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**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM IN IR
— A SHORT SUCCESS STORY?**

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ORCID no. 0000-0001-6405-1024**e-mail:** karol.chwedczuk-szulc@uwr.edu.pl**Abstract**

This article aims to present selected elements of SC's development in the field of International Relations (IR) theory. It underlines the role played by sociology of knowledge and the transformative moment of the end of the Cold War. The main focus of this article is put on the process of mainstreaming SC in IR. This article presents a summary, reminding one the fundamental premises of SC and their potential in IR and in social sciences in general. It is especially important today, as we face the situation where "everyone writes, but no one reads anymore" (Bok, 2015).

Keywords: SC, theory of IR, Alexander Wendt**Ascendancy of SC in International Relations**

SC in IR has basically two backgrounds: the sociology of knowledge and the Fourth Great Debate. The constructivist paradigm was from the very beginning positioned in opposition to the dominant status of realism and liberalism and their *neo* versions. The process that prepared the ground for SC's appearance in IR was the debate, especially in the 1980s, between liberal institutionalists and realist structuralists (Waltz, 1979; Keohane 1993). The liberals, referring to the idealists' tradition, were arguing that elements such as culture, collective biographies of nations or religion do matter.

The historical event that facilitated the appearance of social constructivism (SC) was obviously the fall of Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar Cold War world. The dominant IR theories of realism and liberalism were blamed for not predicting this epoch-changing phenomenon (Cox, 2008). Therefore, not only were the predictive potential of the theories of rationalist paradigm put into question, but also their explanatory power. It turned out that theories using an essentialist, static approach to social reality were not enough for the description and explanation of a fluxional, constantly changing, globalising world and its transition to a predominantly multi-polar and unstable world order. The dominant impression was that rationalist theories, aiming at the creation of robust models of reality, with constant and stable elements, were overtaken and left behind by the ever-alternating

reality. This in turn brought the need for a new ontological and epistemological approach that would be able to catch up with the post-Cold War reality. SC was developed as a part of an answer to this demand in IR.

Deficits of rationalist theories are neatly explained by Christian Reuss-Smit (2005) in his chapter on constructivism in “Globalization of World Politics”. First, the rationalist paradigm assumes that the character of main IR actors is pre-social and static. The general assumption is that the main actor of IR is a state and that its nature, goals, interests and needs are constant and given exogenously. The second assumption stems logically from the first one: because a state is a pre-social actor, the interactions within the IR system do not change its structure, *ergo* they are not to be taken into account. Third, the society itself is not a dynamic, changing actor but a “strategic domain”, whose sole purpose is to fulfil states' egoist interests (Reuss-Smit, *op.cit.* 192). Of course, these statements in their classic versions refer mostly to the theory of realism, but they are present also in liberalism, as they characterise in general the rationalist paradigm. Neoliberalism, with its focus on *low politics* and internal dynamics of the state and which embraces culture to some extent, may be seen as a step towards constructivism.

The rationalist assumptions on the insignificance of social interactions between IR seems to be unsuitable for the description of international relations. This presumption, implicating *de facto* a lack of change in IR, appeared to be ineffective at the end of the Cold War and is so today. Interactions shaping trends (micro, macro and mega) are bringing constant changes to the world. By ignoring this fact, rationalist paradigms limited its potential to describe, explain and predict trends in IR effectively (Walt, 1998). Constructivist paradigm was a part of an answer to these conditions.

Main trends within SC: variance and convergence

The genesis of SC in IR has to include an anti-positivist breakthrough marked by the rise of critical theories. Modernist (Jürgen Habermas) and postmodernist schools (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault), though with different views on the issue of minimal foundationalism, agreed essentially on the constructivist ontology (Linklater, 2007). There were two significant trends observable within the stream of SC in IR. One of them treats SC as a meta-theory, a paradigm or a social theory that does not deal with empirical testing of given hypotheses. In this perspective, there is no ambition to create theoretical competition for the realists and liberals. It was rather used to explain the social character of every human endeavour, including international relations (Guzzini & Leander, 2006). The second trend in turn, which appeared to attract more attention at the end of 1980s and 1990s, aimed at challenging the conceptual toolbox of rationalist theories (*vide*: Wendt, 1999; Christiansen, Jorgensen & Wiener, 1999). In the end, after SC ascended to a mainstream position of IR, the reconciliation between constructivist and rationalist paradigms took place. The more conventional (and foundational) constructivist theoreticians, like Alexander Wendt, agreed on certain level of reification (“rump materialism”, Wendt, *op.cit.* 1995). In effect, the positivist methodology does not evoke such controversies anymore within SC. Conventional constructivists agree that “no matter how, as long as it does the job”, or as long as the given methods explain the mechanism of social construction of meanings, they are acceptable. This reconciliation ended a period of theoretical develop-

ment and conflict with the rationalist paradigm and marked the beginning of a period of normal science done from the constructivist perspective (Kuhn, 1996).

