

# A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations

STEFANO GUZZINI

*The Central European University, Budapest*

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In order to avoid both theoretically eclectic and redundant approaches to constructivism, this article proposes one possible and coherent reconstruction of constructivism understood as a reflexive meta-theory. This reconstruction starts by taking seriously the double sociological and interpretivist turn of the social sciences. Based on ‘double hermeneutics’, constructivism is perhaps best understood by distinguishing its position on the level of observation, the level of action proper, and the relationship between these two levels. On the basis of this distinction, the article argues that constructivism is epistemologically about the social construction of knowledge and ontologically about the construction of social reality. It furthermore asks us to combine a social theory of knowledge with an intersubjective, not an individualist, theory of action. Finally, the analysis of power is central to understanding the reflexive link between the two levels of observation and action. The argument is embedded in a contextualization where constructivism is seen as inspired by ‘reflexive modernity’, as well as more directly by the end of the Cold War.

KEY WORDS • constructivism • international relations theory • meta-theory • double hermeneutics • intersubjectivity • power • reflexivity

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What a success story! Hardly known a decade ago, constructivism has risen as the officially accredited contender to the established core of the discipline (Katzenstein et al., 1998). ‘The social construction of . . .’ is littering the title pages of our books, articles and student assignments as did ‘the political economy of . . .’ in the 1980s.

The success is at least partly due to constructivism’s alleged ‘middle ground’ position (Adler, 1997). Taking a constructivist stance allows us to

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be critical towards, or at least innovative with regard to, the mainstream. And yet it does not succumb to the sirens of poststructuralism, which critics have turned into a radical idealist position, increasingly emptied of any intelligible meaning. Put more positively, constructivism promises to make significant contributions to the theoretical debate in International Relations. For some time already, and including many mainstream scholars, this debate has aimed at avoiding the pitfalls of the extremes of empiricism and idealism, of individualism and holism, or of single truth and relativism. Hence, rather than 'seizing' a middle ground in theoretical debates left vacant, constructivism was allowed to become its legitimate tenant.

The new prominence of constructivism comes at a price, however. It is only one step to reverse the relationship between constructivism and the middle ground — although constructivist positions are part of this middle ground, not all theorizing on the middle ground is constructivist. In other words, the success was paid for by a neglect of some of the basic ideas of constructivism.

As a result, 'the social construction of . . .' is often either eclectic or redundant. Eclecticism shows up when constructivism has become a general category out of which many researchers pick and choose their particular version without necessarily looking at the theoretical coherence of the final product. Redundancy applies when a constructivist touch adds some face lift to already existing approaches. This happens, for instance, when constructivism is said to refer to the claim that ideas, besides material matters, have an impact on politics. As such, it would differ from 'rationalism' in that this impact is not necessarily reducible to calculated strategic action. It would differ from pure 'idealism' in that these ideas do not come about in a vacuum (see the well-coined title by Risse-Kappen, 1994) — they are embedded in a historical context and need an institutional support to be effective. Moreover, ideas and their institutional support can affect the preferences and interests of actors. If that were all, Stephen Krasner's (1982) analysis of the feedback of regimes on actor preferences would make out of him an early constructivist (not that he might care much about labelling). But if that were all, why bother to study constructivism? Life is short.

Against this tendency of eclectic or redundant use, this article looks for theoretical coherence, and tries to rebuild bridges to empirical research. What follows offers a systematic rethinking of constructivist tenets. It will hence not provide yet another survey of constructivism. It does not look for a basic common denominator of constructivism shared by all scholars who so call themselves. This undertaking has undoubted merits as a first step for gathering information about a new research programme. But more recent attempts have also shown its limits. The sheer diversity seems to make the category of constructivism explode. Consequently, the plethora of recent

survey articles decided to give constructivism a better coherence either by emphasizing a single particular view (Adler, 1997), by picking out particular approaches for discussion (Checkel, 1998) or by providing typologies (Hopf, 1998). Although this article shares some of these endeavours, it more explicitly wants to offer one coherent, although not the only possible, *reconstruction* of constructivism, understood solely as an explanatory meta-theory.<sup>1</sup>

The present *reconstruction* emphasizes two major inspirations of recent ‘middle-ground’ theorizing, namely the interpretivist and the sociological turns in the social sciences. Taking the interpretivist turn seriously means to start from the idea of meaningful action, and hence from the difference between social sciences which need to interpret an already interpreted world, and natural sciences who need not (Schutz, 1962 [1953]). Theorizing must therefore conceptualize the level of common-sense action apart from second-order action (or, observation). Most importantly, it must analyse their relationship. Again setting the social world apart from the natural, our understandings of people and their action can make a real difference to the latter. For instance, being identified as an opportunist state representative influences options in future negotiations. Moreover, human beings — but not natural phenomena — can become reflexively aware of such attributions and influence their action in interaction with them. This ‘looping effect’ (Hacking, 1999: 34) is one of the reasons for the importance of ‘identity’ in constructivist writings, theoretically and empirically.

Taking the sociological turn seriously implies that meaningful action (and hence also the knowledge of both agent and observer) is a social or intersubjective phenomenon. It cannot be reduced to cognitive psychology or to choice, based on interests. Instead, the sociological turn emphasizes the social context within which identities and interests of both actor and acting observer, are formed in the first place. Finally, it means that the relationship between the two has in itself to be problematized, i.e. the relationship between the social world and the social construction of meaning (including knowledge).

In other words, the present reconstruction understands *constructivism in terms both of a social construction of meaning (including knowledge), and of the construction of social reality*. It proceeds in two steps. A first section aims at contextualizing the recent sociological and interpretivist turn in the social sciences. I will argue that the recent success of constructivism can be linked to the double context of what Ulrich Beck has called ‘reflexive modernity’ which affected all social sciences, as well as of the end of the Cold War which touched more particularly on IR. The main second section presents three central tenets of constructivism, coherently reconstructed from the double turn in the social sciences. The article argues that constructivism implies first

a double hermeneutical position at the level of observation and, second, an intersubjective theory of action. It must avoid mixing an intersubjective theory of knowledge with an individualist theory of action (for a related critique of regime theory, see Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986).

Third, and given the ‘looping effect’, the relationship between observation and action proper needs to be problematized in a ‘reflexive’ way. This reflexivity raises questions about the relation between meaning/knowledge and power which nearly all recent constructivist approaches, in contrast to their poststructuralist predecessors, tend to neglect. Hence, the central issue of power stressed by just one analyst (Hopf, 1998) is, as I will argue, not so much a question of research taste as of theoretical logic. For, if social constructivism is fundamentally stating that the present is not determined by the ‘nature’ of things, then it is analytically akin to power analysis which is always about a counter-factual and how things could have been different (Baldwin, 1985: 22). If meaning attribution and the social world are in interaction, then the political status quo and the legitimacy of public action fundamentally depend on this interaction, on this construction.

Reflexivity is then perhaps the central component of constructivism, a component too often overlooked. This article is, to some extent, an attempt to show how constructivism in IR is harking back to some ideas expressed earlier by Keohane (1989 [1987]) in his distinction between rationalism and reflectivism (for all its shortcomings in providing only a residual category for the latter), or by Neufeld (1993) or, outside IR, in the social theory of Ian Hacking (1999) or of Pierre Bourdieu (see in particular Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).<sup>2</sup>

### *Origins of Constructivism in IR: Reflexive Modernity and the End of the Cold War*

New intellectual developments within an academic community, such as constructivism in IR, can always be seen as the product of a double conjuncture. On the one hand, they are embedded in historical developments outside of the academic community. On the other hand, they reflect the structure and content of the debates that define the identity of an academic community itself. Shifts in theoretical attention are the reaction and adaptation of (at least a part of) the academic community to intellectual fads and achievements, inside and outside the discipline, as well as to peer pressure and to employment patterns for the professional academic.

In the following, I will first attempt to delineate several ‘external’ lineages, before the next section will discuss the tenets of constructivism against the disciplinary background within which it developed. A caveat is needed, however. I cannot establish whether these lineages were indeed the ones that

have influenced all or a certain number of constructivists, directly or indirectly, because this would require other empirical work on the production of knowledge in International Relations. Consequently, my reading is as much a possibility of understanding the historical and intellectual background of constructivism.

