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Complementary Studies  
**Constructivism as a Social Theory**  
Winter semester 2022/23

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**Prof. Dr. Tobias Lenz**

E-Mail tobias.lenz@leuphana.de  
Office C4.004  
Office Hours Fridays, 16:00 – 17:30, Registration via MyStudy

**Time and place**

Mondays, starting 8:15 – 9:45 Weekly seminar C 12.013  
17 October

**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 in the field of International Relations and beyond. The seminar is structured in two parts. In the first part, we develop the core tenets of Constructivism as a theoretical perspective and discuss the ethical commitments that it entails. In the second part, we discuss Constructivist International Relations research as it relates to some of the core concepts of this perspective.

## Course objectives

In this course students learn:

- to develop a solid understanding of the core ontological, epistemological and theoretical assumptions of Constructivism;
- to reproduce selected Constructivist arguments as they are advanced in state-of-the-art empirical International Relations literature, to relate these concepts to Constructivism's core assumptions, and to start developing the ability for critical assessment;
- to enhance students' writing and oral presentation skills.

## Course assessment

This is a Complementary Studies course that is open to students with any disciplinary background. It does not require prior knowledge of Constructivism or the field of International Relations. Assessment is via a combined exam (“kombinierte wissenschaftliche Arbeit”) that consists of two parts: an oral presentation and two essays.

### 1. Oral presentation (40 per cent of final grade)

Students give an oral presentation of not more than **7 minutes** on a course topic of their choice. Presentations introduce the week's required reading and give a concise answer to the question posed for that week. (Only outline an answer to the first question if there is more than one.) The presentation is accompanied by a **written handout** that summarizes the main points (length: 1 page). Handouts are made available to students via MyStudy in the folder of the respective session under “Materials” prior to the presentation. Presenters also draw up **a question** that they had when reading the text and would like to discuss in class. This question can refer to the text itself or go beyond it. Please sign up for a course topic on MyStudy under “Gruppen”.

### 2. Two written essays (each accounts for 30 per cent of the final grade)

You write two essays, each **1000 words** in length (excluding references and general information), which are due on the dates indicated in the course outline below.

The **first essay** addresses the following question:

- What ontological and epistemological commitments does Constructivism entail? Which one of those do you find least convincing? Why?

This essay is based on three sources mentioned in the syllabus.

The **second essay** answers a question of your choice posed in the second part of the syllabus. Your answer is based on at least two sources.

Good essays will structure the text in a logical and coherent fashion and advance an independent argument. I will give some additional tips on essay writing in session 7.

Submit your essays until midnight on the indicated dates by uploading them into the respective folder on MyStudy (“Material”) as a **word document**. Essays that arrive late will receive a fail (grade: 5,0).

### **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 you 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 takes time, but you will soon realize that it is worth it: the better prepared you come to class, the more you get out of class discussions.

*Required readings* are either available electronically through the Leuphana library or I will make them available as pdf files under “Material” on MyStudy. Additional readings, most of which are available in the Leuphana library, serve to deepen specific topics and are intended to support in writing the essays. 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. Students are therefore advised to stay up to date with international political developments.

## Course content

Session	Date	Topic
1	17 October	Introduction and seminar organization
<b>Part 1: Foundations</b>		
2	24 October	Overview
3	31 October	<i>Reformation day (no session!)</i>
4	7 November	Ontology of Constructivism
5	14 November	Epistemology of Constructivism
6	21 November	Genealogy as a Constructivist analytical tool
7	28 November	Ethics of Constructivism <i>Tips on essay writing</i>
8	5 December	Essay writing ( <i>no class!</i> ) <b><u>DUE (6.12.):</u> Essay 1</b>
<b>Part 2: Applications in International Relations</b>		
9	12 December	Collective identity, Russia and Ukraine
10	19 December	Legitimacy, norms and non-intervention <i>General feedback on essays</i>
11	9 January	Ideas and decolonization
12	16 January	Gender and international financial relations
13	23 January	Feminist foreign policy
<b><u>DUE (27.1.)</u> Essay 2</b>		
14	30 January	Concluding session <i>Course evaluation</i>

## **Syllabus**

**17 October**

Session 1: Introduction and seminar organization

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

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Part 1: Foundations</b></p>
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**24 October**

Session 2: Overview

In this session, we start our inquiry into Constructivism (or Constructionism, as some call it) by getting an overview of core tenets and terminology of the Constructivist approach. We will also talk about what it means that the world is socially constructed. This overview, which is written in very straightforward language, will make it easier for us to understand more specific issues in the coming weeks.

