

# Constructivism, Christian Reus-Smit and the Moral Purpose of the State

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## Abstract

Sophists and Socratics are two main thinkers on how to understand reality and acquire knowledge. Constructivism can be understood as the Socratic approach which has been carried to international relations sphere by thinkers such as Onuf, Kratochwil, Finnmore, Katzenstein, Hopf, Wendt, Reus-Smit and others. Constructivism, as the theory of international relations, is to redefine central themes such as anarchy, balance of power, relationship between state identity and interest, and possibility of change in the mainstream international relations theories. The purpose of this article, after a brief explanation of constructivism as theory of international relations, its ontology and epistemology, is to explain the ideas of Christian Reus-Smit, especially in his most well-known work “The Moral Purpose of the State”.

**Keywords:** Reus-Smit, constructivism, institutional practices, fundamental institutions, constitutional structures and constitutive values

## 1. Introduction

Sophism and Socratism are two main approaches on how to understand reality and to acquire knowledge. From the Sophist point of view, knowledge can be learnt through teaching because knowledge is something objective that can be transmitted via lectures. On the contrary, Socratics argues that acquiring knowledge and understanding reality is an inner endeavour and therefore personal experiences are more important than learning from others (Manus, 1996). The Socratic view can be traced in to the 18th Century Vico’s writing whose slogan, according to Von Glasersfeld (Glasersfeld, 1989), was “the human mind can only know what the human mind has made” (Warrick, 2013). The slogan has shaped the basis of the constructivist’s view-points. Depending on how different the constructivist view is from the Socratic approach, three types of social constructivist view-points have been developed: symbolic interaction, social constructionism, and socio-cultural constructivism.

Although symbolic interaction is the least social one in nature, it is the most radical type of constructivism. Symbolic interaction is mostly used in institutions such as schools. Social constructionism is the middle ground that focuses on discourse communities such as physicians and mathematicians who have own common knowledge and language. The last type, i.e., socio-cultural constructivism, has two parts including the United States belief and another belief. The United States belief argues that knowledge is a social construction whose meanings are made by people in their group interactions. Meanwhile, another belief, according to Vigostsky, has three themes, which are: “1) Reliance on genetic analysis which argues that every behaviour has a past history; 2) mental functions that have origins in social life and argue that cognitive abilities depend on social interaction, and 3) mediator tools and signs are the key to understand each other (Penney, 2013). It is important to note that constructivism, as the theory of international politics, is more influenced by the United States belief.

## 2. Early Constructivism

The term constructivism was invented by Kazimir Malivich to negatively describe the work of Alexander Rodchenko in 1917. This was followed by, Naum Gabo and Alexei Gan who used the term in 1920 and 1922, respectively. Constructivism began to grow during the post -World War I period in Russia and its focus was in the school of Vkhutemas which was the school of art established in 1919. The roots of constructivism in Russia

could be traced back to the artistic and architectural movement of 1919 that rejected the idea of “art for art’s sake”. The idea refers to the notion that art as a practice is after social goals. During and after World War II, a new version of constructivism in art was established by Gabo in England in 1930s and 1940s, and this was used by architects, designers and artists who helped spreading constructivism throughout the Europe and Latin America (What is Constructivism?, 2013).

The most influential scientist who helped developing constructivism was psychologist, Jean Piaget, in 1920s. The focus of his studies was on how children learn about the environment surrounding them. His idea on the theory of knowledge in 1954 was based on Vico’s slogan. He argued that children behave like scientists who create their own sense of the world and adapt themselves to their environment according their own understandings (Warrick, 2013). In other words, they learn according to what they make in their mind rather than what they learn from others or the environment. However, his ideas were unknown in North America until 1960s when Harvard Center for Cognitive Studies was established by Miller and Brune (Maker, 2013).

### **3. Epistemology and Ontology**

Epistemology is about origin, foundation, limits and validity of knowledge. The main questions which are important for epistemology are “What is knowledge?” and “Where does it come from?” In other words, the main concern of epistemology is about the “transmission of knowledge” while Ontology refers to issues pertaining to the nature of beings. Thus, the questions that are important for ontology are “Is there reality or does reality exist?” and “What is the nature of reality?” (Warrick, 2013). A variety of constructivist views such as radical, social, physical, evolutionary, postmodern, social constructionism, information processing, and cybernetic system constructivism have been introduced by thinkers (Constructivist Epistemology, 2013), but all of these are based on the same epistemological and ontological bases.