Two historical developments merit to be mentioned for the understanding of constructivism in IR. First, I would relate the emergence of constructivism to what Ulrich Beck (1986: 14, and *passim*) calls 'reflexive modernity'. This refers to the increasing awareness of the inherent limits and ambiguities of technical and social progress, an awareness dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. The second important historical context was intrinsically tied to the internal debates in IR, looking here at an incomparably shorter time-span — constructivism has undoubtedly profited from the *certitude of possible change* that swept over Europe, in particular during the second *détente* and the end of the Cold War.

### *Reflexive Modernity*

For some it might sound far-fetched to invoke long-term historical changes or, as for the second origin, a prevailing *Zeitgeist* as a background for the understanding of a specific meta-theoretical shift in a social science. But then, despite claims to the contrary, scientists are no isolated lot. Moreover, there is an internal connection between a more hermeneutical, indeed 'double hermeneutical' (see later) move in scientific explanations, and the understanding that modernity has become reflexive to itself. Both render problematic the self-awareness of the scientist, and of modern (wo)man, respectively.

Societies, mainly in Western Europe and North America, have known a resurgence of pessimistic ideologies or moods during recent decades. This shift in attitudes is characterized by a critique of modern industrial societies, if not of modernity as such. For many of its critiques, modernity is understood as the belief that, with its technical capacities, humankind can assure never ending progress. Moreover, modernity is taken to be a basically individualist project where the rational ego is the sole protagonist of history. Or as Raymond Aron (1969: 287) once put it, the disillusion with progress stems from the very source of modernity, 'the Promethean ambition', that he finds exemplified in Descartes — the ambition of becoming masters and owners of nature, including human nature, through science and technology.

The origins of the demise of this faith in progress can, among other things, be found in recent ecological disasters, famines with ever increasing death rates, or the threat of a nuclear Armageddon. If rationality cannot

solve these plights, if technocratic action is indeed often the cause of these disasters, then, so the argument goes, the Enlightenment project, or rationalism *tout court*, is no longer a way forward. Postmodernity refers to this kind of hangover after the ebriety of progress. It also alludes to the attempt to 'think the unthinkable', since it is compelled to think in categories mainly borrowed from the Enlightenment; and yet it must invent new ones to show us a way 'beyond' them.

This civilizational pessimism is not exactly new. Its roots are to be found at the turn of the century, when Max Weber already had to struggle with humankind's 'disenchantment'.<sup>3</sup> (Wo)Mankind was both producing incomparable riches and the iron cage of bureaucracy. The increase of individual and social power was not matched by any increase in moral certitudes. On the contrary, we have lost both the mysteries of the for ever unknown, and the comfort of the all-encompassing gospel — different Gods are fighting each other.

But whereas most critiques of modernity never envisaged leaving modernity itself, today some claim to do so. This claim, in turn, has been opposed by many who, in principle, would share the same assessment of present dangers. For the latter, however, the call to postmodernity is not the empirical and moral consequence of a bankrupt project of technological progress, but the internal and logical consequence of a mistaken understanding of modernity itself. For the Enlightenment is not about Reason with a capital R, but about reasoning. Reason, to be coherent with itself, must undermine itself in a dialectical movement, in which the truth of today will be replaced by another tomorrow, as in particular early members of the Frankfurt School have reminded us (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1969). Indeed, as Jürgen Habermas (1985) has repeatedly pointed out, this critique of a reason that no longer allows criticism of itself - a reason which has become a dogma - this very critique is the modern project *par excellence*.

Ulrich Beck has investigated the reason for which modernity could be mistaken for an already accomplished project. According to him, it is due to a fatal conceptual conflation of modernity and industrial society. We have come to believe in the myth that modernity has reached its apogee in the industrial society of the 19th and 20th centuries, 'with its schemes of labour and life, sectors of production, its thinking articulated in categories of economic progress, its conception of science and technology, its forms of democracy' (Beck, 1986: 15, my translation). Consequently, we have started to think that the problems of this form of social organization, as well as any critique of this society, must equal a critique of modernity.

By redefining modernity as an open project, by de-linking again industrial society from modernity, Beck proposes a different view of our present state. When modernization has overcome its traditional opponent, it turns against

itself. We are living in a world in which modernity has reached a new stage — it has become reflexive.

Constructivism in IR can be understood within this context of reflexive modernity. Particularly relevant for International Relations has been the sudden self-awareness of the (European) international society that it is only a particularistic one despite its global expansion during the 19th century. It could no longer assume or impose its rules as being universally shared.

After World War I, the relatively taken-for-granted diplomatic culture showed signs of a crisis which was later taken up by those realists with a more classical understanding of international relations, more historical and practical, than scientific and technical. A main concern lay in the recruitment of a foreign policy elite different from what Hans Morgenthau called the ‘Aristocracy International’. Diplomacy was no longer in the hands of this transnational class, which shared a similar socialization and rules of conduct, and which would be in control of diplomatic recruitment. ‘While the democratic selection and responsibility of government officials destroyed international morality as an effective system of restraint, nationalism destroyed the international society itself within which that morality had operated’ (Morgenthau, 1948: 189). Also Henry Kissinger worried about the survival of the European international society in this context of a rise of particularism, nationalism in Europe and then decolonization elsewhere. ‘When domestic structures — and the concept of legitimacy on which they are based — differ widely, statesmen can still meet, but their ability to persuade has been reduced for they no longer speak the same language’ (Kissinger, 1969: 12). The lack of such a common language could jeopardize the very existence of a shared diplomatic culture and hence the possibility of Concert diplomacy.

More profoundly, decolonization reminded Western powers that the rules of this international society were not only made *by* them, but *for* them (Bull, 1989 [1984]). The arrival of the ‘Third World’ on the international scene made it impossible to overlook the fact that the international system was ruled in a way which had little to do with liberal principles, and that the story of economic progress had forgotten several parts of the world. Indeed, as some early dependency theoreticians argued, the wealth of the ‘North’ could be systematically based on certain conditions of backwardness in the ‘South’. Early writings by R.B.J. Walker (1980), a scholar only later labelled poststructuralist, insisted on the relationship between the Western crisis of confidence and the difficulties of the West to talk in the name of a universe it was told it no longer represented.

Being put in front of a mirror which showed a rather unflattering picture of itself, Western philosophy and social science engaged in discussions and redefinitions of its own and hence others’ identity (for a recent discussion on

identity, see in particular Sparti, 1996). In democratic theory, this shows up in the discussions about multicultural societies (Taylor, 1992; Kymlicka, 1995). More generally, it reverberates in the debates about the social construction of collective identities in the form of *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1991), and our construction of others, like Edward Said's (1979) *Orientalism*. In International Relations, poststructuralists deconstructed the practice of sovereignty as the historical solution to the problem of cultural pluralism and universalism (Walker, 1990, 1991, 1993; Bartelson, 1995). The importance of identity, and its analysis, became central issues for the empirical analysis of the social construction of others — be they labelled poststructuralist (Campbell, 1992) or constructivist (Neumann, 1995; Kratochwil and Lapid, 1996). Identity is also central for the sociological critique of rational choice approaches, which assumes that this socially constructed identity is causally prior to the definition of interests (e.g. Jepperson et al., 1996; Ruggie, 1998).

### *The End of the Cold War*

It seems probably less debatable to relate the development of constructivist theories to the immediate historical background of the end of the Cold War, and not only because the most quoted article of constructivism has been explicitly referring to it (Wendt, 1992). For constructivism refers to a (social) 'World of Our Making' (Onuf, 1989). And a politically geared change of a stalemate that had lasted for half a century seemed to show that international structures were not objective. If, as Hacking (1999: 6) contends, social constructivism is basically about questioning the inevitability of the social status quo, then the unexpected fall of the wall gave new legitimacy to such claims, in particular since the change seemed to have been effected by actors who have become self-consciously aware of the dilemma situation in which the Cold War had trapped them.