*Questions*

- ❖ What are the core tenets of Constructivism?
- ❖ What does it mean that the world is “socially constructed”?

*Required reading*

- Scott Harris. 2010. *What is Constructionism? Navigating its Use in Sociology*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. Chapter 1 (only pp. 1-19).

*Additional reading*

- E. Diaz-Leon. 2015. What is Social Construction? *European Journal of Philosophy* 23(4): 1137-52.
- Ian Hacking. 1999. *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**31 October**

Session 3: Reformation day (no class!)

## 7 November

### Session 4: Ontology of Constructivism

Constructivism is a theoretical perspective that is based on what one may term an ideational ontology. Ontology denotes a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of being, from the Greek words “on” (being) and “logia” (study of). Ontology asks, simply, what reality is made of, what its essence is, and Constructivism focuses on social, as opposed to biological or natural, facts.

#### Questions

- ❖ What are the ontological assumptions of Constructivism? How do ‘institutional’ facts differ from ‘brute’ facts?
- ❖ Think of a contemporary social phenomenon to illustrate Constructivism’s ideational ontology, and relate it back to the notions of contingency, essentialism, reification and work from session 2.

#### Required reading

- John Searly. 1995. *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Penguin Books. Chapter 1.

#### Additional reading

- Peter I. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Penguin books.
- Michaela Pfadenhauer and Hubert Knoblauch. (Hrsg.) (2018). *Social Constructivism as Paradigm? The Legacy of the Social Construction of Reality*. London: Routledge.
- C. Willig. 2016. Constructivism and ‘the Real World’: Can They Co-exist? *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin* 21: 33-38.

## 14 November

### Session 5: Epistemology of Constructivism

Constructivism also has a distinct view of epistemological fundamentals, that is, questions about what we can know and how we can know it. Constructivists are interested in understanding the meaning that actors attach to their actions. This involves an interpretative epistemology. In this session, we develop this epistemological stance and illustrate it with the help of contemporary examples.

#### Questions

- ❖ What are the epistemological assumptions of Constructivism? What does it mean “to understand” a phenomenon from a Constructivist perspective?
- ❖ How is the notion of “understanding” related to the ideational ontology of Constructivism?

### Required reading

- Martin Hollis and Steve Smith. 1990. *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Chapters 1 (only pp. 1-9) and 4.

### Additional reading

- Alexander Wendt. 1998. On Causation and Constitution in International Relations. *Review of International Studies* 24(5): 101-17.
- David Dessler and John Owen. 2005. Constructivism and the Problem of Explanation: A Review Article. *Perspectives on Politics* 3(3): 597-610.
- Stefano Guzzini. 2000. A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations. *European Journal of International Relations* 6(2): 147-82.

## 21 November

### Session 6: Genealogy as a Constructivist analytical tool

Out of Constructivism's interpretivist epistemology follow specific analytical tools that scholars use to analyze social phenomena. Genealogy is a prominent one among them. It does not focus on causal connections but seeks "to describe how the present became logically possible" (Bartelson 1995, p. 8). In this session, we familiarize ourselves with genealogy as an analytical tool in Constructivism and apply it to a social phenomenon of considerable contemporary relevance in the face of the war in Ukraine: the chemical weapons taboo.

### Questions

- ❖ What is genealogy as an analytical tool and how is it related to Constructivism's epistemological commitments?
- ❖ What can we learn about the chemical weapons taboo by knowing how it came about? What do we not learn?
- ❖ What can Price's genealogy of the chemical weapons taboo tell us about the likelihood of such weapons being used in Russia's war against Ukraine or in other conflicts elsewhere?

### Required reading

- Richard Price. 1995. A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo. *International Organization* 49(1): 73-103.

### Additional reading

- Michel Foucault. 1984. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*. Pantheon Books: New York.
- Mark Bevir. 2008. What is Genealogy? *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2: 263-75.
- Jens Bartelson. 1995. *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Esp. chapter 3.

## 28 November

### Session 6: Ethics of Constructivism

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. In this session, we will discuss whether Constructivism entails any ethical commitments and, if so, what these might be.

#### Question

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

#### Required reading

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

#### Additional reading

- Matthew Hoffmann. 2009. Is Constructivist Ethics an Oxymoron? *International Studies Review* 11(2): 231-52.
- Daniele Lorenzini. 2020. On Possibilising Genealogy. *Inquiry*, online first, DOI: DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2020.1712227.
- Jonathan Havercroft. 2018. "Social Constructivism and International Ethics." In Brent Steele and Eric Heinze (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and International Relations*. London: Routledge.