The division within the community of critical theorists between modernists and post-modernists is reflected in the division between conventional and critical social constructivists. The former represents the so-called “weaker” version of constructivism as it agrees on a wider spectrum of foundationalism than the latter. That is why critical constructivism is called a “strong” program of constructivism (Latour, 1999). The conventional one, as mentioned above, is closer, especially methodologically, to a positivist paradigm, whereas the critical constructivism tends to reject positivism and focuses on reflective and interpretative methodology.

Alexander Wendt is perceived as one of the most notable representatives of the conventional constructivism, as he tried to chart a *via media* between the rationalist and constructivist paradigm. His version of SC is often described as “structural” because of the agreement with Waltzian premise about the existence of a relatively stable international relations’ structure (Wendt, op. cit.). One of the first representatives of critical constructivism was Nicholas Onuf. He focused on rules regulating social life as a whole and on how they are responsible for the production of social structures and organising social interactions. The main difference lies in the fact that Onuf (1989) does not reify any structures or rules. They are in a constant process of mutual production/reproduction between the agents and structures.

Ted Hopf (1998) presented this distinction in a concise and readable manner by dividing his analysis into the following categories:

- Ontology. Conventional constructivism argues that the agreement within the epistemic community on widely accepted, intersubjective statements is possible (“minimal foundationalism”). Critical constructivism states it is neither possible, nor desirable. Each concept and phenomenon should be analysed as original and unique in reference to its inimitable context.
- Epistemology. Conventional constructivists accept intersubjective rules of the positivist methodology and accept the intersubjective nature of knowledge. Critical constructivists argue that intersubjectivity is impossible and leads to reification of the research subjects, making the whole research endeavour invalid. Efforts aimed at ensuring intersubjectivity would only lead to an artificial perception of the social process as stable and static.
- Identity. Conventional constructivism focuses mainly on reproductive practices. By knowing these practices, one may be able to establish predispositions of a given actor to behave in a certain way under certain circumstances. These predispositions and circumstance can be generalised. The critical version rejects the possibility of such generalisations and focuses on understanding how actors accept given statements as true and reject others as false. By scrutinising myths, which are crucial elements constituting identity, one learns to understand given identity – it does not allow for prediction of behaviours (Lapid and Kratochwil, 1996).
- Position of a researcher. From the conventional perspective, the researcher is analysing a phenomenon from the outside. They are, to some extent, an objective observer who simply describes and explains a research subject without interfering with it. The critical approach states that a researcher, by the very fact of making an observation, shapes the research subject and is also shaped by the research subject (“double her-

meneutic”; Giddens, 1984). Therefore, “objectivity” does not exist for the critical constructivists.

- Power. Conventional constructivism perceives the category of power as analytically neutral. It recognises that social interactions are strongly influenced by the relations of power. The role of science is to identify and describe the relation. Critical constructivism puts the hierarchy and inequality of power distribution in the centre of its agenda. The aim of science is to debunk these hierarchical relations and change them into emancipating societies from the rules of subordination (Taylor, 1996).

Both conventional and critical versions of SC vary greatly. We could even state that sometimes they are opposite to each other. At the same time, they still represent the same constructivist paradigm and they share fundamental assumptions about social life.

- Both aim at “denaturalisation” of the social world. Constructivism assumes that social reality is socially constructed, so the “naturality” does not exist objectively. The term “natural” is only used to describe a wide consensus on the meanings of a given concept within a given community. The validity of the consensus is limited by time and space.
- The aim of SC is, most of all, to describe and understand the process of meanings’ production and reproduction (Zehfuss, 2002).
- Objectivity does not exist, but intersubjectivity is the “lowest common denominator”, allowing for any relevant exchange of meanings. The reality is not objective, but it can be at least communicated in an intersubjective way (Scheff, 2006).
- All research subjects have to be contextualised.
- There is a link between power and knowledge. Control over knowledge may give power and power may give control over knowledge. Constructivists want to reveal this relation and understand it (Onuf, op.cit).
- Agents and structures are mutually co-constitutive. Agents are limited by structure, but by their practices may shape the structure (Giddens, 1984).

The conventional version of constructivism is closer to the rationalist paradigm that dominated IR indivisibly until the 1990s and still seems to be more popular among scholars. The next section of the article presents how conventional constructivism came into being institutionally and how it positions itself in the field of IR. At the end of the article, I will present the degree of popularity of the most important theories, with special focus on SC.

SC Reconciled with IR Mainstream?