Again, it was definitely not a new point that the international system could be understood as a social artefact. It is the basis of the English School of International Relations.<sup>4</sup> In a different vein, it had been hammered out by peace researchers all over the world for some time already. But during the 1980s, different versions of determinist and materialist approaches to understanding international affairs had taken the floor. In the aftermath of the Afghanistan invasion/Euromissile decision, East–West relations looked grim again and seemed to comfort all those who had said it from the start — *détente* was a way to sell out national interests (a category that could be filled by virtually everything) which, in turn, would be better served by rearmament. For them, there was no way out of the security dilemma. In the absence of a forceful arbiter, state actors have to face the dilemma of

choosing between two equally costly options — do not arm and you risk defeat (insecurity); arm and you risk escalation (insecurity). The Second Cold War of the 1980s tipped the balance in favour of the second choice.

With the end of the Cold War, the European continent moved beyond the security dilemma, at least for the time being. Disarm and you get de-escalation. Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' showed that although states can meet instances of the security dilemma, this was no necessity. Nor was any single bilateral relation doomed to stay within it. This possibility of change is basic to the constructivist understanding of the international system.

Yet, there are two basic misunderstandings about the relationship between the understanding of change in world politics and constructivism in International Relations. The first misunderstanding reduces the constructivist challenge to a mere critique that international theories had been unable to predict the dramatic changes (Wohlforth, 1994/1995). That a single event is difficult to predict is something which could be expected. What spurred the constructivist critique was, rather, that prevailing theories did not even recognize the possibility that it would happen in the first place (for this critique, see Patomäki, 1992; Kratochwil, 1993; Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994). For, according to constructivists, the end of the Cold War showed that the world of international relations is not fixed like the natural world, a world which exists independently of human action and cognition (including here the social phenomena of language and communication). The international system, usually described as being anarchical because it lacks a central government, is still a system whose rules are made and reproduced by human practices. Only these intersubjective rules, and not some unchangeable truths deduced from human nature or from international anarchy, give meaning to international practices.

The second misunderstanding consists in saying that constructivism is a form of pure voluntarism. It would imply that we can construct any social world, simply by wanting it. As the previous argument indicated, however, rules and norms guide the behaviour of actors, and they are intersubjective, not individual. Change is to be conceptualized on this normative level, the legitimacy crisis in the USSR, not on a voluntarist base, say Gorbachev's or Shevardnadze's vision, although individual volition obviously can play a role, and did so in this case.

### *Tenets of Constructivism in IR*

If neither the reference to reflexivity of modernity, nor the awareness of the social nature of the international system were new, why all that fuss about constructivism? The reasons can be found in the internal debates of the discipline. Whereas previous schools of similar content fought their battles

on the level of policy analysis, this time the struggle was drawn into the meta-theoretical field. Constructivism combines many old hats with a willingness to challenge the scientific project of Mainstream International Relations, in particular in the version which became dominant in the 1980s. This assessment seems, at first hand, to contradict the statements of its most well-known representatives in the USA (Jepperson et al., 1996; Ruggie, 1998). But then, the disagreement is only apparent, since those scholars tend to sideline the problem. Jeffrey Checkel's (1998) reception is symptomatic of that stance. There, the Mainstream understanding of science is so widely defined that it begs actually the significant questions. Checkel defines it as a commitment to empirical research (and not pure philosophy) and a commitment to scientific criticism (and not relativism); two commitments easily shared by many who would yet ask for a departure from a more positivist understanding of science. For we need first to know which kind of empirical analysis and which type of scientific criticism we are talking about. These are typical middle ground questions — not only for constructivists.

In the following I would like to discuss three central tenets of constructivism which, if taken together, depart from established theorizing and empirical research by taking the interpretivist and the sociological turn in the social sciences seriously. Given the twofold interpreted character of the social world, these tenets refer to the level of observation, the level of action and their relationship. There is, at the level of observation, first and foremost the very core of *epistemological constructivism* which developed out of the critique of empiricism and positivism. Second, there is the closely related tenet of methodological intersubjectivity, or what one could call *sociological constructivism* which developed out of the critique of rational choice approaches. And finally, there is the central *concept and the analysis of power* in constructivism which functions as the reflexive link between observation and action. If the present status quo was not inevitable or naturally given, the very world-view of Mainstream IR, its definition of politics, and consequently the 'art of the possible' to cope with it, are challenged. The 'art of the possible' is a central theme of the concept of power. Constructivism is part of a wider definition of the international political agenda. Meta-theories do matter both empirically and politically.

### *The Level of Observation: Epistemological Constructivism and Double Hermeneutics*

*Epistemological Constructivism.* Scholars who had so laboriously opened IR to new frontiers during the 1970s, had to watch how the success of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* locked up the discipline again. It was a classical balance of power theory. Its success was due to the fact that it said

much rehearsed things in a scientifically acceptable manner.<sup>5</sup> Waltz's book not only resurrected a very narrow definition of what was international, a very materialist conception of politics, but provided also a welcome 'scientific' definition of how to conduct theorizing and research (for a more detailed critique, see Guzzini, 1998: Ch. 9).

The critique therefore aimed at the meta-theoretical foundations of Waltz's new disciplinary wall. Indeed, one can say that Waltz's critiques used the debate around his book to force an inroad of meta-theoretical discussions into IR. Since Waltz's defence of scholarly criteria was taken from the standard methodology of economics, the critique focused on the potential shortcomings of this methodology — its positivism and empiricism (for its individualism, see the next section). Empiricism and positivism were understood in the following way. Empiricism meant that scholars could have direct access to empirical data, or, to put it more casually, 'data speak for themselves'. Positivism referred to the meta-theoretical position which, at least in principle, would adhere to methodological monism, that is, the idea that social and natural science are of the same kind; a position which includes a model of explanation where explanatory hypotheses are deduced from general probabilistic laws and tested empirically.

Curiously enough for all the ink spilled to denounce it, Waltz, as all true positivists, always rejected an easy empiricism. He certainly endorsed the notion that knowledge is not based on the extrapolation of empirical facts alone, but on concepts which define which fact is a fact. As Immanuel Kant, a philosopher much honoured by Waltz, had put it, categories are the condition for the possibility of knowledge. The task of a theory is a construction of *significant* data, which yield results for our understanding of, and action in, the world out there. Why then this recurring reference to empiricism?

Waltz's empiricist trait stems from his position on testing. He embraced Milton Friedman's (1953) pragmatic defence of testing — assumptions could well have nothing to do with reality; all that counted was that the explanations deduced from them had an empirical fit (weakening his own case, Waltz did explain at some length, though, why this turns out to be difficult even for his theory). And here an empiricist position creeps in by the back door — although we have no direct access to the outside world, and although our theories are only heuristic models with no claim to represent reality 'as it is', the testing procedure can be done on the neutral ground of empirical reality. When it comes to theory-building, data are theory-dependent, but when it comes to theory-testing, data are data. (The interpretivist critique of this dilemma echoes Kuhn's classical critique of Popper.)

But then, having opposed (this version of) falsificationism in the social sciences, does constructivism not fall into the trap of relativism and idealism? This question might be fruitfully assessed by relating it back to one of the main defenders of epistemological constructivism who is also well known in IR, Thomas Kuhn. Kuhn (1970 [1962]) had criticized the positivist view of science with an empirical analysis which showed that major scientific advances in the natural sciences were not the result of cumulation and rational debate where the theory with the better empirical fit had won, but incidences of what he called paradigm shifts (for the following, see in more detail Guzzini, 1998: 3—5, 119–20). New world-views or paradigms were accepted even before they explained something more than the formerly leading school of thought, to recall Lakatos' (1970: 116) definition of scientific progress. Even without necessarily addressing all the explanatory strength of the old one, new paradigms were accepted as potentially resolving central anomalies of the established research.

Indeed, for Kuhn, it seemed inappropriate to say that the shift to a heliocentric view of the world, for instance, explained simply more phenomena of the same kind. Rather, phenomena changed their meaning with each new school of thought. 'When Aristotle and Galilei looked at swinging stones, the first saw constrained fall, the second a pendulum' (Kuhn, 1970 [1962]: 121). Kuhn referred to this shift as a 'gestalt-switch'. In this case, two major schools of thought were relying on such different ontological assumptions that they were incommensurable, i.e. no neutral measure could be found to assess one against the other. Some major theoretical breakthroughs could imply the shift from one world-view to another, from one paradigm to another.

