

# POLS 318: Theories of IR

## Lecture 9 (02.17.2021): Constructivism

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# Overview

- 1 Quick review
- 2 Introduction
- 3 Elements of Theory
- 4 Fit to IR research
- 5 Extra Material

# Review

## WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- Rational choice: a general theory of behavior.
- Is war a rational choice?
- The bargaining range and peaceful settlements.
- Rationalist explanation: private information.
- Rationalist explanation: commitment.
- Extended nuclear deterrence as a commitment problem.
- Public defense pact or deploy troops?

Questions?? Email me!

# A stark contrast

## BACKGROUND

- Rational choice → state-actor maximize objectives.
- Neorealism and Liberalism.
- **Constructivism** - how objectives are formed.
- Link domestic culture, values and preferences to power.

# Identity and preferences

## Processes of identity formation

- Legitimation.
- Role definition.
- Reflection.

## Example: Human Rights

- Strategic endorsement of treaty.
- International pressure to adopt norms.
- Shift in behavior?

# A constructivist view

## Actors and structures

- An intersubjective social context.
- Intersubjectivity?? [▶ Illustration](#)
- Norms drive interactions.
- Norms define identity of actors and behavior.
- Example: US in Vietnam war.

# A constructivist view

## Identities and Interests

- Crucial component of global system.
- Drives expectations of behavior.
- Important → interpret others:
  - Interests and Preferences.
  - Actions.
- Intersubjective view of identity → view of others.
- USSR/Russia during cold war.

## Power

- material and discursive.
- Vietnam war: American identities (great power, imperialism).

# A constructivist view

## Balance of threats

- Balancing behavior facing threats.
- Understanding threats a-priori.
- Balancing → shared identities.
- Rethinking the cold war blocs.



# A constructivist view

## Cold war shared identities



# A constructivist view

## Cooperation

- Liberal view → focus on self-interest.
- Cooperate → similar identities.
- No incentives for unilateral action.
- Discourse drives cooperation and finding value in collaboration.

## Domestic Politics

- Internal aspects: culture, society, identity.
- Constrain and enable identity, interests and actions.

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# Constructivism in IR

## Distinctions from material theories

- No longer a unitary actor.
- Self-interest? based on social practices.
- The origins of interests - identity formation.
- Power in discourse.
- Actors and structures constitute each other.

## However, some similarities

- Concerns with structure of system.
- State interests.
- Power and system changes.

# Challenges and Limitations

- Theory or an analytic tool?
- Empirical data: volume and types.
- Selection bias.
- *UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.*
- A long process??
- Saudi Arabia: progress?? (*Media Link*)

# An application of Constructivism

- LGBT rights and government actions - Uganda.
- Norms Immunization.
- Norm Backlash.



# Human rights

## Opposing norms

- Government reject transnational norms.
- Fear of internal pressures.
- Immunization - legal barriers.
- Examples:
  - ① Russia 2006, 2013.
  - ② Algeria 2014.
  - ③ Nigeria 2014.
- Justification for laws → protection of children.

# Human rights

## Norms backlash

- When? political threat & successful advocacy.
- Japan and anti-whaling.
- Regressive action to counter the internalization process.
- Construct the norm as a national threat.
- Diverse actions:
  - Norm content (Iraq).
  - Advocacy (Nigeria).
  - Laws (Texas constitution).
  - Policy (Iraq state media).



# LGBT Rights in Uganda

## STAGES

### (1) Transnational norm advocacy

- 1980's: international organizations advocate protection of gay rights.
- Legal victories in Europe.
- Norm diffused globally, adopted mostly in the west.
- Strong opposition: religious groups, nations-states.

### (2) Uganda: advocacy and rejection

- 2004: local groups call for protection of LGBT rights.
- Rejection: government and global groups.
- Call for legal counter-action.

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- Legal ruling against the government.
- Public officials blame international advocacy.



# LGBT Rights in Uganda

## STAGES

### (4) Construction of a threat

- Frame norm diffusion as national threat.
- Threat to culture and identity of Uganda.
- Associate with colonialism.
- Justify defensive measures.

# LGBT Rights in Uganda

## STAGES

### (5) Immunization

- 2009: bill introduced.
- 2013: Approved by parliament.
- 2014: Signed into law.

### Other aspects:

- Practical implications: limit legal rights, outlaw advocacy and public funding.
- Incentives for immunization: Normative or political.
- Fit theory: a 'constructivist process'.

# Recommended readings

More studies on Constructivism in IR:

- ① Wendt, Alexander. (1992). "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46, 2, 391-425.
- ② Buzas, Zoltan. (2018). "Is the Good News About Law Compliance Good News About Norm Compliance? The Case of Racial Equality." *International Organization* 72, 2, 351-385.
- ③ Tannenwald, Nina. (1999). "The nuclear taboo: The United States and the normative basis of nuclear non-use." *International organization* 53, 3, 433-468.

# Constructivism

## Social intersubjectivity