Epistemologically, in the most radical way, there is no external truth, knowledge or reality outside of people’s experience. As constructivist Von Glasersfeld (Glasersfeld, 1989) argues, “To claim that one’s theory of knowing is true, in the traditional sense of an experiencer-independent world, would be perjury for a radical constructivist”. In a lesser radical way, constructivist epistemology argues that knowledge and reality do not have an objective value or in the modest way, reality cannot be known. In other words, reality is a net-work of relationships we rely on and believe in our living. One’s experiences interpret and construct reality and therefore the reality is viable if it is adequate in the context where it is created (Glasersfeld, 1995). In the following epistemological explanation, the ontological nature of constructivism argues that reality is unknowable and relies on the agreements among people or the social group creates reality or truth; the truth which is different from reality itself. The consensus which creates the truth is called “little t” (Penney, 2013).

### **4. Constructivism and Theory of International Politics**

Nicholas Onuf (Onuf, 1989) was the first to apply the constructivism as the theory of international politics. Since then, constructivism has been evolving according to the different scholars on the basis of different levels of analysis. Some constructivist such as Martha Finnmore focused more on the norms of international society and their effects on the states’ identities while Katzenstein (Katzenstein, 1996) and Hopf (Hopf, 2002) focused on the role of domestic norms in the area of national security. The most influential attempts on constructivism in the field of international politics were done by Wendt (Wendt, 1999a, 1999b) who focused on the interaction between states in the international system. Constructivism in the international politics is described as an attempt to achieve a compromise between rational and reflectivity approaches. In relation to this goal, Smith and Owens (Smith & Owens, 2001) called constructivism as the “middle ground” position.

As explained, constructivism is not a theory of international politics in nature but is used to study of international politics on the basis of its core idea which argues international relations are socially constructed (Karacasulu & Uzgoren, 2007). Constructivism, in international politics, is a subdivision of critical theories that contain a family of theories including post modernists such as Ashley and Walker; neo-Marxists such as Cox and Gill; feminists such as Peterson and Sylvester; constructivists such as Onuf, Kratochwil, Ruggie, Katzenstein and Wendt; and others. Hence, epistemological and theoretical differences distinguish constructivism from critical approaches but what unites all of them is the concern with how world politics is socially constructed.

Both constructivism and other types of critical theories aim to denaturalize the social world, and both believe in the importance of inter-subjective reality and meanings, argue on the basis of contextualized nature of data, and insist on relationship between power and knowledge. Moreover both insist on a mutual constitution of actor and structure. Nonetheless, methodology and epistemology separate constructivism from critical theories. Accepting possibility and maybe necessity of contingent universalism or what Mark Hoffman has called “minimal foundationalism” by constructivism is the core difference between critical and constructivist theories of

international relations. In other words, constructivism offers the possibility of understanding of social reality which is totally rejected by critical theorists (Hopf, 1998).

Based on its epistemology and ontology, the main goal of constructivism in international politics is to redefine central themes such as anarchy, balance of power, relationship between state identity and interest and the possibility of change in mainstream international relations theories. Briefly, constructivists believe that both actors and structures are important and are mutually constituted. Meanwhile; anarchy is an imagined situation that is mutually constituted by actors; identities are necessary in order to ensure creation of predictable patterns of behaviour. Material power which includes military and economic and discursive power -including knowledge, culture, and ideology -is important, and; change in the world politics is agnostic, i.e. it does not insist that change inevitably happens but explains how and where change may occur (Hopf, 1998).

In order to do so, different kinds of constructivism have been formed. Hopf (Hopf, 1998) explains that there are two types of constructivism, which are "critical" and "conventional". Katzenstein et al. (Katzenstein, Keohane, & Krasner, 1998) added post-modernist constructivism as the third type in international relations. Critical constructivism is dominant in Europe and it focuses on power and discourse, while the conventional type that is dominant in the United States focuses on norms and identities. According to critical constructivists, all scholarly works have normative consequences. They are skeptical of any general formulation of covering laws. Therefore, critical constructivists emphasize on a detailed study of texts in order to find symbolic systems that govern actors' discourses, rather than on an analysis of a large number of cases (Katzenstein et al., 1998).

While Conventional constructivism ontologically differs from the mainstream theories of international politics, it applies positivist epistemology. Katzenstein argues that conventional constructivism operates between the mainstream theories of international politics and critical theory. Ontologically, it studies how ideational or normative structures constitute agents and their interests, while epistemologically attempts to complement rationalism with sociological perspectives and argues how agents and structure are mutually constitutive in order to bring a more dynamic conception of change of system structures in social science. In other words, conventional constructivists focus on two factors which are critical historical junctures from which new structural arrangements emerge and on interactions between existing structures and agents (Katzenstein et al., 1998).

Post-modernists as the most radical type of constructivism argue that there is no firm foundation for any knowledge. For post-modernists such as Richard Ashley, the foundation of reality is based on analytical and ideological categories. They insist that there are only power relations concealed in all knowledge, which claims that the scholars' task is to reveal them (Katzenstein et al., 1998). Accordingly, they argue that all symbolic and political orders are unstable; and "since subjects only understand the world through language, and control of language implies power, linguistic presentations are always open to cognitive and political processes of destabilization" (Katzenstein et al., 1998).