Kuhn's understanding of the production of knowledge requires, hence, an analysis of the social realm in which it takes place. According to Kuhn, paradigms fulfil two central functions (see also Gutting, 1980: 1—2). The first is the already mentioned epistemological function of providing a coherent set of assumptions, a world of meanings, that define legitimate research questions and significant research puzzles. Since paradigms provide the basic tools of researching and understanding the world, of science, that is, science, in turn, cannot correct the paradigm (Kuhn, 1970 [1962]: 122). Paradigms come as a whole and must be replaced as such. Furthermore, this already implies the second function of paradigms — they define the social subsystem of disciplines and what counts as legitimate research; they define the shared values and boundaries of a scientific community. Indeed, as Kuhn (1970 [1962]: 80) wrote, 'a paradigm governs, in the first instance, not a subject-matter, but a group of practitioners. Any study of paradigm directed or paradigm shattering research must begin by locating the responsible group or groups.'

Such a conception has been, erroneously I think, criticized for being relativistic, reducing science to ‘mob-psychology’ (Lakatos, 1970: 178). If paradigms, so the argument goes, with their holistic theory of meaning, are incommensurable, no rational deliberation is possible and hence ‘anything goes’.

It is, of course, correct that Kuhn denies that there is a neutral language with which we can compare observations produced by different paradigms (Kuhn, 1970: 265). But only from a naturalist understanding of science does this result in the statement that no communication and debate, no reasoned rebuff, is possible (Bernstein, 1983). Kuhn himself likens scientific communities to language communities, and paradigm debates to (hermeneutical) language translations. The latter are open to the informed judgement of the community of scientific observers (Kuhn, 1970). We might accept that there is more than one correct translation, depending on the purpose and historical context of the translation. But, surely, some translations will be considered less well done or will not meet the consent of the observer. Indeed, they might be unintelligible to the respective audience. Hence, Kuhn and epistemological constructivism, for all their resistance against a naturalist conception of science, are not relativist, but conventionalist (although the stress between the two poles might be different in other constructivist approaches, see Merlingen, 1999).

Still does this not imply an ontological poverty, an idealist mirage? What does the real world mean for the constructivist? This criticism does not come from the more empiricist side, but from critical realism which suspects that putting epistemology in front of the meta-theoretical cart ends up in a shallow, mainly implicit ontology (Patomäki, 1996; Patomäki and Wight, 1999). In a sense this mirrors the criticism made against those constructivists, like Wendt, who do weigh ontological concerns more heavily, but are faulted for being shallow on the understanding of language and intersubjectivity cherished by more epistemology-focused constructivists (Zehfuß, 1998).

Constructivism does not deny the existence of a phenomenal world, external to thought. This is the world of brute (mainly natural) facts. It does oppose, and this is something different, that phenomena can constitute themselves as objects of knowledge independently of discursive practices. It does not challenge the possible thought-independent existence of (in particular natural) phenomena, but it challenges their language-independent observation. What counts as a socially meaningful object or event is always the result of an interpretive construction of the world out there. ‘We construct worlds we know in a world we do not’ (Onuf, 1989: 38). This construction is, however, not a kind of idiosyncratic will to knowledge. Our interpretations are based on a shared system of codes and symbols, of

languages, life-worlds, social practices. The knowledge of reality is socially constructed.

At the same time, constructivism, being in the hermeneutical tradition, distinguishes between the natural and social world. Ontologically speaking, it is a theory about the construction of social reality. Besides brute facts, there are some facts which exist only because we attribute a certain function or meaning to them. Searle (1995) relies heavily on the example of money which besides being a metal coin or a piece of paper becomes ‘money’ only through an attribution done by actors. In other words, if everybody ceased to believe that this piece of paper was money, it would no longer be (although it would still be a metal coin or a piece of paper). Searle calls these facts ‘institutional’ — they depend in their very existence, and not only in their observation, on an intersubjectively shared set of meanings.

Now, one reason why constructivists in IR, with the exception of Wendt perhaps, tend to be less concerned with ontological questions is that all they are concerned with are institutional, not brute facts. To this extent, constructivism claims either to be agnostic about the language-independent real world out there, or simply uninterested — it often is irrelevant for the study of society (the argument will get a bit more complicated later in the section on intersubjectivity).

To sum up, constructivism recalls against empiricism that observation is no passive recording or purely subjective perception, but that objects of knowledge are constructed. It would oppose epistemological idealism on the grounds that the principles of knowledge construction are not entirely internal to discourse, but socially constituted through practices (Bourdieu, 1980: 87). Finally, it holds against positivism that there is a qualitative difference between institutional and brute or natural facts, and it is the former, in their fundamental social quality, which command the interest of the social scientist. In a nutshell, constructivism, as understood here, is epistemologically about the *social construction of knowledge*, and ontologically about the *construction of social reality*. It is to the latter that we turn now.

*Double Hermeneutics.* The previous discussion on constructivist epistemology showed the intrinsic link between the epistemological and sociological level of analysis in constructivism. As Barry Barnes (1982) has argued, it is not particularly telling to look at how social sciences fit into Kuhn’s scheme, but rather at what Kuhn’s approach has to say about the social sciences. Constructivism does exactly this. As we will see in this section, it argues that any theory of action must be coupled with a theory of knowledge.

Basic to the interpretative or hermeneutical understanding of science is that the very human action which counts as significant in the social world,

cannot be apprehended without interpretation, that is, without understanding the meaning that is given to it (Weber, 1988 [1922]). When social scientists analyse a red traffic light, they are not interested in the electric circuit and technology that finally produces something we recognize as light with a certain colour (the natural world). They focus on its meaning for the actor and on its role and function within society. In other words, meaning is not limited to the actor itself, but must comprise the significance given to it by other actors, and also observers (Sparti, 1992: 102–3). Meaning is not something idiosyncratic to be studied through empathy. Moreover, when interpretative social scientists analyse the red light, they would resist the behaviouralist understanding of such an action. There, action is seen in a stimulus–reaction chain, similar to Skinner’s rat experiments, in which the human decision-making is a black-box, a ‘through-put’.

Imagine the following caricature. The traffic light turns red and a car stops while a person crosses the street. Whether one observes such an action in Italy or Germany, the explanation in terms of behaviouralism is always the same. But, as those traffic users combat proven in both countries can testify, the apparently equal actions might be profoundly different. In Germany, both persons were following certain rules, here the traffic code. In Italy, the red light is not necessarily a strong indicator of the driver’s intention. In this particular event, the person crossing the street, a German tourist, had neither looked right nor left simply because his/her traffic light turned green. Having no eye-contact, which is the Italian convention for double-checking the car driver’s usual priority, the driver was forced to stop to avoid a traffic accident (a good example for brinkmanship strategies, too). Interpretative scholars would argue that the apparently equal actions meant something very different and that this difference is crucially relevant for the social sciences. Without retracing the actual meaning of social action, this scientifically significant difference would be overlooked.

Those interpretative approaches interested in social rules would, instead, be interested in the context of the society within which traffic comes to be regulated, and would try to understand why this convention of a red light was chosen, or out of what it developed, in the first place. The analysis would centre on the social and cultural context within which this rule or convention suggests a certain behaviour to individual actors. An actor coming from another society where such a convention does not exist would at first be at an utter loss to understand the meaning of the red traffic light. Hence, correct behaviour presupposes a type of background knowledge. Yet, even persons who do not understand the sign, still make sense of it within their world of understandings, their background knowledge. It is this interpretation which is crucial for understanding their action, independently of whether the action fits the context or not.

In both cases, the actor's capacity to attach the 'right' meaning to a social event depends on the capacity to share a system of meanings within the society. Hence, 'interpretation', as used here, does not necessarily imply an act of conscious or intentional understanding, but the sharing of what Searle (1995: 127–47) calls background abilities or what Bourdieu calls a habitus (see later).

This gives a double hermeneutical twist to the analysis. We have to think about the two levels of action involved in a scientific explanation — the level of action proper and the level of observation. In both instances we interpret, at one time making sense within the life-world of the actor, and at another time making sense within the language shared by the community of observers. We interpret an already interpreted social world (Schutz, 1962 [1953]). Furthermore, Giddens's (1984: 249–50) concept of *double hermeneutics* problematizes exactly the relationship between self-interpretations and second-order interpretations. For not only do observers rely on first-hand interpretation, but their interpretation, in turn, can itself have a feedback effect on the former (for this point, see also Jaeger, 1996: 325, fn. 25).

