# Social Constructivism vs. Positivism

## The most recent debate in IR theory

2 *Higher Education*

# Introduction

- Realism, liberalism, and Marxism together comprised the **inter-paradigm debate** of the 1980s, with realism dominant amongst the three theories.

- Despite promising intellectual openness, however, the inter-paradigm debate ended up naturalizing the dominance of realism by pretending that there was real contestation.

# Introduction

- **In recent years, the dominance of realism has been undermined by three developments:**

- **first, neo-liberal institutionalism has become increasingly important;**

- **second, globalization has brought a host of other features of world politics to centre-stage;**

- **third, positivism, the underlying methodo-logical assumption of realism, has been significantly undermined by developments in the social sciences and in philosophy.**

# Theoretical developments I

- The main non-marxist theories comprising the **inter-paradigm debate** were based on a set of **positivist assumptions**, namely the idea that social science theories can use the same methodologies as theories of the natural sciences, that facts and values can be distinguished, that neutral facts can act as arbiters between rival truth claims, and that the social world has regularities which theories can 'discover'.

# Positivism I

- **<u>Axioms</u>: correspondence theory of truth, methodological unity of science, value-free scientific knowledge**

- **<u>Premisses</u>: Division of Subject and Object, Naturalism – deduction of all phenomena from natural facts, Division of statements of facts and statements of values**

# Positivism II

- **Consequences:**
- **Postulated existence of a „real" world (Object) independent from the theory-loaded grasp of the scientist (Subject);**
- **identification of facts in an intersubjectively valid observation language independent from theories;**
- **methodological exclusion of idiosyncratic characteristics and/or individual (subject) identities assures objective knowledge of an intersubjectively transferable character**
- **Postulate of like regularities in the natural as well as the social world, independent of time, place, and observer, enables the transfer of analytic approaches and deductive-nomological processes of theory formulation from the field of the natural to the field of the social sciences & to the analysis of social/societal problems**
- **Knowledge generated on the basis of positivist research approaches and methodologies is limited to the objective (i.e. empirical) world. Statements and decisions on values are outside the sphere of competence of science.**

# Positivism III

- **Further Consequences:**
- *Concept of Reason* predicated on the purposeful rationality/rationality of purpose of instrumental action aiding the actor to technically master her/his environment
- *Rationalisation* of societal (inter-)action by its predication on planned/plannable means-end-relationships, technical (or engineering) knowledge, depersonalisation of relationships of power and dominance, and extension of control over natural and social objects ("rationalisation of the world we live in")
- *Theory* regards itself as problem-solving theory, which accepts the institutions and power/dominance relationships of a pre-given reality as analytical and reference frameworks, and strives for the explanation of causal relationships between societal phenomena; its aim is the elimination of disturbances and/or their sources in order to insure friction-less action/functioning of social actors
- *International politics* is regarded as the interaction of exogeneously constituted actors under anarchy, the behaviour of which is as a rule explained by recourse to the characteristics or parameters of the international system (top-down explanation)

# Theoretical Developments II

- Since the late 1980s there has been a **rejection of positivism**,mainly due to the insight that its stringent methodological criteria do not fit the Social Sciences

- The current theoretical situation is one in which there are three main positions:

- first, **rationalist theories** that are essentially the latest versions of the **realist** and **liberal** theories; second, **alternative** theories that are **post-positivist**;

- and thirdly **social constructivist** theories that try to bridge the gap.

# Theoretical Developments III

- Alternative approaches at once differ considerably from one another, and at the same time overlap in some important ways. One thing that they do share is a rejection of the core assumptions of **rationalist** theories.

# Historical sociology

- **Historical sociology** has a long history, having been a subject of study for several centuries. Its central focus is with **how societies develop the forms that they do**.

- Contemporary historical sociology is concerned above all with how the state has developed since the Middle Ages. It is basically a study of the **interactions between states, classes, capitalism, and war.**

# Historical sociology

- Like realism, historical sociology is interested in **war.** But it undercuts **neo-realism** because it shows that the state is not one functionally similar organization, but instead has altered over time.

- Raymond Aron: Paix et guerre entre les nations (1962)

2 *Higher Education*

# Normative theory

- Normative theory was out of fashion for decades because of the dominance of positivism, which portrayed it as 'value-laden' and 'unscientific'.

- In the last fifteen years or so there has been a resurgence of interest in normative theory. It is now more widely accepted that all theories have normative assumptions either explicitly or implicitly.

# Normative theory

- The key distinction in normative theory is between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. The former sees the bearers of rights and obligations as individuals; the latter sees them as being the community (usually the state).

- Main areas of debate in contemporary normative theory include the autonomy of the state, the ethics of the use of force, and international justice.

# Normative theory

- **In the last two decades, normative issues have become more relevant to debates about foreign policy, for example in discussions of how to respond to calls for humanitarian intervention and whether war should be framed in terms of a battle between good and evil.**

- **F.H.Hinsley: Power and the Pursuit of Peace. Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States (1967)**

- **Geoffrey Best: Humanity on Warfare. The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflict (1980)**

# Post-modernism I

- **Lyotard** defines **post-modernism** as **incredulity towards metanarratives**, meaning that it denies the possibility of foundations for establishing the truth of statements existing outside of **discourse**.

- **Foucault** focuses on the **power-knowledge relationship** and sees the two as mutually constituted. It implies that there can be no truth outside of **regimes of truth**. How can history have a truth if truth has a history?

# Post-modernism II

- **Foucault** proposes a **genealogical** approach to look at history, and this approach uncovers how certain regimes of truth have dominated others.

- **Derrida** argues that the world is like a text in that it cannot simply be grasped, but has to be interpreted. He looks at how texts are constructed, and proposes two main tools to enable us to see how arbitrary are the seemingly 'natural' oppositions of language. These are **deconstruction** and **double reading**.