The emergence of SC as a meta-theory, or a social theory, was not really in a dispute with theories like realism or liberalism, but rather with the rationalist paradigm. Even though my impression is that most scholars today perceive SC (SC) exactly as such, i.e. a general social theory, it does not mean that there were no attempts to position SC as another medium range theory, competing with (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism.

The main aim of the theories stemming from the rationalist paradigm was to create an analytical framework with enough explanatory and predicitating potential to serve as a tool for an effective understanding of reality and to be useful for decision-making. For

constructivists, this assumption is not self-evident and is actually proof of the rationalists' theories weaknesses. These weaknesses encompass: ahistoricity, universalism and artificial autonomy of concepts from social processes. As presented before, these shortcomings seem to explain to a large extent why rationalist theories did not effectively account for the end of Cold War. From the perspective of SC, it is oversimplified and invalid to perceive international relations as a static system saturated with stable relations, especially in the globalising, where constant change is determining a new world order. Therefore, paradoxically, the rationalist assumption on the constancy of some rules of international relations (anarchy, self-help etc.), instead of facilitating successful forecasting, appeared to be false and prevented a valid prediction. SC, by accepting constant fluidity of social relations, accounts for a change, arguing that it is the basis for a more reliable prediction.

SC, seen as a meta-theory, still limits its predication ambitions. The main goal is to explain and understand the mechanisms of creating and reproducing meanings in social life and how they shape actors and their behaviours. Knowledge of these mechanisms allows for some limited generalisations, but they do not have the character of laws, therefore it is impossible to develop a complex theory that is valid in every context. Social constructivists made attempts to create a theory with a certain dose of reification. Of course, the most notable attempt was by Alexander Wendt. In his landmark book "The Social Theory of International Politics", he presented a complex theory of IR. The result of his endeavour is known as structural constructivism, as Wendt tried to reconcile SC with the structural realism of Kenneth Waltz (Sárváry, 2001).

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Wendt's approach is rather an exception among constructivists, as it challenges many of the ground assumptions of SC (McCourt, 2016). First, Wendt reifies the core element of the IR, namely the state. He treats states as complete, closed, unitary, non-emergent actors which fall outside the scope of inquiry. Second, Wendt accepts the epistemological premise of scientific realism – this is out of the constructivist canon. Scientific realism is based on the assumption that the cognition of a real, material world is possible and it is the final aim of science. Of course, it goes against such foundations of SC as a double hermeneutic and ignores the social origins of knowledge and science. These elements show that Alexander Wendt moved his theory into the direction of rationalist paradigm, which is irreconcilable with the constructivist paradigm. It explains why his proposal, very important for the development of SC in IR, was finally rejected by many social constructivists (Guzzini, Leander, op.cit.).

After all, the attempt of Alexander Wendt to reconcile constructivist "outcasts" with the mainstream of IR theories was successful, even if many of constructivists distance themselves from Wendt's perspective. Still, the "The Social Theory of International Politics" remains as a very important point of reference, not only for constructivists, but for all scholars dealing with the theory in IR. It has also fostered the discussion about the differences between the conventional and critical versions of SC, their assets and limitations and possible applications in research. At the end of this article, I argue that the debate provoked by Wendt made constructivists to pose and answer the question of whether one should focus on Kantian phenomena or rather try to reach the understanding of noumenon (an object existing independently from human cognition; Kant, 1972).

One of the results of the debate spurred by Wendt's book turned into the conclusion on the labour division between realism and SC (Guzzini, Leander, op.cit.). For example, the category of "interest" can be researched fruitfully from both perspectives. Realism takes

care of identification, description and operationalisation of the interest. Constructivism, in turn, describes and explains the mechanism leading to the creation of interests (e.g. securitisation), how they are understood by given actors and how they are reproduced within a given structure. We have to remember that the role of SC in this model is to problematise the very nature of the category of interest. From the constructivist perspective, it is not exogenic, but is the result of an interplay between power and knowledge, and as such it should be deconstructed and analysed. In this way, there is no direct conflict between SC and realism, because SC remains a paradigm, while realism is used as a medium range theory and a methodological approach.

Wendt's work also served as an incentive for the methodological discussion within SC. The main argument here may be that it is possible to reach "constructivist goals" with the positivist methodology. From the constructivist perspective, positivist methodology is not an objective, reality-revealing system of methods, but rather an outcome of a long-term social process of knowledge accumulation. Therefore, positivist methodology results from the development of a social system that we describe as science. SC may accept findings of positivist research, while bearing in mind that it is a product of a highly contextualised process where certain rules of objectivity are met. It does not mean, of course, that this knowledge is independent from the researcher and their social context. On the contrary, it is a product of this context. *Ergo*, the constructivist perspective accepts the intersubjectivity of science and knowledge, in any given space, time and social context. In this view, there is no conflict between the positivist and interpretivist methodology.

