
 <b><u>Norbert Merkovity</u></b>	 <b><u>15-20 minutes</u></b>	Thing to remember:  Poststructuralists will challenge concepts like the nation state, power, national interest, survival, adding that these concepts only play a vital role if we reproduce that we do.
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## Constructivism and post-structuralism

### Question:

When it comes to public policy, does the truth matter?

To a **constructivist**, the answer would be no, because public policy can be shaped to create a particular kind of “truth” depending on the goal of the policy.

To a **poststructuralist**, the answer would be, it depends on the meaning you assign to this concept of truth? And who has created the meaning of this truth? And who’s version of this truth has been left out?

Constructivism and Post-Structuralism vary to a degree in their approach to IR, however, they both provide explanations behind how and why various constructs of various truths take place, and how and why these various truths have the capacity to alter.

## **Constructivism: Setting the Scene**

Up until the end of the Cold War, Neo-Liberalism and Neo-Realism had been dominating IR thought.

“Neo-Realism made several core claims. States are the central actors in world politics, and they are fixated on their security and survival; these interests suffocate any possibility that ideas, norms, or values might shape state behaviour. They pursue these interests in the context of an international system that is defined by: anarchy...; functional non-differentiation of the units (because anarchy creates a self-help system, all states must be self-reliant and safeguard their security); and the distribution of power.” (Barnett, M. 2014, 156 in Baylis et al 2014)

- “Neo-liberalism lightened neo-realism’s dark view of international politics by demonstrating that states cooperate all the time on a range of issues in order to improve their lives. Because a primary obstacle to cooperation is the absence of trust between states, states construct international institutions that can perform various trust-enhancing functions, including monitoring and publicizing cheating. [Both neo-realism and neo-liberalism, however] shared a commitment to individualism and materialism. Individualism is the view that actors have fixed interests and that the structure constrains their behaviour...Materialism is the view that the structure that constrains behaviour is defined by distribution of power, technology, and geography...Although both approaches allow for the possibility that ideas and norms can constrain how states pursue their interests, neither contemplates the possibility that ideas and norms might define their interests.” (Barnett, M. 2014, 156-157 in Baylis et al 2014)

Constructivists challenged this presumed understanding of individualism and materialism. Once the Cold War had ended, Constructivism gained momentum and notoriety within IR as scholars worldwide began debating over what would become of the world now that the duopoly of Soviet Russia vs the United States had come to an end.

Constructivism, in the early stages, was espoused as creating a particularly challenging lens for the world, posing a ton of questions. This led to a great deal

of criticism of the theory as it wasn't seen initially as being able to provide anything of real substance.

*Constructivism can be seen as somewhere in between Neo-Realism/Neo-Liberalism and Critical Theories, such as Feminism and Marxism.* Some variation among Constructivists in terms of research methods and approaches, however, they all emphasize the importance of looking to social, rather than material, influences on the international system.

### **Constructivism: Key Claims**

*The International System:* Socially constructed depending on how humans think and interact, actors/structures can have their identities shaped, rather than just their human-nature behaviours. (Realists and Liberals would argue that the international system is “set-in-stone” prior to social construction)

*Anarchy:* Not fixed, but fluid, and changing. Consider the following, Alexander Wendt: “[a]narchy is what states make of it,” that is, the “nature” of international anarchy appears to be conflictual if states show a conflictual behaviour towards each other, and cooperative if they behave cooperatively towards one another. Therefore, it might be compelling to argue that there is no pre-given “nature” to international anarchy, but it is states themselves that determine anarchy's nature. With such an argument in mind, then, to understand conflict and cooperation in international politics, we must focus upon what states do, which in turn depends on their identities and interests, not on the perceived “nature” of systemic international “anarchy.” (Cited in Weber 2010, 62)

Alexander Wendt (1958 – ) claimed that “Anarchy is what states make of it.”

*Norms/Identity/Discourse:* Vital to Constructivism as meaning is drawn from these based on how humans think and interact. Ideas, cultures and norms are accepted if there is a consensus among people in a society. (Eg. Constructivists

support that the identity of a nation defines its policies.)

*History:* Highly valuable for creating ideas, cultures and norms.

*Agency:* Emphasise the capacity for evolving interaction between actors and structures. Those in positions of power have a greater chance of influencing the development of ideas, culture and ideas.

*Knowledge:* “Brute facts such as rocks, flowers, gravity, and oceans exist independently of human agreement, and will continue to exist even if humans disappear or deny their existence. Social facts are dependent on human agreement and are taken for granted. Money, refugees, terrorism, human rights, and sovereignty are all social facts. Their existence depends on human agreement, they will only exist so long as that agreement exists, and their existence shapes how we categorize the world and what we do.” (Barnett, M. 2014, 159 in Baylis et al 2014)

“By emphasizing the social construction of reality, we are also questioning what is frequently taken for granted. This points to several issues. One is a concern with the origins of social constructs that now appear to us as natural and are now part of our social vocabulary. Sovereignty did not always exist; it was a product of historical forces and human interactions that generated new distinctions regarding where political authority resided.” (Barnett, M. 2014, 159 in Baylis et al 2014)

### **Post-Structuralism: Setting the Scene**

Became part of IR in the 1980s and was similarly influenced by the Cold War. “Postructuralists held that the key to the cold war lay in the enemy constructions that both East and West promoted.” (Hansen, L. 2014, 170 in Baylis et al, 2014)

Are particularly critical of how nation states conduct foreign policies and how IR theories enable us to examine what nation states do. “...postructuralism adopts a critical attitude to world politics,

it raises questions about ontology (what is in the world) and epistemology (how we can study the world).” (Hansen, L. 2014, 170 in Baylis et al, 2014)

For example: within IR studies, the State is usually the central tenant with which we begin our exploration. Post-Structuralism challenges this and “...[o]ne of the strengths of poststructuralism has been to call attention to how much the ontological assumptions we make about the state actually matter for how we view the world and for the more specific explanations of world politics we come up with.” (Hansen, L. 2014, 170 in Baylis et al, 2014)

Poststructuralists will challenge concepts like the nation state, power, national interest, survival, adding that these concepts only play a vital role if we reproduce that we do. Ultimately as well, it depends on who is telling us that these concepts are even important!?