This double interpretation differentiates social science from the natural sciences, and therefore also interpretivist approaches from naturalist approaches, like neoclassical economics, within the social sciences. Interpretivists cannot therefore unconditionally collapse the level of action proper into the level of observation as done in naturalist approaches to the social sciences.

*The Level of Action: Sociological Constructivism, Intersubjective Units of Analysis, and Bourdieu's Field Theory*

Again referring to Barnes's claim that one should think what Kuhn's approach means for the social sciences, constructivists need to take seriously that if science is just another form of human action, both theories of knowledge and theories of action have to be understood in connection. 'Basic concepts of social action and the methodology of understanding social action are fundamentally connected' (Habermas, 1985 [1981]: 152, my translation). As a result, constructivists must assume scientific and common-sense knowledge to be socially produced. Furthermore, to the extent that the social world is made of institutional facts, they must be able to analyse these institutional facts without reducing them to individual cognition. They need to combine a social theory of knowledge with an intersubjective, and not an individualist, theory of meaningful action.

*Intersubjectivity vs Individualism.* To clarify what is meant by intersubjectivity, let us develop one individual theory of action, as presented by

rational choice. Rational choice, similar to constructivism as defined here, is not a theory proper, but a meta-theoretical framework of analysis. Rational choice entails an individualist theory of action. It makes two main assumptions about human behaviour. First, humans are self-interested utility maximizers; and second, humans are choosing rationally on the basis of a consistent (transitive) preference ranking. If A is preferred to B and B to C, A should be preferred to C.

A straightforward and parsimonious theory of action derives from this basic depiction of self-interest and rationality. Once we know the *desires* of individuals (their preferences), as well as their *beliefs* about how to realize them, we can deduce their rational *behaviour*. Indeed, as Keith Dowding has succinctly put it

The three go together in a triangle of explanation and given any two of the triumvirate the third may be predicted and explained . . . This is a behaviouralist theory of action, since it is studying the behaviour of individuals that allows us to understand their beliefs (by making assumptions about their desires) or their desires (by making assumptions about their beliefs). We may understand both by making assumptions about different aspects of each. (Dowding, 1991: 23)

It is hence the situation, or the set of incentives, which suggests behaviour to the individual and, besides the two behavioural assumptions, carries the major weight in the explanation. Although rational choice does not necessarily entail such a behaviouralist theory of action, it has become prominent in IR (e.g. Waltz).<sup>6</sup>

There are two problems with this type of individualist analysis, namely the very assumption of egoistic value-maximization and the misunderstanding of the nature of norms and rules. First, the assumption of value-maximization seems either erroneous, if purely egoistic, or of little use (for positivist studies), if not. It has been an old charge against realism in International Relations that its assumption of egoistic behaviour was contradicted by many instances of world politics. The classical realist answer consisted in saying that, in the absence of an arbiter in world politics, non-egoistic behaviour was certainly possible, but that it would not be wise to base one's behaviour on it and that 'ultimately', 'in the last resort', egoism materialistically understood, would obtain. Worst-case thinking meant exactly this — preparing for the case that people did behave according to purely materialist egoistic desires.

This charge that egoism is an erroneous assumption has also been levelled against rational choice theories. In response, proponents of rational choice in International Relations insist that the formula 'value-maximization' does not at all exclude altruistic preferences (Keohane, 1984: 74). Although this is strictly speaking not wrong, it does strip theories based on rational choice of

their predictive power and possibly more. For, if behaviour can be either driven by egoism or altruism, by one thing and its opposite, then human action becomes indeterminate (Schmalz-Bruns, 1995: 354). Indeed, rational choice inspired theories then risk becoming mere taxonomies, a system of concepts which simply reformulate any behaviour into terms of rational action. Then, as with Waltzian realism, the biggest problem of rational choice inspired approaches would not be that they are wrong, but that they can never be wrong.

The second problem with this individualism is that it is unable to have a proper understanding of norms and rules. If regime approaches rely on an economic model of explanation, the ontological and the methodological levels contradict each other. For rules and ideas are ontologically intersubjective, not individualist as an approach based on economic methodology would have it (see the classical critique by Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986). As a result, the structural level becomes reduced to a set of naturalized or objectivized constraints, the institutionally sedimented strata of previous strategic and collective action.

This approach is hence unable to conceive of an independent status of the structural level in intersubjectivist terms.<sup>7</sup> Intersubjectivity is best understood through an analogy with language. Language does exist and cannot be reduced to the simple material support for communication (voice or other). It does not exist independently from its use, but its rules cannot be reduced to individual choices — language cannot be reduced to meanings that individuals attach to it. Or, to use a Wittgensteinian phrase, there is no private language. Hence, languages are neither reducible to objective materialism, nor to subjective individualism — they are intersubjective. They exist in the shared meanings of their users and are reproduced through their practices. These practices, in turn, are patterned by the rules embodied in the language. In order to avoid individualist reductionism, structural change cannot be conceived as being the simple aggregation of individual action, but must be conceived as the open reproduction of intersubjective practices following rules on their own.

*An Example of a Social Theory Sensitive to the Double Turn and Intersubjectivity: Bourdieu's Field Theory.* This is the crucial point at which constructivism should insist on a logical analogy — if meaning is socially constructed at both levels of action and observation, then we need a conceptual apparatus which can cope with a non-mechanistic, but interpretivist intersubjective level of analysis. Some writers have used Giddens's structuration theory (Wendt, 1987; Jaeger, 1996), others the socially thicker theory of communicative action (Müller, 1994; Risse-Kappen, 1995; Risse, 1998). In the following, I will illustrate my point by referring to Bourdieu

(see also Schlichte, 1998) because of the wealth of empirical studies in sociology which have been influenced by it (for Bourdieu-inspired IPE, see Leander, forthcoming, 2000).

Bourdieu explicitly tries to avoid different reductions inherent in rational choice approaches or functionalist approaches, by offering a theory around the concept of a *field*, a social subsystem. A field stands both for a patterned set of practices which suggests competent action in conformity with rules and roles, and for the playing (or battle) field in which agents, endowed with certain field-relevant or irrelevant capital, try to advance their position. This social subsystem is not mainly defined by its functionality as compared to the entire system, but relies intrinsically on a historically derived system of shared meanings which define agency and make action intelligible. Being historical, fields are open and change over time. It is this concept, together with the concept of habitus (see later), which is the intersubjective core of the theory.

The starting point is the relationship between structure and field (*champ*). In Bourdieu, *structure* is conceived as the product of collective history. In the widest sense, structures are social, not natural phenomena, although they certainly have a material character and, this being the sociologically most important question, are often taken as self-evident. Being interested in (domestic) social systems, structure is a concept linked to the system of 'social difference' or stratification, in other words, to the generative context for the establishment of status groups, for the establishment of (social) power.

Bourdieu's theory of stratification is based on his theory of capital. He distinguishes between economic, social and cultural capital (symbolic capital being a fourth but slightly different notion). Agents are endowed with different amounts of these capitals. Conversely, their capital has not always the same efficacy depending on the context in which it is used. Having much economic capital might not be of much use in being well positioned as an artist, although it certainly influences the way the artistic field is structured. Indeed, to some extent the very identity of these subsystems is closely connected to the particular mix of the relevant capital. Bourdieu, when referring to these differentiated social subsystems, calls them *fields*. This argument is wider, but reminiscent of Baldwin's (1989 [1979]: 134) insistence that power instruments are issue area specific, or, to express it in a more technical language, that power is not necessarily fungible from one policy-contingency framework to another (you usually cannot force devaluations with a nuclear weapon).

Within the overall structure, and depending on the level of differentiation of a society, different fields exist within a society. Fields, like the artistic field, the academic field, are the specific contexts within which *practices* take place.

Fields correspond to a network of positions, a set of interactions with a shared system of meaning. They give meaning to agency. They are the playgrounds where agents realize individual strategies, playing within, and thereby openly reproducing, the rules of a given game (as defined by the specific set of capital most valuable for holding power within the field).

