

Transcript: Theories of International Relations: Constructivism

Realists and neo-liberals share in common the idea that states are rational egoists. The latter concept refers to the idea that actors do not care much about the welfare of others as an end in itself. Neo-liberals as we have seen take this assumption and argue that it is not incompatible with long-term cooperation. But what is left unsaid here is that if actors judge that cooperation is no longer serving their long-term interest, then they will have no compunction from exiting the cooperative arrangement. In short, a rational egoist view of the social world is a statement about an identity that does not change through interaction, communication, or institutions. So, our hunters in the stag-hunt enter the hunt as rational egoists and they remain rational egoists through that hunt and all the others to follow. No bonding occurs around the camp fire; no shared values develop, no common obligations are felt, and no sense of friendship emerges.

The point of departure for constructivism is that international politics like stag hunts are social constructs. By a social construct they mean that there is nothing natural, given, or inevitable about social practices. The classic example that people use to explain this idea is the idea of money; the bank notes we carry in our wallets are at one level nothing more than bits of paper and ink; in this sense they have no intrinsic material value as and of themselves. So what makes the bits of paper and ink a commodity that we can exchange for goods and services is the collective meanings that we give to these bits of paper, and if we stopped acting on this collectively agreed – albeit unspoken – understanding, then money would cease to have value.

Applying this understanding of the social furniture we live with to international politics, how we act at any time is shaped by the social practices in which we are embedded, and which our actions critically produce and reproduce in the same way as we produce and reproduce money every time we go shopping. Actions don't speak for themselves and why some actions are taken and not others on the global stage is critically dependent on the identities of the actors which, in turn, are bound up with the roles and social practices in which actors find themselves. So if you are in a relationship of enmity with another actor, as with the United States and Iran today, this casts you into a role which both constrains and enables the possibilities of action. Conversely, if you are the United States and the United Kingdom, you are in a relationship of amity or friendship, and this opens up a very different menu of choices as to how you act.

The core claim of constructivism is that none of these relationships are fixed in stone because identities are changeable through interaction and communication, and enemies can become friends just as friends can become enemies. It is no part of constructivism to argue that social practices will always lead to cooperation; gas chambers, cannibalism, and human sacrifice are just as much social practices as cooperation, love, and peace.

To bring our theoretical threads together, while realism and liberalism can also explain the rise and fall of cooperation between states, given their fixed conception of state identities as rational egoists, they would reduce explanation solely to the level of material interests. Constructivists would respond that they are only looking at the tip of the iceberg; it is identities, constructivists argue, that shape how we think about our interests. To finally return to the stag-hunt, constructivists would say that if your hunting party includes your best friends, your spouse, or your parents, it is highly likely that as a result of the positive identifications you would normally feel for them, you will want to cooperate because of the shared values. This type of bonding creates a very different set of identities, and hence collectively shared meanings, for each of the hunters than is the case in Waltz's original story where all the hunters are assumed to be rational egoists.