparation is worth your time: the better prepared you come to class, the more you get out of class discussions.

Required readings will be posted on StudIP. Additional readings, most of which are available in the *Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (SUB)* or the *Bereichsbibliothek Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften*, serve to deepen specific topics and are relevant to some tasks of the portfolio assessment; they are generally not discussed in class. Note that some of the readings are relevant to more than one class topic.

The course seeks to strike a balance between conceptual work and empirical application. Besides in-class discussion of the weekly readings, we will regularly apply the conceptual and theoretical insights gained from the readings to contemporary issues in world politics. Students are therefore advised to stay up to date with international political developments.

Course content

Session 1 Introduction and overview

Part 1: Foundations

Session 2 Core theoretical and ontological assumptions

Session 3 Constructivism and Rationalism

Session 4 Constructivism and explanation

Session 5 Ethical assessment

Part 2: Key concepts

Session 6 Identity and norms

Session 7 Discourse

Session 8 Legitimacy

Session 9 Knowledge

Part 3: Applications

Session 10 Power

Session 11 International organizations

Session 12 Gender

Sessions 13/14 Limits of Constructivist International Relations

General reading

I recommend the following books as general works on the topic. Of foremost interest are the respective chapters on Constructivism.

- Dunne, Tim, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith. Eds. 2016. *International Relations Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4th edition.
- Weber, Cynthia. 2014. *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 4th edition.
- Reus-Smit, Christian and Duncan Snidal. Eds. 2008. *Oxford Handbook of International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Syllabus

Part 1: Foundations

16 April

Session 1: Introduction and overview

In this introductory session, I will give an overview of the content and structure of the course and outline its main requirements.

10 May

Session 2: Core ontological and theoretical assumptions

In this session, we start our inquiry into Constructivism by seeking to understand what it means that the world is socially constructed. We also identify the core theoretical and ontological premises of constructivist theorizing about international politics.

Questions

- ❖ What are the core theoretical and ontological assumptions of Constructivism?
- ❖ What does it mean that the world is “socially constructed”?

Required reading

- Drezner, Daniel. 2015. *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter “The Social Construction of Zombies” (pp. 65-74).

Additional reading

- Fierke, Karin. 2016. Constructivism. In Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith. Eds. *International Relations Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4th edition.
- Hurd, Ian. 2008. Constructivism. In Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal. Eds. *Oxford Handbook of International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1992. Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization* 46(2): 391-425.

Session 3: Constructivism and Rationalism

Constructivism is a theoretical perspective on International Relations that is similar to Rationalism in its scientific status. In this session, we contrast the two perspectives and seek to identify their differences (and similarities).

Question

- ❖ How is Constructivism distinct from Rationalism as a theoretical perspective on international relations? How meaningful are the differences between the two perspectives?

Required reading

- Fearon, James and Wendt, Alexander. 2002. Rationalism vs Constructivism: A Skeptical View. In Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons. Eds. *Handbook of International Relations*. London: Sage Publications.

Additional reading

- Price, Richard and Reus-Smit, Christian. 1998. Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Relations Theory and Constructivism. *European Journal of International Relations* 4(3): 259-294.
- Checkel, Jeffrey. 1997. International Norms and Domestic Politics: Bridging the Rationalist-Constructivist Divide. *European Journal of International Relations* 3(4): 473-495.
- Opp, Karl-Dieter. 1999. Contending Conceptions of the Theory of Rational Action. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 11(2): 171-202.

Session 4: Constructivism and explanation

Constructivism also has a distinct view of epistemological fundamentals, that is, questions about what we can know and how we can know it. Constructivists generally explain action on the basis of how creative actors create the conditions of their existence that subsequently constrain their action. Rather than seeing social action as determined by structural constraints (situational explanations), they see it as create interpretations of their environment, eschewing bold if-then generalizations. In this session, we develop this epistemological stance and contrast it with Rationalism.

Question

- ❖ What are the epistemological assumptions of Constructivism? What does it mean “to explain” a phenomenon from a Constructivist perspective?

Required reading

- Dessler, David and Owen, John. 2005. Constructivism and the Problem of Explanation: A Review Article. *Perspectives on Politics* 3(3): 597-610.

Additional reading

- Wendt, Alexander. 1998. On Causation and Constitution in International Relations. *Review of International Studies* 24(5): 101-117.
- Epstein, Charlotte. 2013. Constructivism or the Eternal Return of Universals in International Relations: Why Returning to Language is Vital to Prolonging the Owl's Flight. *European Journal of International Relations* 19(3): 499-519.
- Guzzini, Stefano. 2000. A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations. *European Journal of International Relations* 6(2): 147-182.