“While sympathetic to much in critical theory’s account of the structures that produce global inequalities, postructuralists are also sceptical that emancipation can tackle power and avoid the pitfalls of universalist discourse.” (Hansen, L. 2014, 181 in Baylis et al, 2014)

**Post-Structuralism has also received criticism, primarily, for their lack of attention to that which is material and, arguably, deemed outside of discourse. Further, Poststructuralists have been criticised for not embracing causal relations but rather constitutive ones.**

### **Post-Structuralism: Key Claims**

**Discourse:** Language is vital in order to make any sense of the world. A complex and evolving set of ideas can be presented to us, even through just one word. For example: *genocide, asylum seekers vs boat people...*

**Deconstruction:** Understanding what something is in relation to something else. For Post-Structuralism, the meaning that we attach to something has the capacity to change. This is particularly examined through dichotomies. Dichotomies are often expressed in terms of hierarchy, with one term being more superior to the other, depending on the context with which the terms are explored and the meaning given to each term.

**Genealogy:** ‘history of the present’. Starts from the now and looks back.

Our understanding of genealogy also leads to a poststructural understanding of power. As largely influenced by Foucault, power is seen to be fluid and changing. Further, knowledge also plays a role in how power is implemented. Knowledge can be used to create a particular kind of discourse.

**Intertextuality:** “The theory of intertextuality was developed by the semiotic theorist Julia Kristeva. It argues that we can understand the social world as comprising texts. This is because texts form an ‘interest’ – that is, they are connected to texts that came before them.” (Hansen, L. 2014, 172 in Baylis et al, 2014)

This can refer to a literal reference to texts of the past, whether they be legal, academic, etc... It can also refer to the reference to abstract meanings from history, eg. If we say that the United States has been *a global hegemon* since the end of the Cold War, this infers a “body of texts” that constitutes the U.S as being a superpower, in a particular position of authority, etc.

As explored, Poststructuralists can utilise these previous four key concepts: discourse, deconstruction, genealogy and intertextuality as a “lens” to view international relations.

They avoid generalisations and universalism given that any meaning attached to a piece of knowledge or discourse **will depend on the context with which it is coming from. And this meaning should never be presumed to be constant. This also applies to notions of foreign policy, cooperation, international law, etc. All of these are created based on knowledge, discourses and power. They are created based on the meaning attached to them.**

*What about identity? What do Poststructuralists say about identity?*

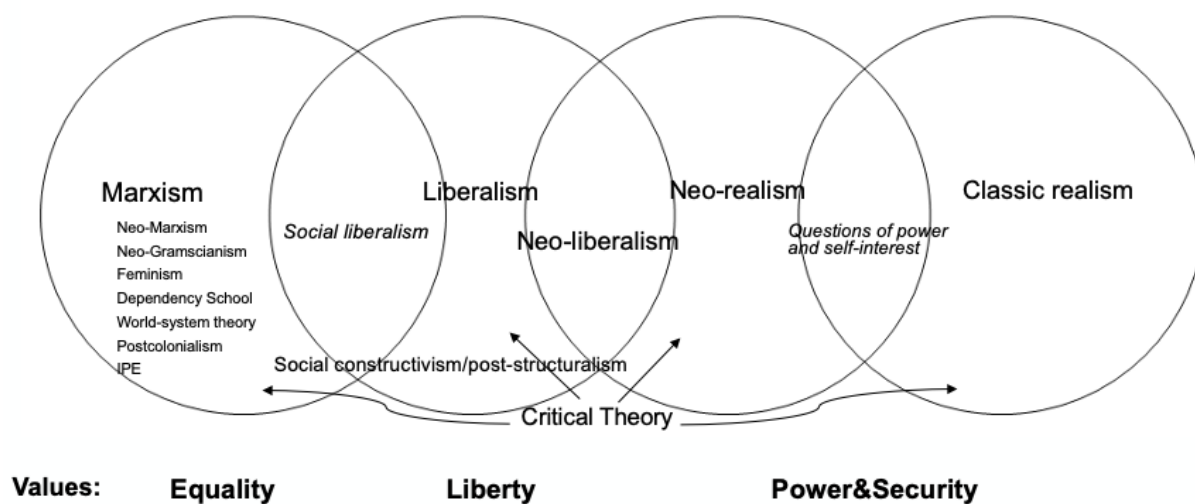
“When poststructuralists write about identities as constituted in discourse, they usually use the terms ‘subjectivities’ or ‘subject positions’ to underscore the fact that identity is not something that someone has, but that it is a position that one is constructed as having. Individuals and institutions navigate between different subject positions and might identify with the positions they are given by others to a greater or lesser extent.” (Hansen, L. 2014, 172 in Baylis et al, 2014)



Differences between structuralism and post-structuralism:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d\\_IYn6ZEKqs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_IYn6ZEKqs)

## Progress



## Questions

1. How constructivism and post-structuralism think about the truth?
2. How *constructivism* says about neorealism and neo-liberalism?
3. What constructivism has to say about the international system?
4. And about anarchy?
5. When did post-structuralism start?
6. What concepts will challenge post-structuralists?
7. What says post-structuralism about *discourse*?
8. What says post-structuralism about *deconstruction*?
9. What says post-structuralism about *genealogy*?
10. What says post-structuralism about *intertextuality*?

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