INTRODUCTION: ‘CONSTRUCTING IR: THE THIRD GENERATION’

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INTRODUCTION

There are two stories to tell about constructivism as an approach to the field of International Relations (IR). The first story is the happy one. Constructivism has already had a huge impact on International Relations. For a long time Liberals and Realists, in particular, were quite content to focus on evaluative practices by states as rational actors bound by the belief in the power of empirical social science. The quest for scientific rigour and the envy of economics ruled the day. Whether it was the economic theory of the firm, consumer theory, game theory, or modern contract theory (like principal-agent problems and institutional design), IR provided a good outlet for (US) economic models. With the advent of constructivism, new concepts like norms, discourses, speech acts, intersubjectivity among others were put to task in order to help understand the changing contours of world politics. In this sense, it is fair to say that constructivism did change IR’s vocabulary and its boundaries significantly. Among many other things, constructivists dealt with the role of language, meaning, social facts, and the differences between the social and natural sciences with regard to tests, proof, and evidence in the process of scientific inquiry.

Yet it may be too soon to open the champagne, for perhaps, contrary to first impressions, ‘constructivism’ is in a rather dismal state. The major debates have died

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down and, at the moment, what passes for constructivism looks more like a norm-testing exercise than what it set out to become – a social theory of international relations. One needs to remember that constructivism was never confined to the disciplinary boundaries of International Relations (IR) itself, but provided the link between IR and social theory. Yet this link seems to have been forgotten. Open any textbook of IR and you will find that constructivism is not linked with social theory, but rather represented in terms of (usually liberal-inflected) norms, anarchy as what states make of it, and the agent-structure problem. This representation and presentation of constructivism is in itself correct insofar as many contributions did deal with exactly these questions. However, we do believe that it makes a difference whether these ‘topics’ are presented as ‘translations’ of social theoretical debates into IR, or as ‘constructivism’s core’. Moreover, these topics are predominantly associated with the work of Alexander Wendt. Like no other, he shaped and influenced the US debate on constructivism in the 1990s and his impact cannot be underestimated. We are certainly neither interested nor in the position to criticise this fact. However, still to link constructivism with these three topics disregards how he has abandoned his ‘project’ already – for all the right reasons. This brings us to a second reason for the current dismal state. Much of what is reproduced, and what one finds in the obligatory ‘constructivism’ session, still too easily tells the story of constructivism. Constructivism at the very least is complicated by its delineation into mutually incompatible streams. A moderate version treats constructivism as a middle ground between rational and post-structuralist approaches. A radical version of constructivism not only questioned the very objectives associated with the middle ground and supported a different vision of scientific practices, but also accused the moderate version of trying to establish a new orthodoxy. What makes ‘constructivism’ such a complex enterprise is that both streams may use the same concept like norms or sovereignty, but mean utterly different ‘things’ with them. The differences also arise from their different overall projects. While moderate constructivists are happy to flirt with positivism, radical constructivists do reject this attempt. The use of their – sometimes shared – vocabulary also always pursues the objective to advance their agenda. On the one hand, this complicates any attempt to find out what ‘constructivism’ stands for with the danger that it becomes all-


inclusive. On the other hand, there is the danger, as Nicolas Onuf once put it, that constructivism ends up as a fad.\(^7\)

**GENERATIONALISING CONSTRUCTIVISM: TOWARDS A CROSS-GENERATIONAL DIALOGUE**

To gain a better appreciation of constructivism, its richness, and the recent re-engagement of some of the more complex constructivist classics, we chose as a title of this forum ‘constructing the third generation’. We do so for two reasons. First, others have discussed constructivism in such terms. Back in 2001, Karin Fierke and Knud Erik Jørgensen introduced a *second* generation of constructivism. The second generation was a constructivism that had matured, was more diverse, and had already started to have a long lasting impact on the discipline.\(^8\) Fifteen years have passed since then, and a new generation of constructivists has made its way into the intellectual field (or discipline). The second, more complicated reason for using ‘the generation’ here is that the concept of a generation is actually important for clarifying the context in which ‘constructivist scholarship’ is undertaken. As Nicholas Onuf made clear in his response in the 2001 volume, there are crucial differences between the social contexts in which the first and now (back then) the second generation operated. Their problems were not the other’s problem, their discussions not the other’s discussions. It may have led to some confusion about constructivism as an intellectual project, but at least Onuf was honest when he remarked that the sum was less than its parts.

From this perspective, the use of generations opens the gateway for a more reflexive approach to constructivism that takes seriously the sociology of our discipline, i.e. the way knowledge is produced and naturalised. By using ‘generation’, thus, we do not claim that we know better or hold that ultimate truth of constructivism in our hands. Rather, the point is that we first need to be clear of our own grounds. We could call our project a ‘critique’ in the classic-Kantian sense that reconstructs the ‘foundations’ of our thinking and acting while at the same time being post-Kantian in the way we understand knowledge and power. In short, we do believe that a non-reflexive constructivism, i.e. one that does not observe its own context, its own limits and thus bids farewell to classic concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘science’, is a contradiction in terms.

