



POSTFOUNDATIONAL CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM: RENEWING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

How socio-political world is constituted and transformed are fundamental questions of ontological and epistemological debate in international political theory. In this debate, the focus is on determining to what extent human agency has a role in the constitution and transformation of human socio-political world. In turn, the main question becomes to ascertain how human agency is constituted, that is, whether, to what extent and how material forces independent of human consciousness or human ideas take part in the constitution of human agency and thereby social reality. The discussion of these issues takes place generally the form of a confrontation between so-called philosophical positions of materialism and idealism, and sociologically it is formulated as the structure-agency debate. In the course of these debates, constructivism as an approach in social theory emerged as a promising conception that can transcend the limitations of existing theoretical approaches deemed to be structuralist. Those explicitly or implicitly structuralist positions leave human agency a very limited role and they could not develop a satisfactory perspective on the issue of how the material and ideal realms can be related to each other. In effect, such structuralist positions produce naturalizing and legitimizing effects in the reproduction of socio-political status quo. The main premise of constructivism is that socio-political reality is intersubjectively constituted. On this basis, constructivism claims to be a critical conception of society, which can challenge the taken-for-grantedness of social reality, give human agency its due role, and therefore provide a non-structuralist perspective. In this article, I will examine whether and to what extent constructivism succeeds in providing a critical, non-structuralist perspective on the constitution of socio-political reality.

I develop a critique of conventional constructivism on the basis of Maja Zehfuss's postmodernist approach. Zehfuss argues that conventional constructivism is an essentialist conception and takes certain aspects of reality for granted rather than questioning it. Then, I examine Vincent Pouliot's attempt to provide a non-essentializing, postfoundational constructivism on the basis of Zehfuss's critique of constructivism. Pouliot offers a distinction between acts of essentialization and observation of acts of essentialization. He claims that the fault of conventional constructivism is confounding these two aspects of human activity. Pouliot argues that social agents essentialize certain aspects of the world and constitute them as social facts which then function as objective structures. He argues that constructivists should not take for granted these essentializations as the foundations of social reality. However, I will argue that Pouliot's postfoundational constructivism is not radical enough, because it still implies the existence of social facts independent of social practice, after social facts have become constituted as reified. Rather, I propose to consider social facts not as objective reified facts but as reifying processes of definite conceptions of social reality through socio-political practices. I will argue that Rogers Brubaker's conception of nation as an epistemological reality - as existing only through perceptions, interpretations and classifications of reality - is an instance of such an approach. On this basis, I will suggest that Brubaker's cognitivist constructivist conception of nation and nationalism can be a framework for developing a postfoundational critical constructivism for a social and political theory of international relations. In conclusion, I will argue that a postfoundational critical constructivism should not conceive structures as something which defines the "limits of possible" for human agency. Rather, the constitution of social facts as structures is a precarious process and itself subject to the contestation of social practices. The existence and persistence of social facts depend on the precarious reproduction of reification processes of particular conceptions of the world by conflicting social and political practices. Materialism/idealism debate also loses its significance, as a result of not granting any objective reality to any facet of social and political reality independent of social practice, and by associating the existence of social reality solely to its continual production and reproduction by social and political practices.

Keywords: International Relations, Social Ontology, Objectivity, Constructivism, Structuralism, Essentialism, Reification, Nation.

I. Introduction

How socio-political world is constituted and transformed are fundamental questions of ontological and epistemological debate in international political theory. In this debate, the focus is on determining to what extent human agency has a role in the constitution and transformation of human socio-political world. In turn, the main question becomes to ascertain how human agency is constituted, that is, whether, to what extent and how material forces independent of human consciousness or human ideas take part in the constitution of human agency and thereby social reality. The discussion of these issues takes place generally the form of a confrontation between so-called philosophical positions of materialism and idealism, and

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sociologically it is formulated as the structure-agency debate. In the course of these debates, constructivism as an approach in social theory emerged as a promising conception that can deal with these issues. Constructivism is regarded as an approach that can transcend the limitations of existing theoretical approaches deemed to be structuralist. Those explicitly or implicitly structuralist positions leave human agency a very limited role and could not develop a satisfactory perspective on the issue of how the material and ideal realms can be related to each other. In effect, such structuralist positions produce naturalizing and legitimizing effects in the reproduction of socio-political status quo. The main premise of constructivism is that socio-political reality is intersubjectively constituted. On this basis, constructivism claims to be a critical conception of society, which can challenge the taken-for-grantedness of social reality, give human agency its due role, and therefore provide a non-structuralist perspective. In this article, I will examine whether and to what extent constructivism succeeds in providing a critical, non-structuralist perspective on the constitution of socio-political reality.