## **5. Christian Reus-Smit and Constructivism**

Reus-Smit argues that there are four basic institutional practices, namely, spontaneous evolution (realists), hegemonic construction (neo-realists), rational institutional selection (neo-liberals), and state identity (constructivists). He puts himself under constructivist approach while distinguishes his ideas from other constructivists in some aspects. In other words, he attempts to present an alternative way of understanding international systems change. He categorizes constructivist perspectives into two main forms of systemic constructivism and holistic constructivism. Systemic constructivism, whose most well-known scholar is Wendt, focuses on systemic interactions between states. Wendt argues that the identity of the state informs its interests and, in turn, its actions (A. Wendt, 1995). Reus-Smit contends that the systemic perspective of constructivism accommodates the reproduction of social and political forms, but not their production or transformation (Reus-Smit, 1999).

Holistic constructivism treats domestic and international structures and processes as two-face social and political order. Considering both domestic and international faces leads holistic constructivists to two distinct but complementary perspectives of grand shifts between international systems and changes within the modern society of states. The first one can be traced in Ruggie's work on the transition from the medieval system of rule to the modern, and the second one in Kratochwil's work on the end of the Cold War. Reus-Smit introduces his contribution as a holistic perspective of constructivism on international relations. He argues that new constitutional values grow out of profound ontological changes in human consciousness and define the terms of legitimate governance in core states. The core states transmit them to other parts of world. These meta-values gradually become structural features of international society (Reus-Smit, 1999).

He defines social identities like other constructivists which provide actors with primary reasons for action. The main reason he distinguishes himself from other constructivists is Reus-Smit's argument that although existing constructivist perspectives rightly direct attention to how primary social institutions shape state identity and in turn affect basic institutional practices, they cannot explain the differences between societies of states. According to him, the constructivist perspectives have failed for two main reasons. First, they have not paid proper attention to constitutive values that define the social identity of the state which in turn overestimate organizing principle of sovereignty, and second, they have insufficiently paid attention to what links inter-subjective ideas of legitimate statehood. These are the reasons that have caused constructivists' inability to explain the nature of basic institutional practices or institutional variations between the societies of sovereign states (Reus-Smit, 1999).

## **6. Christian Reus-Smit and the Moral Purpose of the State**

Reus-Smit focuses more on complex social and especially historical roots of international institutional norms and societies. His first book "The Moral Purpose of the State" (Reus-Smit, 1999) based on his PhD thesis under supervisory of Peter Katzenstein, is one of the leading books on constructivism. In this book, he focuses on the evolution of international society through analyses of different practices and norms in different societies in history. The basis of his idea is that the states of every period of history share elementary interests and values as their goals and in order to achieve them, they construct rules and institutions. However, the main question of his book is why have four systems of sovereign states, including the Ancient Greek, the Renaissance Italian, the absolutist European, and the modern -all subject to the insecurities and uncertainties of anarchy-evolved different fundamental institutions? In other words, all of them had experienced the same system of anarchy but despite it, they have evolved different fundamental institutions. The focus of the article in this part is explanation of "The Moral Purpose of State".

Fundamental institutions are the "generic" structural elements that provide the basic framework for the cooperative interaction between states and transcend shifts in the balance of power and the configuration of interests. He argues that the basic institutional practices have led to the creation of many international regimes which structure international relations in diverse issue-areas. According to him, states engage in a process of communicative action through redefining the fundamental institutional rules that facilitate international cooperation. Therefore, fundamental institutions are a set of rules that specify how legitimate state ought to deal with its problems. In other words, states coexist with each other through fundamental institutions such as international law and diplomacy which help them to interact with each other under anarchical system.

However, these fundamental institutions in different international societies differ from each other. For example, contractual international law and multilateralism are fundamental institutions of modern international society, whereas system of third-party arbitration was fundamental institution of the ancient Greek, oratorical diplomacy was practised by renaissance Italy and dynastic diplomacy and naturalist international law were created by the states of absolutist Europe. Reus-Smit argues that rational approaches have failed to enduring fundamental institutions despite the shifts in the balance of power and vice versa creation of different fundamental institutions under similar structural conditions. He also argues that constructivists fail to explain institutional differences between the societies of sovereign states. He further claims that every system of sovereign states is justified by a unique conception of the moral purpose of the state that gives them distinctive cultural and historical meanings. These conceptions have generated distinctive norms of procedural justice, which have in turn produced particular sets of fundamental institutions.