Session 5: Ethical assessment

The core ontological and theoretical assumptions of Constructivism entail, some argue, a commitment to a normatively progressive research program because Constructivists have shown that moral norms matter in world politics. This implies that progressive moral change is possible, even desirable. We will engage this discussion on the basis of an Oxford-style debate, in which we weigh the arguments for and against this position.

Question

- ❖ Is Constructivism a normatively progressive research program? Justify your opinion!

Required reading

- Price, Richard. 2008. The Ethics of Constructivism. In Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal. Eds. *Oxford Handbook of International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Additional reading

- Erskine, Toni. 2012. Whose Progress, Which Morals? Constructivism, Normative IR Theory and the Limits and Possibilities of Studying Ethics in World Politics. *International Theory* 4(3): 449-468.
- Hoffmann. 2009. Is Constructivist Ethics an Oxymoron? *International Studies Review* 11(2): 231-252.
- Barnett, Michael. 2009. Evolution without Progress? Humanitarianism in a World of Hurt. *International Organization* 63(4): 621-663.

Part 2: Key Concepts

7 June

Session 6: Identity and norms

Identity and norms are two key concepts of constructivist International Relations theorizing. They both denote intersubjective understandings of appropriate behavior in a particular social context. Hemmer and Katzenstein advance an eclectic theoretical argument that combines rationalist and constructivist elements. This is useful for our purposes because it sharpens our understanding of the difference between the approaches.

Questions

- ❖ What is identity and how does it relate to norms? In what ways are these constructivist concepts?
- ❖ How did identity shape the US' decision to advance multilateralism in its relations with Europe and bilateralism in its relations with Asia after World War Two? Why is a rationalist explanation insufficient to explain this outcome?

Required reading

- Hemmer, Christopher and Katzenstein, Peter. 2002. Why Is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism and the Origins of Multilateralism. *International Organization* 56(3): 575-607.

Additional reading

- Finnemore, Martha and Sikkink, Kathryn. 1998. International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization* 52(4): 887-917.
- Mitzen, Jennifer. 2006. Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations* 12(3): 341-70.
- Hebel, Kai and Lenz, Tobias. 2016. The Identity/Policy Nexus in European Foreign Policy. *Journal of European Public Policy* 23(4): 473-91.

Session 7: Discourse

It is through discourse – written and spoken communication – that human beings understand the world. Constructivists believe that discourse does not “objectively” reproduce reality but constructs reality by labeling and categorizing things and events and thereby making them accessible to actors. In this session, we examine the role of discourse in shaping world politics.

Questions

- ❖ What is discourse? How did discourse shape power relations during the negotiations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?
- ❖ Are there other ways in which discourses can shape world politics? Which one is the most powerful one, and why?

Required reading

- Holzscheiter, Anna. 2011. Power of Discourse or Discourse of the Powerful? The Reconstruction of Global Childhood Norms in the Drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Journal of Language and Politics* 10(1): 1-28.

Additional reading

- Milliken, Jennifer. 1999. The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods. *European Journal of International Relations*. 5(2): 225-254.
- Evans, Tony. 2005. International Human Rights Law as Power/Knowledge. *Human Rights Quarterly*. 27(3): 1046-68.
- Deitelhoff, Nicole. 2009. The Discursive Process of Legalization: Charting Islands of Persuasion in the ICC Case. *International Organization* 63(1): 33-65.

Session 8: Legitimacy

Legitimacy denotes the recognition of an authority’s right to rule and it entails a distinct motivation for compliance with social rules. When actors see social rules as legitimate, they comply with them because they believe that these rules ought to be obeyed, not because they are forced to do so or because it is in their own self-interest. In this session we examine the concept of legitimacy and apply it to the question of why states generally recognize national borders.

Questions

- ❖ What is legitimacy, and why is it important? How is it distinct from power and self-interest?
- ❖ How has legitimacy shaped compliance with the norm of sovereign nonintervention?

Required reading:

- Hurd, Ian. 1999. Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics. *International Organization* 53(2). Only read pp. 379-399.

Additional reading

- Franck, Thomas. 1990. *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1.
- Reus-Smit, Christian. 2007. International Crises of Legitimacy. *International Politics* 44(2): 157-174.
- Lenz, Tobias and Viola, Lora. 2017. Legitimacy and Institutional Change in International Organizations: A Cognitive Approach. *Review of International Studies* 43(5): 939-961.

Session 9: Ideas and Knowledge

Ideas embody “knowledge” about the world, which is either causal or principled. In this sense, ideas are situated in time and space. In this session we examine the role of ideas and knowledge in world politics.