The practices of agents in these fields are inspired by taken for granted beliefs, the so-called *doxa*, which Bourdieu defines also as the very presuppositions of the field. Doxa refer to the quasi-perfect correspondence of a socially constructed, yet objectified order (structure and fields) and the subjective principles of its organizations that agents share. It is in this spontaneous sharing of the common-sense in which the natural, but also the social world appears as self-evident (Bourdieu, 1977: 164).

Such an analysis relies heavily on the study of field-specific sets of *dispositions*, called the *habitus*. Bourdieu defines the *habitus* as a product of history which in itself (through effecting certain practices) produces history. It guarantees the active presence of past experiences through providing schemes of perception, thought and action which tend to reproduce practices in conformity with the field throughout time (Bourdieu, 1980: 91). The habitus functions like the materialization of collective memory. Comparable to Kuhn's 'paradigm', it is a disposition to act, perceive and think in a particular way.

The logic of the field also implies that the dispositions are not themselves perceived as the result of a particular history; they are, as Bourdieu says, the 'forgetting of history that history produces', or, in other words, collective memory that appears as the 'natural' way of doing, perceiving and thinking things. Dispositions lead to the smooth reproduction of exactly those assumptions that define the autonomy of the field. This is Bourdieu's *sens pratique* which means both meaning/sense (of action and practices) and drive/direction (of the open reproduction of fields). It is important to note that this 'reproduction' is neither closed nor mechanistic.<sup>8</sup>

This conceptualization is a sociological translation of socialization processes that take place not on the individual level via competition and strategic learning, but on a social level where the agent's identity is related to groups. It is a revised version of a Weberian status group approach. Cooperation or common action is hence not necessarily the result of choice. Practices are (also) the result of the orientations given by the habitus and the structure of the field as a system of authorizations and punishments (Bourdieu, 1982: 14). In other words, identity (agency), interests and strategies are field-specific and can be understood only after a prior analysis of the field itself (for a short discussion of how Bourdieu redefines these usually economic concepts of interests and strategies, see Bourdieu, 1990:

87–93; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 91–5). For a synopsis of this approach, see Figure 1, adapted from Guzzini (1994: 244).

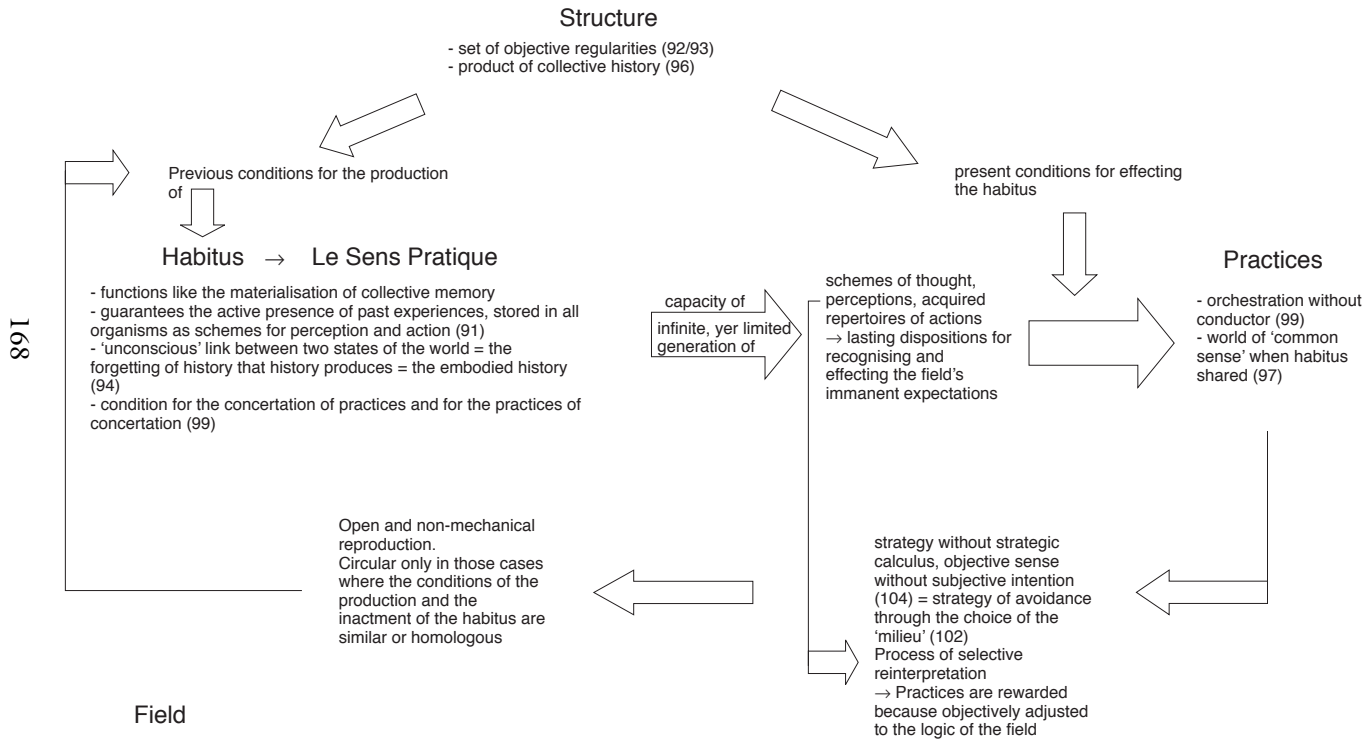
Some examples from the second Gulf War might serve as an indicative illustration of the conceptual apparatus (for a more detailed analysis, see Guzzini, 1994: Part V). In this case, constructivism-inspired approaches would be interested in the way the understanding, and therefore also the agendas of policies which are deemed possible and necessary, both of the policy-makers and their observers were shaped. Such an analysis would have first to specify the relevant fields to be studied.

The most obvious field for IR is diplomacy. Here the field's habitus is rich in a collective memory of the lessons of the past which provide the background abilities for understanding and acting in foreign affairs. So some politicians looking at the Gulf War through the lenses of World War II, on the basis of an analogy of Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein, would understand the Gulf conflict as a further incident of an anti-totalitarian war in which the allied forces had to anticipate Hussein before he got weapons of mass-destruction (Lakoff, 1991; Luke, 1991). Such a script in which several metaphors are bundled, has an inbuilt logic in the story which could explain, for instance, why the US public did not really understand why the allied forces did not go all the way to Bagdad (to remove Saddam Hussein). The former President Bush was at pains to point out that the allied forces had no mandate to do so — when his public justification for the intervention in terms of the World War II script would have made him go for unconditional surrender.

Another field which is of particular interest to constructivists is international media (Jaeger, 1996: 333–5). The study of media would have to include its relationship to political and economic fields which have been heavily shaping the selection and production of footage, indeed the very prevalence given to live footage as opposed to the written press (Taylor, 1992: 272). The organization of the media coverage where journalists were dependent for their security on the allied forces, obviously had a similarly biased effect.

More precisely, the study would need to analyse the dispositions (habitus) of journalists. A practice particularly prominent during the Gulf War was self-censorship which again features the distinction between an individualist and an intersubjective approach. An individualist account of self-censorship sees it as an anticipated reaction of an imputed sanction, should compliance not happen. An intersubjectivist approach would not deny those instances but makes it possible to conceive of self-censorship in a non-individualist way. Such an analysis would look at the habitus of the agents in the media field and establish whether their competent behaviour according to the rules

*Figure 1*  
A conceptual synopsis of Pierre Bourdieu's *le sens pratique*



of the field, their very being a (competent) journalist would result in such a self-censorship.