I begin by presenting the main arguments of so-called conventional constructivism through its representatives in the political and social theory of international relations. Then, I develop a criticism of constructivism through Maja Zehfuss's (2002) postmodernist approach, arguing that constructivism remains an essentialist approach. Then I evaluate Vincent Pouliot's (2004) attempt to provide a postfoundational critical constructivism on the basis of Zehfuss's critique of constructivism. Pouliot aims to transcend essentialist aspects of constructivism by introducing a distinction between the acts of essentialization by social agents and observation of acts of essentialization. I will argue that Pouliot's critical constructivism is not radical enough, and he still reproduces constructivism's essentialist/foundationalist aspects. As an alternative to Pouliot's critical constructivism, I propose Rogers Brubaker's (1996; 2004) cognitivist critical constructivist approach in order to reformulate constructivism in the political and social theory of international relations. Brubaker argues that social phenomena like ethnicity and nation should be perceived as perspectives on the world rather than ontological realities or "social facts". On that basis, I claim that Brubaker's approach can be interpreted as providing a postfoundational non-structuralist critical constructivism, given that his theory develops a conception of social reality whose various aspects are produced and reproduced continuously by contested human social practices at the present time. As a conclusion, I will argue that the terms of discussions around structure/agency and materialism/idealism become obsolete.

II. Conventional Constructivism

In this section, I discuss Alexander Wendt and Emanuel Adler as the main representatives of conventional constructivism in international relations theory in relation to their views on the materialism/idealism debate.

By reframing idealism-materialism debate from the point of view of what he calls social constructivist approach, Wendt (1999) aims to transcend the limitations of both perspectives. He redefines materiality and material causes. He argues that material causes can also be made of ideas. Thus, he differentiates his position from the existing approaches in international relations which equate material causes with the effects of power, interests or institutions as material structures. Rather, Wendt claims that what should differentiate a materialist approach from an idealist one is not about whether social life is constituted by ideas or power and interest but to what extent ideas and to what extent brute material forces are constitutive of power and interest. Wendt's answer is that "the meaning of power and the content of interests are largely a function of ideas" (1999, 96). On this basis, Wendt develops a "rump materialism" in opposition to radical constructivist views which deny any independent causal effects of brute material forces. We can say that Wendt's position is the conventional view of constructivism which characterizes its different versions. Adler (1997) also develops his constructivist approach in a comparable way to Wendt. For Adler, constructivism is "the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world" (Adler, 1997, 322). From this perspective, in explicating his conception of the relationship between the material and the ideal, similar to Wendt, Adler (1997, 323) argues for the constitution of social reality by the ideal realm, while he also underlines that constructivists acknowledge not only the ontological reality of the material world but also its causal effects on the social reality. However, regarding social life, Adler highlights the constitutive and causal role of the ideal realm; thereby the ideal realm is identified as the structure of social life. Wendt even claims that "material forces are significant only insofar as this structure gives them meaning" (Wendt, as cited in Wight, 2006, 156). Ideas become social structure through their intersubjective constitution as social facts which confront agents. As Adler notes, social facts gain ontological



reality only by human agreement, that is, “by way of collective understanding and discourse, on the attachment of collective knowledge to physical reality” (Adler, 2005, 100). In turn, ideas

as collective knowledge, institutionalized in practices [become] the medium and propellant of social action; they define the limits of what is cognitively possible and impossible for individuals. Concurrently, knowledge-based practices are the outcome of interacting individuals who act purposively on the basis of their personal ideas, beliefs, judgements and interpretations. (Adler, 1997, 325)

For constructivists, this implies a dialectical relationship between structure and agency, which points to the role of agency in the constitution of ideational social structure. As Wendt (1999) emphasizes, “*structure exists, has effects, and evolves only because of agents and their practices*” (185).

