

## **Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality**

**by Maja Zehfuss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002. 289pp. Index. ISBN: 0-521-81544-4 & 89466-2.**

(Reviewed by Hannes R. Stephan, SPIRE, Keele University, July 2004)

Constructivism has been something of a fashion in the 1990s and its fortunes show no sign of waning. It is hard to find young academics these days who – unless they consciously work within the ‘old’ mainstream – do not enhance their theses with a bit of constructivist rhetoric or substance. As the realist-liberal debate grew stale and as the ‘Third debate’ never really took off (partly due to much incomprehension from the positivist side), it seemed as if a new, more vigorous debate could pit so-called rationalists against their constructivist contenders. At least, so the positivists/rationalists must have thought, this would be a debate that could proceed on equal terms and possibly engender new research programmes.

And they were not to be disappointed. Nowadays, scholars like Alexander Wendt or Peter Katzenstein perceive themselves as bridge-builders between the different approaches, and others like Emanuel Adler (1997) are claiming the ‘middle ground’, that is, the philosophical minefield separating the realms of positivism and postmodernism. Yet, if one thing is certain about this wave of constructivist writing, it is its inherent eclecticism (Guzzini 2000). Constructivism is much more of an approach than a fully-fledged theory. Its disciples propose a variety of perspectives and pursue quite different agendas, too.

Maja Zehfuss, therefore, has set herself an ambitious task in presenting a well-reasoned indictment of the most important constructivist theorists. Coming from a poststructuralist perspective, she scrutinises the theories proposed by Alexander Wendt, Friedrich Kratochwil, and Nicholas Onuf and draws attention to their internal tensions and their normative consequences. Applying constructivist insights to the case of unified Germany’s decision to participate in international military interventions, she demonstrates that constructivism’s analytical (and especially normative) power is limited. By singling out certain key issues – such as identity for Wendt, intersubjectivity for Kratochwil, and the material limits of constructivism for Onuf – she claims to offer a thorough critique of the core concepts of constructivist theorising.

Zehfuss sums up her main argument in the last two chapters. Chapter 5 provides a brief overview of Jacques Derrida’s thought and the practice of deconstruction. Deconstruction is supposed to debunk false claims to reality. Reality, she says (echoing Derrida’s most famous quote), cannot be grasped outside of our texts, that is, outside of human interpretations. By appealing to an independent, constraining reality, we simply try to free ourselves from the burden of responsibility. Moreover, “[t]he assertion of an independently existing reality, which in itself cannot be proved and seems to demand no proof, works to support particular political positions and to exclude others from consideration” (p. 245).

According to Zehfuss, all of the three scholars she examines are complicit in this enterprise of depoliticisation – and, by extension, this point is valid for constructivism as a whole. Her critique of Wendt is not all that innovative, for there have been many others pointing out his failure to include the level of domestic politics or his commitment to ‘scientific realism’. But Zehfuss is right to take a close look at Wendt’s treatment of identity as corporate and stable. In characteristically poststructuralist vein, she asserts:

“Acknowledging that identities do not exist apart from articulation and contextualisation, have no clear bounds and fail to be logically coherent, as the illustration [of post-unification Germany] suggests, would threaten the premises of the approach.”

Kratochwil's work is not as inherently flawed as Wendt's theories are, but he comes under attack for not taking his analysis of the 'political' far enough. The core constructivist notion of intersubjectivity rests on common understandings that are generally expressed in terms of rules and norms. Zehfuss affirms that intersubjectivity is not a neutral analytical tool but a political construct. Furthermore, "shared meaning [...] is inextricably linked to what is accepted as legitimate or good" (p. 150). From this perspective, constructivist writings obscure the political content of norms and the underlying power relations.

Finally, Zehfuss' assessment of Onuf's constructivism centres on what is another key philosophical difference between constructivism and postmodernism: the question of reality. Zehfuss finds Onuf's treatment of this question slightly incoherent, as he, on the one hand, stresses the "performativity of language" and, on the other hand, insists on a distinction between "words and world" (p. 192). Even if there were a material reality constraining us (which Zehfuss does not explicitly deny), "it could never matter matter to us other than within our constructions" (p. 195). Talking about reality, Zehfuss submits, is always a way of supporting the status quo, for it is usually the powerful who define what we conceive as reality.

On the whole, Zehfuss delivers an engaging and often lucid critique of the most influential constructivist writings, but it is also clear that constructivism does not collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. All approaches in political theory have their ambiguous moments and underlying tensions, which is why they are continuously being rearticulated and elaborated. Even Zehfuss's own 'ethics of responsibility', as I would term it, would be hard pressed in dealing with particular aspects, such as the question of how to recognise and combat 'evil' as opposed to mere 'difference'.

I think it is more promising to accept that on all important levels – ontology, epistemology, and advocacy – constructivist theories disagree with poststructuralism. Ontologically, it is groups and intersubjective communities that matter, not just creative individuals and floating discourses; epistemologically, constructivists defend a version of 'external realism' (Searle 1998) or 'ontological realism' (Adler 1997) which posits some material limits to our imagination. That these limits are, to some extent, always politically constructed (because we do not have unmediated access to reality) is not a good enough reason to neglect them.

Similarly, there exists a 'social reality' that is rooted in social practices and will resist our attempts to change it. By understanding it better, our agency is more likely to have a lasting impact. Lastly, although some constructivists pursue a cosmopolitan agenda, constructivism remains relatively weak in terms of advocacy. Strongly influenced by the phenomenological tradition of sociology, constructivism prefers an almost ironic distance to fundamental questions (like power or privilege) while exposing their constructed, malleable foundations. Yet this does not have to be its fate.

As Zehfuss rightly reminds us, although we have to start somewhere, our methodological choices are not innocent but deeply political. Constructivist scholars should welcome this critique and can undoubtedly learn from the hard questions this book is asking. Their response could be an explicit acknowledgement and a defense of the basic constructivist positions. Not just on methodological grounds but on normative grounds as well. Intersubjective communities, they could argue for example, *have always been, are and shall be* the central locus of human existence. Generally speaking, the 'middle ground' will always be a difficult place to be and many of those who think of themselves as constructivists today will be seduced to build their bridges towards the shores of positivism (e.g. Wendt) or postmodernism. To be more than a fashion, however, constructivism will have to continue to profess and elaborate its own contribution to the discipline of International Relations.

#### **Bibliography:**

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