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Between Continuity and Change: Ostpolitik and the Constructivist Approach Revisited

To social constructivists, West German Ostpolitik, as implemented by the social-liberal government of Chancellor Willy Brandt in the early 1970s, is an excellent example of norms and identities influencing foreign policy. According to constructivists, Ostpolitik involved a continuous social process in which decision-makers were increasingly guided by norms such as ‘peace’, ‘reconciliation’ and ‘Europeanness’. However, constructivist analyses of Ostpolitik remain too abstract to answer the question of why West German reunification policy was first diverted down an international side track, before subsequently taking the lead in international détente and shaking up the political status quo on the national and international stages. Only when the constructivist emphasis on the influence of norms is allied with more traditional decision-making models of bureaucratic and government politics, with their focus on strategic interests, does it become clear that the answer lies in the dynamics of the ongoing political struggle in West German party politics.

2.1 Constructivism and foreign policy

Since the early 1990s, constructivist IR theory has emerged as a major third school of thought set against neorealism and neoliberalism, or ‘neo-utilitarianism’, as both approaches were labelled by John Ruggie (1997, pp. 9–11). Central to the constructivist approach is the notion that international politics does not so much reflect an objective, material reality, but an inter-subjective, social reality (cf. Onuf, 1989). As one of the most prominent constructivists, Alexander Wendt, has put it (1995, pp. 71–81): ‘The fundamental structures of international politics are social, rather than strictly material […] and these […] structures shape [the] actor’s identities and interests […].’ According to
the constructivist view, the interaction between states affects how self-interest is defined in terms of shared norms and values. Through this process, states are able to form a collective social structure or collective identity. Contrary to the ‘rationalist’ approaches of neorealism and neoliberalism, which treat the interests of states as a given, the constructivist approach sees interests as variable products of social interaction (Wendt, 1994, pp. 391–425).

The constructivist approach not only concerns systemic IR theory but also extends to the field of FPA. This is not to say that constructivists all agree that this is a desirable development. Wendt, most notably, has taken a strictly systemic approach (Wendt, 1999, p. 11). Alongside the level-of-analysis discussion, which can also be found within other schools of thought, constructivist disagreement generally centres on the ‘thinner’ and ‘thicker’ versions of their approach (Carlsnaes, 2002, p. 339; Barkin, 2003, p. 327). The ‘thinner’ approach is represented by ‘modernist’ constructivists such as Ruggie and Wendt, as well as by scholars like Peter Katzenstein, Martha Finnemore or Thomas Risse. Followers of the ‘thicker’ version are more deeply rooted in a broad school of different critical meta-theoretical views on international politics and traditional IR theory (Carlsnaes, 2002, p. 339; Chernoff, 2007, p. 153). These so-called post-positivist approaches share the conviction that empirical research and objective knowledge in the social sciences are highly problematic.

Although these ‘modernists’ do believe that constructivists should seek empirical backing for their hypotheses, the constructivist approach is not suited to investigating causal relationships. When international politics is based on the social interaction between states, which results in a collective social structure or collective identity, the causal relationship between ‘agent’ and ‘structure’ is lost. Individual states and collective identity are constantly interacting. We can never therefore be certain of how or to what extent states influence social structure and to what extent social structure influences individual states. According to constructivists, their approach is not therefore one of causal relationships, but of ‘constitutive theorizing’ based on the mutual reciprocity between ‘agent’ and ‘structure’ (Wendt, 1995, pp. 83–88). There are constructivists who claim that the agent-structure problem constitutes no impediment at all to using the approach in traditional empirical research, investigating causal relationships between variables. Wendt (1995, p. 75), for example, states that: ‘Constructivists […] fully endorse the scientific project of falsifying theories against