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The Constructivist Thesis

Introduction

Constructivist theories which developed in international relations in the early 1990s challenged the central theoretical perspectives in the academic discipline of international relations. During the Cold War and most of the history of international relations, the research agenda was dominated by rationalist approaches which subordinated morality to the interests of power. The constructivist framework challenges this emphasis on power and seeks to demonstrate that rather than power, it is norms and values which shape the behaviour of the majority of states. States may still wield power in terms of military and coercive might but the use of this power is not guided solely by amoral state interests. Rather, in the constructivist framework, power is constrained and state interests reshaped through international normative structures created by the multiple interactions of state and non-state actors in actually existing global civil society. Constructivist theorising in international relations today influences a wide range of differing approaches from liberal internationalism to critical theory and postmodernism.²

This chapter focuses on constructivist theory as it relates to empirical studies of global civil society rather than attempting to engage with constructivist thinking per se. The following sections outline briefly the developments leading to a shift away from more traditional international relations concerns of liberal institutionalism and towards transnational networks operating in global civil society. Then the explanatory strength of the constructivist approach in this area will be considered and finally some of the limitations will be raised, which will be drawn out further in Chapters 3 and 4.
A new research agenda

Until the end of the Cold War, the dominant theoretical perspectives in international relations assumed the nation-state was the key actor and that it acted in the pursuit of pre-given national interests. There were a number of disagreements between commentators and theorists, regarding the nature of these interests and whether cooperation or conflict was the predominant means of attaining them. But, whichever perspective was followed, the assumption was that these ‘self-interested’ interests were themselves pre-given. The main debate in international relations was between neo-realists who focused on the limits of cooperation and the possibility of conflict and the neo-liberals who focused on the possibilities for cooperation and the limits to conflict (for surveys see Keohane 1986; Nye 1988; Baldwin 1993). For both sides, states were theorised as rational actors pursuing self-interested goals.

These approaches had three core assumptions. Firstly, that states were the key subjects, i.e., the main actors in international relations. Secondly, that the interest of states as rational actors was to maximise their power and influence, by pursuing their self-interests. Thirdly, that in the context of international anarchy, i.e., the lack of a world government, states had to pursue self-help strategies, limiting the nature of international cooperation and making the international sphere one of strategic interaction in which security concerns were paramount. The development of constructivist approaches challenged all three of these core assumptions.

De-centring the state

Constructivist theory de-centres both the subject or active agent of international relations, the nation-state, and simultaneously the structural constraints of neo-realism. Rather than the structure of anarchy creating states and state interests – in which case the needs of ‘power’ constitute ideas and ideological constructions which further these interests – constructivists assert that understanding international relations in purely structural or ‘instrumental’ or ‘rationalist’ terms is inadequate. The structure of self-guided egoistic state-subjects operating in a world of self-help power politics is questioned. The relationship between the individual state and the society of the international sphere of relations is transformed. Rather than the immutable framework of anarchy creating the conditions of possibility and structural limitations, for state interaction and state interests, constructivists hold