He explains that states attempt to deal with two basic sorts of cooperation problems that include problems of collaboration and problems of coordination. The first one is the states' concern on how to achieve common interests while the later one focuses on collective actions of states that need to avoid particular outcomes. The problems are the main reasons for the states to develop Fundamental institutions. These institutions are produced and reproduced through institutional practices. According to Reus-Smit, "given this mutually constitutive relationship, the terms "fundamental institution" and "basic institutional practice" are frequently used interchangeably". Societies of states usually exhibit a variety of basic institutional practices such as bilateralism, multilateralism, international law, diplomacy, management by the great powers, and even war.

Another important concept used by Reus-Smit is constitutional structures which, according to him, are deeper levels of international institutions that condition the nature of basic institutional practices. Constitutional structures comprise of the constitutive values that define legitimate statehood and rightful state action. Fundamental institutions are actually embodiment of the basic rules of practice that determine how states should solve their problems. It is important to note that constitutional structures differ from each other culturally and historically. Different societies with different historical and cultural contexts develop different constitutional

structures and therefore establish different fundamental institutions. In other words, the moral purposes of the states vary according to their cultural and historical backgrounds, and therefore, they have different norms of pure procedural justice. Hence, fundamental institutions are created by the states and are reflections of their social identity.

He argues that different governing norms, values and beliefs are the results of “constitutional structures” or evolving political structures. His idea is different from other constructivists who argue that norms, rules and institutionalized practices are constituted by given values and beliefs of agents. Hence, the main question in his idea of constructivism is how norms and moral principles have emerged out of negotiations, and agreements within international institutions such as international law and diplomacy. Therefore, state consent remains the core requirement for the efficiency of laws and rules, but such consent also depends on the states’ and individuals’ capacity to construct the institutions in order to facilitate coexistence and cooperation’. Reus-Smit argues that the main constitutive value of norms, principles and rules shape institutional practices continuously in an open-ended manner. Reus-Smit distinguishes between ‘fundamental institutions’ and what we referred to earlier as ‘constitutional structures’.

### **7. Constitutional Structures and Constitutive Values**

Three constitutive values including hegemonic belief about the moral purpose of state; an organizing principle of sovereignty; and a norm of pure procedural justice are incorporated in constitutional structures. Constitutional structures order societies of states. As meta-values, hegemonic beliefs define the social identity of the state and specify what legitimate state action is. It is the basis of moral purpose of the state that justifies sovereignty and generates norms of pure procedural justice. The norms of pure procedural justice have profound influence on institutional design and action. This way shows how legitimate states should, or should not, act. It does not happen in vacuum but within the pre-existing values that define legitimate agency and action.

Reus-Smit argues that constitutional structures shape the nature of international systems of rule and therefore changes in meta-values, especially in prevailing ideas of the moral purpose of the state that comprises constitutional structures, are the main reasons of systems change; because these values give historical meaning to the principle of sovereignty and the norms of procedural justice. In relation to the nature of the values that cause systems change, there are two different forms of system change known as purposive and configurative changes. Purposive change redefines the moral purpose of the state and leads to shifts in the meaning of sovereignty and procedural justice, while configurative change involves not only the shift in the moral purpose but also the shift in the organizing principle that governs the distribution of authority. According to him, the transition from absolutist to modern systems was purposive change and transition from feudalism to absolutism was configurative change.

The organizing principle of sovereignty differentiates the states on the bases of particularity and exclusivity. These differentiations are rooted in the historical contexts which have meanings attached to sovereignty. Norms of pure procedural justice specify the legitimate or good conducts of states domestically and internationally. The organizing principle of sovereignty defines cognitive horizons of institutional architects and provides meta-norms that shape the process of communicative action including the production and reproduction of fundamental institutions.

Therefore, inter-subjective meanings bound together societies of states as communities of mutual recognition, and in this way they define the parameters that constitute a legitimate state. Inter-subjective meanings are conceived as hegemonic beliefs, organizing principle of sovereignty, and a norm of pure procedural justice or in other words, as constitutional structures. These values distinguish societies of states by determining the basic institutional practices adopted by the states and explaining why institutional forms have varied from one society of states to another. Therefore, the legitimacy of sovereign state and its actions rest on the values other than sovereignty itself; and in making decisions, states make their choices according to their cultural and historical backgrounds that have created specific beliefs about procedural justice.

### **8. Conclusion**

In conclusion, “The Moral Purpose of the State” advances the alternative constructivist perspective. Reus-Smit argues that constitutional structures bound international societies. These constitutional structures define social identity of the states and explain how rightful state act in international society. According to him, constitutional structures are sets of inter-subjective beliefs, principles, and norms that define what constitutes a legitimate actor and the basic parameters of rightful state action; as well as define and shape international politics. Constitutional structures are hegemonic because they constitute prevailing basis for the rights of sovereign state. Nevertheless, this does not mean that hegemony of constitutional structures cannot be challenged by counter-hegemonic

structures.

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