III. Critique of Conventional Constructivism

In this context, constructivists claim to show the social constructedness of social reality, and thereby the constitutive role of human agency in the constitution of social reality. They argue for the mutual constitution of structure and agency on the basis of a conception of social reality as intersubjectively constituted. Thus, they contend that constructivism transcends structuralist materialism. However, constructivists have been critiqued for failing to meet their promises. Most radical critique of constructivism as an approach in the study of international relations has been developed by poststructuralist/postmodernist approaches exemplified by Maja Zehfuss’s work (2002). Zehfuss argues that constructivism in its different versions represented by Alexander Wendt, Friedrich Kratochwil, and Nicholas Onuf actually takes for granted different dimensions of reality. Therefore, rather than being true to constructivist principles of questioning reality by showing its socially constructed character and contributing to its transformation, Zehfuss claims that constructivism contributes to the reproduction of existing status quo. Zehfuss shows that constructivists ground the constitution of social reality on different foundations: Wendt on unitary pre-interaction state identities, Kratochwil on the politically neutral rules and norms as the basis for intersubjectivity, and Onuf on the rules and speech acts constrained by the material reality. As a result, according to Zehfuss, for such forms of constructivism, various aspects of social reality function as a structure freed from the determination of constitutive agency, while agency moves within “the limits of possible” provided by the ideational structure. Thus, constructivism actually remains a structuralist approach and fails to present a conception of social reality as defined by the mutual constitution of structure and agency.

Zehfuss criticizes Wendt for his essentialization of identity, since Wendt does not question how state identity is constituted. Wendt ignores the plurality of contested identities which, in contrast to Wendt’s attempts, makes impossible to determine the ‘real’ cause of state behaviour. With respect to Kratochwil’s constructivism, Zehfuss focuses on Kratochwil’s conception of “intersubjectivity as the politically neutral realm of shared through which communication becomes possible”. Zehfuss says that by arguing for the politically neutral intersubjectively shared meanings as constitutive of norms and rules which establish the context for political action, Kratochwil’s approach “turns political questions into technical problems”. Rather, Zehfuss notes that the same norms themselves are interpreted differently and even contradictorily in the actual world of politics. She gives the example of how the norm of “Never again war” in German politics is conceived. She notes that for some this is interpreted “as ruling out the use of force altogether and as requiring the use of force to stop war by others” (Zehfuss, 2002, 226). The third target of Zehfuss is Onuf’s constructivism. In my view, this is the most important aspect of Zehfuss’s criticism of constructivism. I think that her critique of Onuf is valid for the most versions of constructivism with respect to their conception of the relationship between social reality and material conditions. As Zehfuss states, Onuf claims that “society constructs human beings out of the raw materials of nature” (Onuf, as cited in Zehfuss, 2002, 236) and therefore agents’ freedom “depends on the ability to recognize material and social limits and to evaluate the consequences of ignoring or defying those limits” (Zehfuss, 2002, 237). However, Zehfuss argues that material limits are rather limits of our conceptualizations. She argues that

[i]f we do not acknowledge that the boundary we believe we experience is a limit of our conceptualizations rather than the interference of an independent materiality, we consider our choices limited by a mysterious outside power that we cannot ever directly experience. As a result, we limit our responsibility. This conceptualization is therefore deeply political. The assertion of an independently existing reality, which in itself cannot be proved and seems to demand no proof, works to support particular political positions and to exclude others from consideration (Zehfuss, 2002, 245).



Pouliot (2004) by affirming Zehfuss's postmodernist critique of constructivism tries to develop a postfoundational critical constructivism that does not reify any aspect of social reality. Pouliot agrees with Zehfuss's criticisms that constructivism remains an essentialist approach. However, Pouliot argues that Zehfuss fails to make a distinction between the act of essentialization and the observation of essentialization. Pouliot argues for an epistemological notion of "foundation" of social reality as socially constituted. Pouliot notes that constructivists essentialize reality by turning their representations of some aspects of reality into the reality itself. However, Pouliot suggests that while to essentialize reality is analytically flawed, reality is actually essentialized or reified by the social agents themselves. He argues that such acts of essentialization are the foundation of social construction of reality. He states that acts of essentialization constitute "social facts", as aspects of reality that are treated as if they were real by social agents. Thus, Pouliot argues, "social facts confront agents' everyday life as 'objective' facts that cannot be ignored" (Pouliot, 2004, 329). Therefore, Pouliot claims, social facts as the ontological foundation of social reality are the essence of constructivism. And, for him, what constructivists should do is to observe these social facts, rather than taking some of them as the foundation of reality. As an answer to the question of how it can be possible to observe acts of essentialization given the fact that essentialization is an intangible process, Pouliot says that essentialization can be observed through the practices of social agents. He argues that "if social facts are 'real' it is precisely because they produce concrete effects through practices [which] are behaviours endowed with meaning, and as such they reflect the intersubjectivity of social life" (Pouliot, 2004, 330).

