

Social Constructivism and the EU

Constructivism is one of the more recent theoretical additions to the study of the European Union, although it has significant repercussions for the way the EU is studied, and perhaps more fundamentally, *what is* studied when we study the EU. Social constructivism is a large area of research in the social sciences and cannot be covered fully in detail here. As such, this extract has four major, but limited objectives. Firstly, it seeks to explain what social constructivism is and what it entails as a theory. Secondly, it outlines constructivism's stance of the relative role of agents and structures. Thirdly, it seeks to contrast the logical conclusion of constructivism, that is to say that actors behave according to the *appropriateness* of their behaviour rather than on the basis of a rational cost/benefit *consequences* of their actions. Finally, it draws attention to interesting aspects of European integration highlighted by social constructivism.

What is social constructivism?

Social constructivism essentially revolves around the notion that human beings are not separate from their environmental context (structure) and that the ideas and beliefs that form the ideational environment that an actor finds themselves within inform the actions of individuals. In turn social constructivism holds that individuals (collectively) reproduce or 'reconstruct' this environment through their behaviour and actions. Risse (p. 160) argues that constructivism "is based on a social ontology which insists that human agents do not exist independently from their social environment and its collectively shared systems of meanings ('culture' in a broad sense)".

For social constructivists, the social environment defines who we are and what we think, and in turn we (collectively) reproduce this social environment through our actions.

Crucially, unlike Neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, constructivism is not ontologically rationalist or materialist. That is to say it does not see actors as acting rationally on the basis of the maximisation of their material benefits and the minimisation of costs. Rather, constructivism sees actors as profoundly impacted by ideas, beliefs and their identity (that is to say their beliefs about themselves). Indeed, constructivists assert that to study actors effectively one needs to understand how their beliefs about themselves and about what the correct or 'right' thing to do impact on what they do. In turn, one needs to study how these actions themselves reinforce these beliefs and come to further 'create' the broader ideational social/cultural environment for other actors.

Structure and agents

Generally speaking constructivism breaks down the distinction between agents (actors such as individuals or states) and the structural context that they find themselves in (the interstate system, a European Council meeting for example). Intergovernmentalism, for example, is an agency centred theory. It is concerned with what agents do on the basis of their interests (it does of course recognise that actors exist within a structure - the structure of power and material interstate bargaining in the EU).

Constructivists, by contrast, see agents and structures as *mutually constitutive*. That is to say they see structural factors, such as the broader ideas of a society for example, as both shaping the way that actors behave (i.e. they set the rules regulate their behaviour) and who they are (i.e they impact on their identity - they constitute who they are). At the same time the regular actions of individuals, collectively adhering to these ideas, reconstruct these structures. In this sense structures affect who you are as well as what you do and in turn

by behaving in a certain way you help to recreate the broader context that encourages or compels others to behave in the same way.

Let's look at a simple example. You (an agent) operate within a social structure (your society). You probably like to consider yourself as a good citizen within your society (it's who you are, part of your identity). You don't set the rules for being a good citizen however. Indeed, it is society collectively that sets the rules and ways of behaving that constitute (make up) what it is to be a good citizen. We know what these rules and ways of behaving are though because we have been told about them and been given constant examples of them since we were children.

For example, good citizens don't steal. You could steal if you wanted to but you don't, partly of course because society sets the rules that state it's not the right thing to do (and sets punishments for those who do), but also because if you see yourself as a good citizen, stealing is *just not what you do*. It's *just not you* to do something like that. In turn however by (collectively) following these rules we reconstruct for each other what it means to be a good citizen through our actions. We see others being good citizens and not stealing (despite the fact they could) and this, when done by enough people, sets the rules and standards for not stealing as part of what it means to be a good citizen. As an agent you are driven by the standards of behaviour in your society. In return by following these standards, collectively we recreate the standards of society (structure) for others and ourselves.

The logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness

Behaving in line with what is acceptable in a given society (including a society of states) is known as operating according to a 'logic of appropriateness'. In operating to a logic of appropriateness one is acting in accordance with what is the right thing to do in a given society or context. The opposite, the 'logic of

consequences', refers to situations when actors operate according to what will happen to them (i.e. will they benefit or lose out from their actions).

To follow the example from above, when one does not steal because they would get caught, they are operating to the logic of consequences (I steal, I get punished). Indeed, if getting caught is the only reason one does not steal, one would steal every time there was the opportunity to do so without being caught. When, however one does not steal because it feels like the 'wrong thing to do' one is operating to the logic of appropriateness.

If we take some of the theories that we have looked at in this unit so far we can see different theories being based on both logics. Intergovernmentalism, for example, operates on a logic of consequences. States take decisions on the basis of whether they will benefit or not from a certain decision. It is the consequences of their actions that determine whether they decide to integrate at the European level, for example.

Conversely, sociological institutionalism holds that states behave according to the logic of appropriateness. The assumptions of this theory argues that states do not behave on the basis of what they will get out of a decision, but rather on what is acceptable and the right thing to do in a given situation.

Social constructivism and the study of the EU

Social constructivism shines light on a number of important areas of study in the European Union. Firstly, for example constructivism suggests that identity is a core part of states' decisions to integrate at the European Union. Those states that feel more 'European' are more likely to cooperate at the EU level. Constructivism, for example, raises questions such as to the extent to which European identity (or lack of it) impacts on UK approaches to the EU.

Likewise, states perceptions about what is considered the 'right thing to do' are thought to impact on their decision making at the European Union. States are more likely to cooperate on issues where EU action is seen as the right thing to do (appropriate) or where the values imbued in EU action are seen to be 'right'.

Ultimately, constructivism is useful in the context of European politics as it draws attention to how the normative, ideational context that actors find themselves in at the European level impacts on their behaviour and the decisions they take. This provides a useful counter argument to materialist-rationalist theories that see politics as determined by actors' rational decisions based on how much they are set to gain or lose from their actions in a given circumstance.

Further Reading

Risse, T. (2005). Social Constructivism and European Integration. In Weiner, A. & Thomas, D. *European Integration Theory*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.