Questions

- ❖ How did normative ideas enable the process of decolonization? To what extent, and in what ways, was decolonization “inevitable”?

Required reading

- Jackson, Robert. 1993. The Weight of Ideas in Decolonization: Normative Change in International Relations. In Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane. Eds. *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Additional reading

- Epstein, Charlotte. 2005. Knowledge and Power in Global Environmental Activism. *International Journal of Peace Studies* 10(1): 47-67.
- Haas, Peter. 1989. Do Regimes Matter? Epistemic Communities and Mediterranean Pollution Control. *International Organization* 43(3): 377-403.
- Williams, Michael. 2004. Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization* 58(4): 633-665.

Part 3: Applications

5 July

Session 10: Power

Power is a key concept of International Relations. Whereas Realists generally understand power as military capability, Constructivists have expanded our understanding of power as involving the ability to shape intersubjective understandings of other actors. In this session we zoom in on one specific form of power – soft power – that has been prominently discussed in academic and policy circles alike.

Questions

- ❖ What is soft power? What is constructivist about the concept?
- ❖ Why is soft power, according to Nye, so important to the United States after the end of the Cold War?

Required reading

- Nye, Joseph. 1990. Soft Power. *Foreign Policy* 80(3): 153-171.

Additional reading

- Bially Mattern, Janice. 2005. Why 'Soft Power' Isn't so Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics. *Millenium* 33(3): 583-612.
- Manners, Ian. 2002. Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2): 235-258.
- Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong. 2008. China's Soft Power: Discussions, Resources, and Prospects. *Asian Survey* 48(3): 453-472.

Session 11: International organizations (guest lecture by Burcu Mangitli)

In this session we examine the role of international organizations from a constructivist angle. Specifically, we look at country's implementation of agreements with the International Monetary Fund – an international financial institution that was founded in 1945 with the aim to stabilize countries in financial difficulties. Burcu Mangitli, a postdoc at the Institute of Political Science, will present the main findings of her PhD dissertation on the topic. After Burcu's presentation, students will have the opportunity to discuss the role of the IMF in international relations.

Required reading

- Mangitli, Burcu. 2016. A Bottom-Up Approach to International Cooperation: Econocrats' Role in Compliance with IMF Agreements. Ph.D., Department of Political Science, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. (Read only the conclusion!)

- As background reading on the IMF, please also read one of the following three readings:
 - Bretton Woods Project. 2018. IMF Surveillance. [Critical take on the IMF by a non-governmental organization]
 - Boughton, James. 2007. Strengthening the IMF: Lessons from History. In Colin Bradford and Johannes Linn. Eds. *Global Governance Reform*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.
 - Woods, Ngaire. 2006. Understanding Pathways through Financial Crises and the Impact of the IMF: An Introduction. *Global Governance* 12: 373-93.

Session 12: Gender

Gender – constructed differences between the sexes – has become a growing concern of International Relations research. In this session we examine how and to what extent gender affects international negotiations.

Questions

- ❖ How do gender stereotypes operate in international negotiations? In what ways do they affect outcomes?
- ❖ What conclusions should policy-makers draw from the findings of Naurin/Naurin/Alexander (2019)?

Required reading

- Naurin, Daniel, Naurin, Elin and Alexander, Amy. 2019. Gender Stereotyping in International Negotiations: A Survey Experiment in the Council of the European Union. *International Organization*. Online first.

Additional reading

- Aharoni, Sarai. 2011. Gender and “Peace Work”: An unofficial History of Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations. *Politics and Gender* 7(3): 391-417.
- Locher, Birgit and Prügl, Elisabeth. 2001. Feminism and Constructivism: Worlds Apart or Sharing the Middle Ground. *International Studies Quarterly* 45(1): 111-129.
- Towns, Ann and Niklasson, Birgitta. 2017. Gender, International Status, and Ambassador Appointments. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 13(3): 521-540.

Session 13/14: Criticisms of Constructivism in IR

Questions

- ❖ To what extent does Constructivism neglect power? Is it a “naïve” perspective on world politics?

Required reading

- Bially Mattern, Janice. 2001. The Power Politics of Identity. *European Journal of International Relations* 7(3): 349-397.

Additional reading

- Milliken, Jennifer. 1999. The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods. *European Journal of International Relations*. 5(2): 225-254.
- Bell, Stephen. 2011. Do We Really Need a New ‘Constructivist Institutionalism’ to Explain Institutional Change? *British Journal of Political Science* 41(4): 883-906.
- Sterling-Folker, Jennifer. 2000. Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and Neoliberal Institutionalism Compared. *International Studies Quarterly* 44(1): 97-119.