This "contextualised methodological conventionalism", as I call it, is, in my opinion, another element allowing the mainstreaming of SC in IR. The point is that by taking into account contextuality, SC can accept a given convention to partake in an epistemic community, preserving the critical stance towards this convention.

To sum up the above, we can distinguish three main stages of SC development:

- 1980s/1990s – SC appears in IR as a result of an anti-positivist breakthrough.
- 1990s – SC slowly takes place among other mainstream theories in IR. Attempts are made to reconcile constructivism with the rationalist paradigm (vide Wendt).
- 21st century – a clear tendency to "deconstruct a convention", meaning that conventional and structural constructivism are too far away from the foundations of the constructionist paradigm (McCourt, *op.cit.*).

On a side note, it is important to stress that, along with the changes described here, the aims of SC have been changing as well. In the first stage, the axionormative element of SC was quite strong and aimed at the redefinition of the relations of power. During the phase of "conventionalisation", the idea of a neutral scientific approach was dominant. Today, in turn, we can observe a comeback to the approach in which a researcher should also take into account their own agenda, meaning they cannot avoid some introspection and declaring their motivations. By this, they account for a personal opinion in the research, satisfying the requirement of intersubjectivity.

Instead of a conclusion

Because SC has become relevant in IR in the last 30 years, we can safely state that it has become one of the main paradigms in this field of social sciences. We have at hand both

qualitative and quantitative data to prove that IR scholars perceive constructivism as an approach that they use most often:

Table 1. Self-descriptive approach to study in IR1.

	Constructivism	English School	Feminism	Liberalism	Marxism	Realism	Other	I do not use paradigmatic analysis
All	22	4	2	15	4	16	15	22
US	20	2	2	20	2	16	12	26
UK	22	10	3	7	7	7	24	20
Can	25	6	4	10	5	19	16	16
Aus	22	5	4	9	5	13	22	21
NZ	11	17	11	6	6	11	28	11
Ire	17	0	0	13	7	20	3	40
Fra	24	2	0	7	2	23	17	24
Den	23	7	0	16	0	11	20	23
Fin	25	0	0	0	0	0	50	25
Nor	8	3	3	23	3	13	10	38
Swe	33	4	6	9	2	9	11	26
Isr	28	4	0	8	0	36	4	20
Tur	24	4	1	15	7	26	11	11
HK	9	0	0	18	9	18	9	36
Sin	25	0	0	10	0	5	20	40
SA	33	4	4	21	0	13	17	8
Arg	22	9	3	0	6	16	16	28
Bra	20	9	1	13	8	14	16	19
Col	29	6	2	21	6	13	8	15
Mex	19	2	0	11	8	19	25	17

Source: D. Maliniak, S. Peterson, M.J. Tierney, *TRIP Around the World: Teaching, Research, and Policy Views of International Relations Faculty in 20 Countries*, The College of William and Mary Williamsburg, Virginia, May 2012

Today, it is hard to imagine that the influence of the social processes could be ignored in any serious IR research. As the results presented above show, social constructivist successfully convinced the IR epistemic community that materialistic scepticism is not enough to understand the complexity of processes taking place in international relations. SC has managed to bring back international relations into the domain of social life, where all

1 Question asked: Which of the following best describes your approach to the study of IR? If you do not think of your work as falling within one of these paradigms, please select the category in which most other scholars would place your work.

human-to-human relations belong. Elements such as culture, religion, tradition, collective experience, habitus etc. are important. What is the most important, though, is the fact that meanings constantly change. Therefore, in order to understand them and to be able to “stay on top of things” (whatever it means in any given context), it is necessary to know the process of triangulation of meanings.

In spite of their many successes, social constructivists still have many areas where additional work is needed. The main question of whether SC is a paradigm/meta-theory or a theory of IR seems to remain unresolved, especially within many national spaces of IR scholarships functioning largely autonomously or even separately, divided along the borders of states. A significant debate on the methodology is still taking place: is a positivist methodology acceptable at all from the constructivist perspective, or should one use only reflexive and interpretative methods? The issue of the utilitarianism of SC remains unclear – should the researcher reveal their motives and take them into account, or should they rather strive towards the ideal of an absolute normative neutrality?

Even though these questions are very important and should spur a lot of debates and intellectual ferment, it seems that IR and SC are stuck in some kind of retention. A 2015 study has shown that over 75% of all social sciences articles written in the USA are not being cited even once (Bok, 2015). Many works consist mostly of BA/MA-thesis-like introductions, with loads of references, but with little to no value added. This problem is visible within the social constructivist approach. The question remains: is there still potential in this approach, maybe in the form of the sociology of knowledge, that could lead to another breakthrough and an advancement of the field?

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