## 5 December

### Session 7: Essay writing

There is no class this week because you are given time to work on your first essay, which is **due on 6 December**.



## Part 2: Applications to International Relations

### 12 December

#### Session 9: Collective identity, Russia and Ukraine

Collective identity is a key concept of Constructivist International Relations theorizing. It denotes intersubjective understandings of self (and other) in a particular social context. In this session, we address the concept with reference to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The paper is highly topical in light of current events.

#### Questions

- ❖ What is collective identity and why does it matter in world politics? In what ways is it a Constructivist concept?
- ❖ What can we learn from this article for the Russian war on Ukraine today?

#### Required reading

- Valentina Feklyunina. 2016. Soft Power and Identity: Ukraine and the 'Russian World(s)'. *European Journal of International Relations* 22(4): 773-96.

#### Additional reading

- Viatcheslav Morozov and Bahar Rumelli. 2012. The External Constitution of European Identity: Russia and Turkey as Europe-Makers. *Cooperation and Conflict* 47(1): 28-48.
- Charlotte Epstein. 2011. Who Speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity in International Politics. *European Journal of International Relations* 17(2): 327-50.
- Kai Hebel and Tobias Lenz. 2016. The Identity/Policy Nexus in European Foreign Policy. *Journal of European Public Policy* 23(4): 473-91.

### 19 December

#### Session 10: Legitimacy, norms and non-intervention

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*

- Ian Hurd. 1999. Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics. *International Organization* 53(2). Only read pp. 379-99.

*Additional reading*

- Thomas Franck. 1990. *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1.
- Christian Reus-Smit. 2007. International Crises of Legitimacy. *International Politics* 44(2): 157-74.
- Tobias Lenz and Lora Viola. 2017. Legitimacy and Institutional Change in International Organizations: A Cognitive Approach. *Review of International Studies* 43(5): 939-61.

**9 January**

Session 11: Ideas and decolonization

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 the process of decolonization by which many African states achieved independence from European colonial rule in the 1960s.

*Question*

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

*Required reading*

- Robert Jackson. 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*

- Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. 2012. *Ch’ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization*. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(1): 95-109.
- Neta Crawford. 2002. *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization and Humanitarian Intervention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Charlotte Epstein. 2005. Knowledge and Power in Global Environmental Activism. *International Journal of Peace Studies* 10(1): 47-67.

## 16 January

### Session 12: Gender and international financial relations

Gender – constructed differences between the sexes – has become a growing concern of International Relations research. In this session we examine how gendered narratives play a role in international financial relations.

#### Questions

- ❖ What role have gendered narratives played in the aftermath of the global financial crisis?
- ❖ In what ways does work on gender in International Relations have a critical impetus? Is it useful for feminism?

#### Required reading

- Elisabeth Prügl. 2012. “If Lehman Brothers Had Been Lehman Sisters...”: Gender and Myth in the Aftermath of the Financial Crisis. *International Political Sociology* 6(1): 21-35.

#### Additional reading

- Sarai Aharoni. 2011. Gender and “Peace Work”: An unofficial History of Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations. *Politics and Gender* 7(3): 391-417.
- Laura Sjoberg. 2007. Gender, Structure, and War: What Waltz Couldn’t See. *International Theory* 4(1): 1-38.
- Dan Reiter. 2015. The Positivist Study of Gender and international Relations. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(7): 1301-26.

## 23 January

### Session 12: Feminist foreign policy

#### Questions

- ❖ What is a feminist foreign policy? How, if at all, does it differ from more traditional forms of foreign policy?
- ❖ Does it constitute a useful concept to direct foreign policy in new directions? Why or why not?

#### Required reading

- Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergmann Rosamond. 2016. Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy in the Making: Ethics, Politics, and Gender. *Ethics & International Affairs* 30(3): 323-34.

#### Additional reading

- Jennifer Thomson. 2020. What’s Feminist about Feminist Foreign Policy? Sweden’s and Canada’s Foreign Policy Agendas. *International Studies Perspectives* 21(4): 424-37.

- Victoria Scheyer and Marina Kumskova. 2019. Feminist Foreign Policy: A Fine Line between 'Adding Women' and Pursuing a Feminist Agenda. *Journal of International Affairs* 72(2): 57-76.
- Lisa Ann Richey. 2001. In Search of Feminist Foreign Policy: Gender, Development, and Danish State Identity. *Cooperation and Conflict* 36(2): 177-212.

### **30 January**

#### Session 14: Concluding session

In this session, we will evaluate the course.