It is this sense of acceptability, and not whatever form of rational calculus oriented towards the maximization of symbolic profits, which . . . determines corrections and all forms of self-censorship. These are concessions granted to a social world by the fact of having accepted making oneself acceptable. (Bourdieu, 1982: 75–6, my translation)

This sociological approach also shows why it is probably incompatible to link constructivism up with cognitive psychology (Checkel, 1998). Checkel asks for such a link to remedy the supposedly weak concept of agency in constructivist approaches. Although the macro-micro link is no easy thing, and claims about its final solution are premature, theories like Bourdieu's do at least provide concepts, like the habitus, which are rich enough to account for the regulated part of agency without necessarily relying on cognitive rules of behaviour. Constructivism does not need to deny the possible importance of psychological factors. Some psychological approaches, like scheme theories and similar approaches in the belief-systems literature, are compatible with it. Yet, it must deny a concept of agency which would not include some socially thick components like the habitus. That would be hardly coherent within the constructivist framework. Hence, Checkel's call for the missing agency is slightly misplaced — it is only an individualist understanding of agency which is missing.

Once one accepts the existence of intersubjective units of analysis, their study must become a research agenda on its own. It means that research not only addresses the nexus between material and ideal inputs and individual behaviour, but must first understand this agency in a more embedded way, understanding the historically evolving schemes of thought, perception and action, as well as the distribution of capital, including the social, in carefully defined fields where agents meet. Many of the important questions for a social scientist are located at this wider level. Indeed, being related to social stratification, as in Bourdieu's approach, the analysis is concerned not only with questions of action, but with social power.

#### *'Power' and the Constructivist Linking of the Levels of Action and Observation*

Absolutely crucial for understanding constructivism is the turn power analysis has taken during the 1980s in International Relations. For the concept of power provides a link between a coherent constructivist understanding of the level of observation and the level of action proper. As mentioned earlier, constructivism sees the international system as socially constructed through practices, in particular diplomatic practices. Similarly,

on the level of observation, action is understood in terms of the practices of the scholarly community (although not that alone). Since both levels are levels of action, a coherent constructivism must approach them in the same way. The very basis of double hermeneutics means that constructivism must theorize the relationship between them. The concept of power has emerged as one of the most prominent ways to link the two, i.e. the interaction between the social construction of meaning (including knowledge) with the construction of social reality.

Given the usual understanding of power in IR, it is not self-evident why power would be able to provide this link. For a long time, the discipline has been happy living with a fairly narrow and usually materialist conception of power as capacities. Yet this understanding has produced a series of anomalies that fundamentally vitiate the usefulness of this type of power analysis in IR (for a short assessment of contemporary power analysis in IR, see Guzzini, forthcoming, 2000). First, with the opening of the international agenda, sources of capabilities expanded; military might did not necessarily prove useful in other sectors. This lacking ‘fungibility’ implied that general national power indexes, not to speak of their aggregation as general balances of power, are fairly useless for particular empirical analysis (Baldwin, 1989 [1979]: 167). Related to this, it implied that some of the issue areas might be heavily influenced by the skilful use of non-material capabilities, as Susan Strange’s (1987) insistence on US ‘structural’ power in the knowledge structure, and Joseph Nye’s (1990) related ‘soft-power’ bear witness. Indeed, power concepts increasingly referred to the production of systematic effects, whether they were intended or not, whether their sources could be pinpointed at some agents or not — they tried to include non-intentional or impersonal power approaches (Guzzini, 1993). This went beyond the only partial exception to the rule of intentional power concepts, namely the famous ‘law of anticipated reactions’ (Friedrich, 1963: 199–215), in which actors changed their behaviour by imputing intentions to another actor.

But why call non-intentional or impersonal influence power? Indeed, many scholars within the tradition of methodological individualism resisted the inclusion of non-intentional power for its apparent randomness, and impersonal power for the so-called ‘benefit fallacy’. First, although economic approaches can include non-intended effects (Elster, 1989) in their analysis, within this framework, it does not make sense to include them in their concept of power, or their power analysis. Second, impersonal power approaches have been criticized for deducing power from rewards, something which has been called the ‘benefit fallacy’ of power (Barry, 1988 [1987]: 315). Nelson Polsby (1980: 208) explicitly mentioned the case of the free-rider who certainly profits from a certain systemic arrangement, but

who basically remains at its mercy. One would not necessarily ascribe power to the free-rider. In other words, expanding the concept meant confusing power with randomness or luck.

I think that both arguments are falling short by excluding non-intentional and impersonal effects from a power analysis. More importantly, the reason for this also helps us to understand why power (I would add: power *analysis*) can serve as a link between the level of observation and the level of action.

For seeing the importance of power, we have to shift our conceptual analysis from the question what power *means* to what the use of the concept power *does*. And here we are at the core of a political debate. Power is a concept which has a variety of purposes (Morriss, 1987: 37–42). To mention two, power is used in practical contexts in which we are interested in what we can do to others and what others can do to us, whether intentionally or not. It is furthermore important in moral/legal contexts where it functions as an indicator of effective responsibility — if actors could not have done an act (if they had not the capacity to do so), they cannot be found guilty of it. The first indicates the realm of agency and change. Power is a counterfactual which implies that things could have been otherwise. Hence, power is an indicator of politics understood as the ‘art of the possible’. The second purpose assesses possible responsibility. As William Connolly (Connolly, 1974: 97 ff.) noted some time ago, attributing power to an agent implies an attribution of responsibility and hence a potential need for justification.<sup>9</sup>

In such a context it is quite understandable that dependency scholars have been stressing non-intentional effects. For by limiting the practical context to only those actions with which we intend to affect others, we rule out from political action and moral judgement those actions with which we affect others, whether intended or not (as explicitly done by Knorr, 1973: 77–8). Leaving out non-intentional power mobilizes a status quo research bias and blinds us to the tacit power of the strong (Guzzini, 1993: 476).

Similarly, the ‘benefit-fallacy’ is linked to a power holder-centred and causal understanding. To say that a system benefits certain people does not mean that they caused that benefit or that they control it. ‘All one need do is note that a status quo that systematically benefits certain people (as Polsoy agrees it does) is relevant in itself . . . Yet if the social system performs in such a way as systematically to advantage some individuals or groups, it certainly seems odd not to take account of this’ (Morriss, 1987: 105–6). And although scepticism about the links between power and benefits are warranted, it seems a reduction not to allow for a conceptual apparatus which can take account of systematic benefits in any other terms as ‘systematic luck’ (Dowding, 1991: 137). Because again, as a consequence, since power is not involved, we ‘have no alternative’ but to live with this

fateful state of affairs. Power, understood as an indicator of the 'art of the possible', is ruled out. By reducing a systematic bias to a question of luck, this approach leaves out of the picture the daily practices of agents that help to reproduce the very system and positions from which these advantages were derived. For this reason perhaps, Dowding (1996: 94 ff.) now rephrases his approach and explicitly includes systematic luck into power analysis which he correctly then links to normative debates.

Now, if the concept of power functions as an indicator of the 'possible', it is obvious that constructivist theoreticians who spent their time in unravelling 'worlds of our making' had to be interested in it. Moreover, it is this particular function of power analysis which made it that power, and not another concept, theoretically appealed to scholars interested in bridging the reflexive relationship between the level of action and the level of observation. For this to happen, however, power needed (again) to be approached in a way which allowed it to view socially constructed knowledge as a constitutive factor of social power and which, relatedly, made it possible to conceive of the relationship between power and consensus.

In other words, the concept of power provided a central, because sociologically pertinent, link between the construction of knowledge and social order. It does so basically in two ways. First, people are attributed labels or 'kinds' as Hacking calls them. When the IMF puts a country in the category of insolvent, that country has been disempowered in its social relations. Other international financial actors will change their behaviour accordingly. The country itself will react towards this being perceived as of a certain kind, either by trying to ignore or remedying it. Similarly, giving some immigrant citizens the status of permanent residents empowers them to do things they could not have otherwise done (again, people can become aware and conscious of these kinds and interact with them). Second, power analysis emphasizes the link that exists between the social production of knowledge and collective action. Here the focus is on those social groups empowered to provide the authoritative vision of the world. Both types of power analysis which are profoundly intersubjective, link, on each level, the theory of knowledge with social theory, 'because the specific symbolic power to impose the principles of construction of reality, in particular, social reality, is a major dimension of political power' (Bourdieu, 1977: 165).