# Post-modernism III

- **Post-modern** approaches have been accused of being 'too theoretical' and not concerned with the 'real world'. They reply, however, that in the social world there is no such thing as the 'real' world in the sense of a reality that is not interpreted by us. Despite their methodological preoccupation,they have done a great deal of work on important empirical questions such as war and famine.
- Cynthia Weber: International Relations Theory. A critical introduction (2001)
- Jim George: Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations (1994)

# More Literature

- **Iver B. Neumann/Ole Waever (eds.): The Future of International Relations. Masters in the Making (1997)**

- **Gert Krell: Weltbilder und Weltordnung: Einführung in die Theorie der Internationalen Beziehungen (²2003)**

- **Siegfried Schieder/Manuela Spindler (eds.): Theorien der Internationalen Beziehungen (2003)**

# The Rise of Constructivism I

- The end of the Cold War meant that there was a new intellectual space for scholars to challenge existing theories of international politics.

- Constructivists draw on established sociological theory in order to demonstrate how social science could help international relations scholars understand the importance of identity and norms in world politics.

# The Rise of Constructivism II

- **Constructivists demonstrated how attention to norms and states' identities could help uncover important issues neglected by Neorealism and Neoliberalism.**

- **Yosef Lapid/Friedrich Kratochwil (eds.): The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory (1996)**

# Constructivism I

- **Constructivists**
- are concerned with human **consciousness,**
- treat **ideas** as structural factors,
- consider the dynamic relationship between ideas and material forces as a consequence of actors' interpretation of their material reality,
- and are interested in how agents produce structures and how structures produce agents.
- Knowledge shapes how actors interpret and construct their social reality.

# Constructivism II

- **Normative structures** shape the identity and interests of actors such as states.

- **Social facts** such as sovereignty and human rights exist because of human agreement while brute facts such as mountains are independent of such agreements.

- **Social rules** are **regulative**, regulating already existing activities, and **constitutive**, making possible and defining those very activities.

# Constructivism III

- **Social construction** questions what is taken for granted, asks questions about the origins of what is now accepted as a fact of life and considers the alternative pathways that might have produced and can produce alternative worlds.

- **Power** can be understood not only as the ability of one actor to get another actor to do what she/he would not do otherwise but also as the production of identities and interests that limit the ability to control their fate.

# Constructivism IV

- Although the **meanings** that actors bring to their activities are shaped by the underlying culture, meanings are not always fixed but are a central feature of politics.

- **Maja Zehfuss: Constructivism in International Relations. The Politics of Reality (2002)**

- **Cornelia Ulbert/Christoph Weller (eds.): Konstruktivistische Analysen der internationalen Politik (2005)**

# Constructivism and Global Change I

- **The recognition that the world is socially constructed means that constructivists can investigate global change and transformation.**

- **A key issue in any study of global change is diffusion, captured by the concern with institutional isomorphism and the life cycle of norms.**

# Constructivism and Global Change II

- **Institutional isomorphism and the internationalization of norms raise issues of growing homogeneity in world politics, assuming a deepening international community, and intensifying international socialization processes.**

- **Vendulka Kubalkova/Nicholas Onuf/Paul Kowert (eds.): International Relations in a Constructed World (1998)**

# Epistemologischer Hintergrund: Konstruktivismus - Resumé I

- *Ontologische Prämisse:*
- **Auffassung von Erkenntnis als zirkulär operierender Leistung, die die „Wirklichkeit" in Wahrnehmung und Denken erst erzeugt: „Die Umwelt, die wir wahrnehmen, ist unsere Erfindung." [H.v.Foerster: Wissen u. Gewissen, 1993]**
- *Epistemologische Konsequenzen:*
- **Soziale Tatbestände sind nicht einfach gegeben, sondern sie sind *erzeugt* – von Menschen hervorgebracht, tradiert, erklärt, gerechtfertigt.**

# Konstruktivismus Resumé II

- **Prozesse und Strukturen der Internationalen Beziehungen sind gesellschaftlich konstruiert, eher soziale denn materielle Tatbestände. D.h. – Strukturbedingungen des internationalen Systems sind keine festen, den Akteuren äußerlichen Tatbestände, sondern gesellschaftliche Konstrukte, die die Akteure intuitiv verstehen und durch ihre Interaktionen (re-) produzieren. [A.Wendt: „Anarchy is what states make of it: the Social Construction of Power Politics", IO 46(2)],**

- **Das Akteursverhalten ist nicht ausschließlich systemdominiert [Gegenposition: Neorealismus], sondern es schafft und verändert die Systemstruktur:**

- *„...the structures of international politics are outcomes of social interactions, ...states are not static subjects, but dynamic agents, ...state identities are not given, but (re)constituted through complex, historical overlapping (often contradictory) practices – and therefore variable, unstable, constantly changing; ...the distinctions between domestic politics and international relations are tenuous..." [Knutsen 1997, 281ff]*

# Konstruktivismus – Resumé III

- **Neue Sicht des agency – structure – Problems:**
- **Weder der strukturalistische Determinismus noch der individualistische Intentionalismus sind akzeptable Ausgangspunkte für die Theoriebildung [ Dualität oder sogar Dialektik von agency und structure, Giddens 1984 ] Das Akteurshandeln vollzieht sich zwar in Strukturen (und wird insoweit von diesen beeinflußt), aber die Akteure können durch ihr Handeln selbst die Strukturen verändern . *„...points of departure are the rules, norms and patterns of behaviour that govern social interaction. These are structures, which are on the one hand, subject to change if and when the practice of actors changes, but on the other hand structure political life as actors re-produce them* in *their every day actions...“ [Christiansen/Jorgensen 1999].***

# That's it – folks…