In looking back over the past several decades, we can plausibly identify the formative experiences – part of the ‘social context’ the generation helps to indicate – that have influenced scholars and scholarship. The ending of the Cold War deserves special attention, and no doubt a wave of scholars across various epistemological and theoretical divides seem to have been influenced, both emotionally and professionally, by what Ken Booth called “the spirit of 1989”.\(^9\) Some have characterised this era


not in generational terms, but in theoretical terms as a “liberal moment”, although this is surely a problematic discursive intervention, for the end of the Cold War was not just ‘liberal’, nor was it just a ‘moment’. We could extend this observation that, as Alexander Barder and Daniel Levine note so eloquently, in contrast to the ‘Happy’ 1990s, this emerging third generation is largely filled with voices that are less hopeful and more cautious than previous constructivist generations.

Trying to sketch out the different generations of constructivism proves difficult but not impossible if we focus on the global, political, and social contexts through time. What we are doing here is not with reference to a person’s age, but rather to the first decade they published their first major works, and the scholarly and worldly events that coloured those years. The first generation of constructivists would include Onuf, Kratochwil, Duvall, Ruggie, Yosef Lapid, and a few others. While their ideas were formed, the Cold War was still operating. IR saw the turn to the neo-neo discourse that focused on the promise of rationalism and Enlightenment. The second generation, one that several contributors to this issue engage in the following pages, is defined by the work on ‘norms’ and ‘identity’, and it includes scholars such as Michael Barnett, Jutta Weltes, Martha Finnemore, Audie Klotz, Ted Hopf, and Emanuel Adler.

Here it seems that the end of the Cold War served not only as an influence, but also an opening and opportunity, for what Nicholas Onuf titles this ‘second generation’ of constructivists, who were marked by the “fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union” as their “relevant sources of inspiration” rather than the, “scholarly debates preceding these events”. Alexander Barder and Daniel Levine took special notice of the 1990s and how it influenced the more positive and progressively-inflected work of that decade’s ‘via media’ constructivists.

As the last fifteen years have witnessed major ruptures and transformations in world politics, it is time once again to take reflexivity seriously and start a conversation with these previous generations. Generations help us come to a better understanding of what our context is, where our theoretical inspirations come from, how previous debates evolved, and how our theoretical, conceptual, and methodological discussions differ from the previous ones. In this sense, this issue helps not only to come to terms with the third generation, but also with the social context in which we operate.

The concept of the generation is thus not meant as a ‘critique’ where one position is automatically discredited by being allocated to one generation or another. Instead,
the concept of generation highlights both continuity and transformation. We are aware that no generation is of one cloth. The term generation, as we use it, does not treat each cohort as a monolithic block, but as complex arrangements with internal differentiations and fuzzy boundaries that nevertheless produce an identifiable ‘pattern’ of interactions and theoretical pre-suppositions. To talk about ‘generations’ highlights that we need to acknowledge that debates and approaches are children of their time. Each generation has its own perceived set of problems and relates to other approaches to IR in different ways.

A change of the complexity of world politics will also change the ‘field’ of International Relations and therewith the approaches, arguments and debates. Turned more reflexively, as constructivists we need to be aware of our own context and limitations to understand where we come from, where we are or want to be heading. The term ‘third generation’ emphasises that this group, compared to previous generations, of emerging scholars were socialised (and trained) in a different environment with the consequence that they provide a different take on theoretical debates and empirical problems. They offer perspectives drawn from different philosophical and theoretical sources and thereby offer new suggestions about the past, the present and the future of international politics. Of course the next generation of IR scholars that is already in the making will inevitably be highly critical of what the participants in this issue have to say. As Iver Neumann in an interview explained, “[t]here is certainly an institutionalization of patricide in the Social Sciences, in that in order to get published and to get recognized and establish yourself, you have to chop off the head of the former generation – and that’s as it should be”. Of course, as Neumann elaborated further, “the question is whether you literally try to chop off people’s heads or only metaphorically”.\footnote{Iver B. Neumann, ‘Returning practice to the linguistic turn: the case of diplomacy’, Millennium – Journal of International Studies, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2002), pp. 627–651.} We of course mean the latter, both for the established generations already engaged, and those emerging generations who may engage (and behead) ours. This special issue is thus a friendly and dialogical delineation of constructivism rather than, again, a statement and totalising project on what constitutes the ‘real’ constructivist project.

OUTLINE AND OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

This special issue unfolds in three sections. A first set of papers reconstructs the constructivist’s past and discusses the historical contexts and debates. These contributions attempt to challenge our ‘taken for granted’ knowledge about constructivism and thereby re-open discussions from which we thought that they were settled. Yet, every generation needs to unearth the knowledge of the previous generation – without the hope that we somehow move closer to some externally given truth. Hans-Martin Jäger opens the discussion by looking at ‘defects’ in the ‘construction of constructivism’. Jäger asserts that Wendtian and Habermasian constructivism in IR displayed a number of traits that were inconsistent with constructivist sociological theory. These included state-centrism and actorhood, a voluntarist and intentionalist conception of agency, the limited focus on the problems
of anarchy and cooperation, a partial insistence on causal models, a conception of the problem of order in terms of normative integration, the dissociation of norms and power, and the lack of a theory of socialisation (accounting for the formation of identities and interests). Focusing on Wendt’s seminal Social Theory of International Politics as well as exemplary formulations of Habermasian constructivism, this paper examines to what extent these early ‘constructional defects’ of mainstream constructivism in IR were ‘fixed’ or persist in its mature formulations.