IV. Reformulating postfoundational constructivism

Pouliot's postfoundational approach seems to be promising in producing a reformulation of constructivism, which is not marked by structuralist implications. His conception of social facts as reified aspects of reality which are produced by social agents makes possible to develop a conception of social structure that is socially constituted by human agency. Then, for Pouliot, those social facts confront agents themselves through their effects. Thus, Pouliot establishes a satisfactory non-structuralist conception of mutual constitution of structure and agency. He does not assume any foundation for reality, ideal or material. He also defines social facts not solely as an ideational construct but as constituted by social practices. Therefore, his approach is also useful in transcending idealism/materialism dichotomy. Thus, we can say that constraining material conditions are defined by Pouliot as social facts constituted by social agents. In turn, these constituted social facts become continuously subject to the contestation of social practices of various social agents.

However, I argue that Pouliot's approach is not fully a constructivist conception that can be valid for the examination of all social phenomena, despite his non-structuralist, practice-oriented conception of social reality. I claim that Pouliot's distinction between acts of essentialization/reification and observation of reification of these acts as social facts assumes too much tangible objectivity for social facts. His approach can be to some extent functional for the observation of social constitution of tangible objects such as money or bounded communities such as security communities, which he refers to as examples of social facts. However, I doubt that Pouliot's constructivism can be successfully applied for the investigation of social and political identities in general and such as ethnicity, nation and race in particular, which cannot be considered as social facts constituted by the reification of socio-political practices. I argue that such phenomena exist and attain social reality only to the extent social agents perceive the world from the perspectives of a particular conception of nation, ethnicity, etc. Therefore, if we follow Pouliot's approach in the examination of these phenomena, I think that we would still commit acts of essentialization. Pouliot's interpretation of social facts as "objective" facts confronting agents implies that reified social phenomena achieve relatively stable meanings. However, we can see the inadequacy and essentializing role of such an approach in the case of social phenomena such as nationalist practices and nation. For example, an economic conflict over the resource distribution between two groups of people could be interpreted by some agents as a class conflict, while for others as an ethnonational conflict. In this situation, it is impossible to observe a "social fact" as an objective fact confronting agents. Here, there is not even a contestation over the same norm or rule or over multiple identities of a thing, which we may take as "social facts" that could be said to form an "objective base" for conflict. In analyzing such social and political phenomena, therefore, we cannot employ Pouliot's constructivist reformulation of Zehfuss's deconstructive approach. Rather, in the first place, there is a contestation between practices of social agents over constituting a "social fact", over reifying an aspect of social reality: one party attempts to impose the category of class as an ontological foundation of social reality, while the other party tries to impose the category of ethnicity/nation. Then, in Pouliot's terms, we can say that what constructivists should observe is processes of meaning contestations of social agents over the definition of social facts. On this basis, I argue for the radicalization of Pouliot's constructivism. I contend



that recent advances in the constructivist studies of sociology of nation and ethnicity can be helpful to establish a basis for such a radicalized postfoundational critical constructivism. In this respect, I argue that Brubaker's sociological approach to ethnicity and nation provides the contours of such an approach, which is also developed in the face of essentializing conceptions of nation and ethnicity by existing constructivist theories of nationalism.

Similar to essentializing conceptions of reality in the international relations theory, conventional constructivist conceptions of nationalism argue for the socially constructed character of the category of nation but they in fact reify the category of nation. Prominent constructivist scholars of nationalism such as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm claim that the category of nation is socially constructed by various economic and political forces. However, for such conceptions of constructivism, after the social construction of nation, the category of nation attains an existence on its own with a historical dynamic, that is, in their view, nation is "something that grew and then 'exists' in a stabilized manner" (Jaffrelot, 2005, 20).

We can say that this view is very similar to Pouliot's conception of social facts as reified by the social and political practices of agents. After the reification of nation by political and economic elites, it becomes an "objective" social fact, which confronts individuals or groups. Therefore, nation becomes a reified social fact. However, Rogers Brubaker argues that this view reproduces the substantialist conception of nations as real entities, since

it adopts categories of practice as categories of analysis. It takes a conception inherent in the practice of nationalism and in the workings of the modern state and state-system – namely the realist, reifying conception of nations as real communities – and it makes this conception central to the theory of nationalism (Brubaker, 1996, 15).