To offer again a conceptual illustration of both power links, one could recall Richard Ashley in his communicative and then his Bourdieu-inspired phase. He is the one scholar who most contributed to further thought in IR of the centrality of power in providing the link between the two levels of action.<sup>10</sup> His starting point is the understanding of the consensual aspect of power. This aspect was traditionally handled through the concept of *legitimacy* which, in the Weberian reading, demarcates authority (*Herr-*

*schaft*) from power (*Macht*). The more radical hermeneutical twist can be seen in the meta-theoretical redefinition where the significant concept of power has to be placed, namely not at an individual, but at an intersubjective level.

Ashley starts out with what one could call a *communicative* approach (Kratochwil, 1988: 272; Little, 1989). Here, it is worth quoting him at length, because, although dating from 1984, this section could have been written by today's constructivists. Ashley (1986 [1984]: 276, 291–2) writes that for neorealism,

[t]here is no concept of social power behind or constitutive of states and their interests. Rather, power is generally regarded in terms of capabilities that are said to be distributed, possessed, and potentially used *among* states-as-actors . . . Such understandings of power are rooted in a utilitarian understanding of international society: an understanding in which a) there exists no form of sociality, no intersubjective consensual basis, prior to or constitutive of individual actors or their private ends, and hence b) the *essential* determinants of actors' relative effects on one another will be found in the capabilities they respectively control. . . . Yet such a position strictly rules out a *competence model* of social action. According to a competence model, the power of an actor, and even its status as an agent competent to act, is not in any sense attributable to the inherent qualities or possessions of a given entity. Rather, the power and status of an actor depends on and is limited by the condition of its *recognition* within a community as a whole.

In a later piece, Ashley (1987) tries to give a name to this international subject. He finds it in the community of Realist statesmen and their 'heroic practice' — starting from the idea of an anarchical realm, the shared understandings, hence community, of realist statesmanship must deny its own very existence. Realism is not only about power, but the realist discourse is a power exercise itself. It works through ritualized empowerment as exemplified by the 'double move' of realist discourse, that is, the conception of a universalist abstract rational community on the one hand, which has, on the other hand, a historical (because spatial and temporal) margin — the frontier between the domestic and the international. The rituals of power

administer a silence regarding the historicity of the boundaries it produces, the space it historically clears, and the subject it historically constitutes . . . [International politics] appears as a realm of necessity existing independent from knowledge, will, and practice . . . the double move excludes from active political discourse the strategies and procedures by which the margins of the domestic and the international society are produced, the sphere of international politics is constituted and normalized, and the prevailing subjectivity of modern statesmanship is empowered . . . [These strategies] are appreciated,

if at all, not as rituals of power participating in the production of order but as necessary responses to a truth already given. (Ashley, 1987: 419)

Instead of understanding international cooperation as the result of strategic interaction, Ashley (1986 [1984]: 266) adopts ‘the posture of an ethnomethodologist of a diplomatic community’ (and certainly more so than the classical and empiricist Realists he quotes), a position which he will (unfortunately) reject in his later writings.

Consistently, and necessarily for a double hermeneutical approach, Ashley applied such an intersubjective approach to the level of observation, to the academic community. This strong epistemological outlook is the result of two necessarily related issues. It is a symptom of the realist paradigm in crisis, which prompts debates about fundamentals. But it is also the logical result of an explanatory framework that focuses on disclosing the legitimating routines in the community of diplomats and observers alike.

In a nutshell, the central concept of intersubjective power completes the sociological and interpretivist turn in constructivist International Relations — knowledge is a social construction; international politics is not simply a series of individualist choices in a naturalized environment, but a social construct defining and constructing identities; the reflexive relationship between the two levels of action is central for any intersubjective power analysis.

### *Conclusion*

Given the increasingly inflationary and at times woolly use of constructivism, the main aim of the article was to clear the ground for a better communication within constructivist research as well as between it and competitive approaches. Instead of looking for middle positions or lowest common denominators, it has tried to make sense of constructivism by looking for a coherent meta-theoretical position from which it can be reconstructed.

Its main claim is that constructivism is best understood by carefully distinguishing between its position on the level of observation, on the level of action, and the relationship between the two. With regard to the first, it argues that a coherent position of constructivism implies a constructivist epistemology (the social construction of reality) and double hermeneutics. It argues that constructivism is epistemologically about the social construction of knowledge and ontologically about the (social) construction of the social world. On the level of action it assumes an intersubjective unit of analysis. And since constructivism relies on a problematization of how reality is constructed, it must theorize the link between these two levels, which

usually comes in one or the other version of intersubjective power analysis.

The basic underlying thrust was to increase reflexivity in both theoretical and empirical studies in IR on the basis that analysis of the social world is not only a very part of the real world but might also affect it. This intrinsic link from social science to power and politics might be rejected by some scholars for it seems to imply that all social science is ideological. But this seems to be an unnecessary deduction from the position of this article. I simply stated a truism, namely that social sciences interact with the social world. It asks us to see us scholars and social actors at the same time. But saying that social science has political implications does not imply that social science is *nothing but* politics. Inversely, as already mentioned, it does not mean that although the social world is constructed, it is simply a matter of will to reconstruct it in order to get it changed. Although some scientists might have preferred access to political power, this is by no means a general position, nor one with necessary effect.

I was told a story which I cannot verify, but *se non è vero, è ben trovato*. In a keynote speech to an Association of Economists, the chairman criticized the discipline for the little impact it had on actual politics. His speech was met with outrage. The audience recalled numerous examples of policies influenced by the discipline's thoughts or main protagonists. After listening to these examples, the chairman addressed the floor by asking how it could be then, that so little research has been done on this link, why the discipline was not reflecting on its eminently social role. Constructivism would have helped to avoid the embarrassed silence which followed.

### Notes

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1. Hence, the following is not directly concerned with moral questions which are of central concern to some constructivists (Kratochwil, 1989; Onuf, 1989) and to postmodern approaches (for an assessment of poststructuralist ethics in IR, see Guzzini, 1997).
2. Being particularly important for constructivism does not mean that reflexivity is specific to it. It is present in any more advanced sociological theory, be it in the individualist tradition (Coleman: 1990: Ch. 23), or in Niklas Luhmann's system theory.
3. One could, of course, argue that the conservative counter-movement to the beginning Enlightenment expressed civilizational fears, too. But these are of a different type than the ones of Nietzsche/Weber who certainly do not profess a way back to the unity of faith.
4. Therefore, some constructivists return to representatives of the English School for inspiration, or even try to read a constructivist agenda into their work. This last move, however, is more problematic given the empiricism of the English School. For such a reading, see Timothy Dunne (1995).
5. Waltz is really not very innovative there. Morton Kaplan had already used balance of power theory in a scientifically acceptable manner, mixing, like Waltz, system theory (or a holistic approach) and game theory (an individualist approach). See respectively (Kaplan, 1957; 1969 [1966]).
6. I am grateful to one anonymous referee for drawing my attention to the possible non-behaviouralist approaches in the rational choice tradition.
7. Alexander Wendt has pointed out to me that 'common knowledge' as theorized in rational choice can take on board some, yet not all, of the mentioned requests for intersubjectivity (see also Wendt, 1999: Ch. 4), although it must theorize them as a purely interactionist phenomenon.
8. Fields are not there for ever, and dispositions even less. Besides changes in the overall social structure, there are different internal barriers through which the mechanical reproduction of the field can be inhibited. There is, first, the very passage from collective memory to the schemes of thought and action. Like language which shows the generation of much new thought and understanding, even the strongest adherence to established practices cannot determine the use individuals make of their past. Second, the dispositions are realized in a context which is different from the one in which they were formed. The bigger the perceived difference, the greater the possibility that dispositions may change. Finally, there are all the interferences that can exist because the same agent is part of different fields. Here, it depends very much on the 'discipline' the field (as, for instance, an academic discipline) succeeds in imposing on its participants not to 'steal' and transpose dispositions from other fields (arts or politics, for instance). Hence, it depends on the degree of 'autism' of the field's ability to refract the influence of other fields. These questions can only be established empirically.
9. To be more precise, the issue of justification involves both questions of responsibility (justifying through the absence of abilities and alternatives) and liability. The latter includes cases where missing alternatives or intentions do not

exclude being charged with the costs of remedies. I am indebted to Friedrich Kratochwil who has drawn my attention to this distinction.

10. For an analysis of the agent–structure problem in power analysis in International Relations and International Political Economy, see Guzzini (1993).

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