Constructivism has long been associated with symbolic interactionism, but Rebecca Adler-Nissen argues that constructivism nevertheless lost some of its potential to address everyday experiences and performances of world politics when it turned to logics of appropriateness, norm diffusion and socialisation. Nissen demonstrates how the symbolic interactionist sources of the first generation of constructivists in IR theory are worth recovering, not least of which because of their ability to address what constructivists have always wanted to understand – the construction of world politics.

The second section of the issue addresses some of the promises, but also shortcomings of norms-based constructivism. In ‘Constructivism’s contemporary crisis and the challenge of reflexivity’, David Michael McCourt posits two ways constructivists can tackle and move forward with the challenge of reflexivity. First, constructivists need to practice a “reflexive reflexivity” – a reflex within their analyses of world politics that is also a simultaneous analysis of the social construction of that knowledge. Second, McCourt argues that constructivism cannot have a single response to the challenge of reflexivity because constructivism is not a singular approach. Rather, it is a broad sensibility based on the claim that social life is given by practice, not ex ante. Recognising this allows constructivists to realise that there are multiple ways of being a reflexive constructivist. By way of the incorporation of Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology into IR, McCourt delineates a spectrum of modes of reflexivity appropriate for constructivists going forward.

In ‘Normalising Research’, Stephan Engelkamp, Katharina Glaab, and Judith Renner take McCourt’s argument about the ‘lack of reflexivity’ to another terrain. Similar to McCourt, they charge the literature on norms with a lack of reflexivity which makes visible the conditions of its standing and perspective. Yet in contrast to McCourt, they point in particular to the promises of post-colonial literature for a revisiting of some key constructivist interests and tenets. When the third or fourth debate is linked to perspectivism, as Yosef Lapid has so vividly argued a while ago, then constructivists cannot negate the existence of the history from below.

In ‘Agency, Order, and Heteronomy’, Ole Jacob Sending argues that the norms-oriented scholarship may have presented itself as agent-oriented, but often subsumed the exploration of agency within an account of the micro-level foundation for a norm-anchored order. Sending proposes, through the work of Richard Ashley, a view of agency that he asserts was always present (albeit implicitly) in Kratochwil and Onuf’s work on rules. This account of agency offers better tools with which to explore the historically changing conditions within which actors seek to present themselves as proper agents and to shape any given order.

The third section attempts to discuss the limits of constructivism and its Others. These Others do not derive from debates ‘within’ the field of IR, as they were in the first section. Rather, these Others come from social theory more broadly. Thereby we want to pay tribute to the early promises of constructivism to provide a social
theory of IR that does not care too much about disciplinary confines – and certainly is not interested in creating them. In ‘Constructivism, cognition, and the Third Generation,’ Hannes Peltonen ambitiously argues that while constructivism is a contested concept, turning to Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances helps in understanding why an essence of constructivism needs not be found (if indeed it ever could be). Within this constructivist family, there are different modes of cognition, understandings of legitimate processes of knowing. Peltonen identifies two different modes, one ‘joined’, the other ‘separate but equal’. Third generation constructivists could contribute to constructivism’s evolution by communicating their mode of cognition. Utilising Wittgenstein, Gestalt psychology, and modern physics, Peltonen calls for a cognitive ‘duality’, illustrated with an example from global law.

In ‘Third Generation Constructivism and the rhetoric of inquiry in International Relations’, Torsten Michel posits that third generation constructivism can make a contribution to the practice of meta-theorising in IR. Meta-theory has so far failed to reflect on and recognise the central importance of the deep and intricate relation between the content of meta-theory and the forms in which it is practiced. Michel asks for a shift towards a ‘rhetoric of inquiry’ of meta-theory. This approach opens the path to conceive of meta-theory as an argumentative-persuasive practice whose content is deeply interwoven with forms of presentation on the one hand and normative commitments on the other.

In ‘Construction Time Again: History in Constructivist IR Scholarship’, Benjamin de Carvalho and Halvard Leira examine how succeeding generations of constructivists (broadly understood) have invoked history to leverage narratives of change – both narratives of global political change and narratives of disciplinary change within IR. They take up the generation and the role of historical formative periods in the function of history across (and for) different constructivist generations (what they title the ‘Reykjavik’ and ‘Baghdad’ generations). Across these generations, de Carvalho and Leira see a move from the general to the particular and from a meta-critique of the mainstream through accommodation with the mainstream, to a more localised opposition against the mainstream.

A rejoinder by Friedrich Kratochwil and Nicholas Onuf closes the discussion within this issue. At the same time, we hope that their reflections on the issue and the state of constructivism in a concluding set of essays is not the end but the take-off of a new generation.