Brubaker's distinction between categories of practice and categories of analysis is reminiscent of Pouliot's distinction between acts of essentialization and observation of acts of essentialization. However, Pouliot takes the discursive and practical claims of social agents as denoting reified social facts which are then regarded as the ontological foundations of reality. Thus, Pouliot's distinction in fact does not allow us questioning to what extent social agents become successful in reifying their practices as social facts. Moreover, as a matter of fact, Pouliot's approach becomes inattentive to the conflictual constitution of social reality. For example, in the case of nationalist conflicts, the issue is not "conflicts among nations"; rather, it is about "the conflictive *practice* of constructing and promoting contending visions of nationhood" (Hossay, 2001, 179). Thus, social reality should not be conceived simply as constituted by reified social facts through social practices. Rather, I argue that it should be theorized as a field of social practices in contestation trying to reify particular conceptions of social reality. In this respect, Brubaker's reworking of constructivist theory of nationalism through cognitivist perspectives can be helpful to transcend objectivist, essentializing conceptions of social reality. As he argues, "cognitive perspectives shift analytical attention to "group-making" and "grouping" activities such as classification, categorization, and identification" (Brubaker, 2004, 79). On the basis of this perspective, we can say that

race, ethnicity, and nation are not entities in the world but ways of seeing the world. They are ways of understanding and identifying oneself, making sense of one's problems and predicaments, identifying one's interests, and orienting one's action. They are ways of recognizing, identifying, and classifying other people, of constituting sameness and difference, and of "coding" and making sense of their actions. They are templates for representing and organizing social knowledge, frames for articulating social comparisons and explanations, and filters that shape what is noticed or unnoticed, relevant or irrelevant, remembered or forgotten. (Brubaker, 2004, 81)

I argue that Brubaker's critical cognitivist constructivism provides us with a dynamic conception of structure as a contested social fact to be produced and reproduced continuously by competing socio-political practices of socio-political movements and individuals. Thus, we encounter not reified things as social facts such as nation or ethnicity, but processes of reification reflected in the processes of attempts to nationalization or ethnicization. This conception also redefines the so-called materialism-idealism division by making so-called ideal constructions as existing through contested institutional and socio-political practices rather than as independent reified structures drawing the limits of human agency.

V. Conclusion



To recapitulate, I first presented the arguments of conventional constructivism which argues for the constitution of social reality through intersubjectively constituted, ideationally created structures within which human agency moves. Then, I developed a critique of conventional constructivism on the basis of Zehfuss's postmodernist approach. Zehfuss argues that conventional constructivism is an essentialist conception and takes certain aspects of reality for granted rather than questioning it. Therefore, conventional constructivism cannot remain true to its supposedly distinguishing feature of focusing on the social constitution of reality. Then, I examined Pouliot's attempt to provide a non-essentializing, postfoundational constructivism on the basis of Zehfuss's critique of constructivism. Pouliot offers a distinction between acts of essentialization and observation of acts of essentialization. He claims that the fault of conventional constructivism is confounding these two aspects of human activity. Pouliot argues that social agents essentialize certain aspects of the world and constitute them as social facts which then function as objective structures. However, he argues, constructivists should not take for granted these essentializations as the foundations of social reality. However, I argued that Pouliot's postfoundational constructivism is not radical enough, because it still implies the existence of social facts independent of social practice, after social practices have become constituted as reified social facts. Rather, I proposed to consider social facts not as objective reified facts but as reifying processes of contested conceptions of social reality through conflicting socio-political practices. I argued that Brubaker's conception of nation as an epistemological reality - as existing only through perceptions, interpretations and classifications of reality - is an instance of such an approach. On this basis, I suggest that Brubaker's cognitivist constructivist conception of nation and nationalism can be a framework for developing a postfoundational critical constructivism for a social and political theory of international relations.

In conclusion, I argue that a postfoundational critical constructivism should not conceive structures as something which defines the "limits of possible" for human agency. The constitution of social facts as structures is a precarious process and itself subject to the continual contestation of social and political practices. The existence and persistence of social facts depend on the precarious reproduction of reification processes of particular contested conceptions of the world by conflicting social and political practices. Furthermore, regarding the philosophical implications of a postfoundational constructivism, materialism/idealism debate also loses its significance, as a result of not granting any objective reality to any facet of social and political reality independent of social practice, and by associating the existence of social reality solely to its continual production and reproduction by social and political practices.

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