

Critical Theory and Constructivism

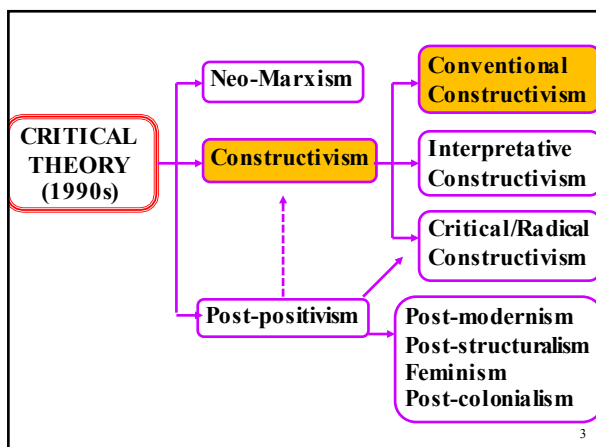
1

Pedigree of the Critical Theory Paradigm

➤ Distinguishing characteristics:

- ❑ Critical of established theories/paradigms
- ❑ Critical of problem-solving theory
- ❑ Critical of rational choice and positivism in general
- ❑ Neither rooted in politics as the realist and liberal paradigms are, nor in economics as the radical paradigm is, but in sociology.

2



3

Main focus is on constructivism

➤ But before having a more detailed look at constructivism we need to clarify the meaning of

- ❑ Post-positivism
- ❑ Post-modernism
- ❑ Post-structuralism
- ❑ Feminism

4

Post-positivism

- Methodology largely developed in reaction to positivist claims
- Acknowledges distinctiveness of social world
- People conceive, construct, and constitute the worlds in which they live, including the international world
- Social science is a different methodology from that of natural science

5

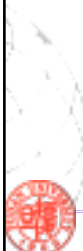
Post-positivist approaches

- United by a dissatisfaction with the established theoretical traditions in IR, in particular neorealism
- Argue against positivist methodology with its emphasis on observable facts and measurable data
- IR theorists are part of the world they study
- They are insiders, not outsiders

6

Post-positivist approaches

- They make assumptions and create images of reality; knowledge is not and cannot be neutral
- There is no single, final truth out there; there are competing claims about how the world hangs together and what makes it stick



7

Postmodernism (1)

- Post-positivist approach that rejects the modern, enlightenment idea that ever-expanding human knowledge will lead to an improved understanding and mastery of the international system



8

Postmodernism (2)

- Distinctive feature of post-modernism in IR: deconstruction of 'universal truths' that are supposed to be valid for all times and places
- Post-modern international relations theory critiques theories like Marxism that provide an overarching metanarrative to history



9

Post-structuralism (1)

- Focused on language and discourse
- Adopts a critical attitude towards established approaches: elucidates how these theories represent and discuss the world
- Especially critical of neorealism because of its one-sided focus on (powerful) states



10

Post-structuralism (2)

- Neorealism portrays a world where a variety of actors (e.g. women, the poor, groups in the South, NGOs) and processes (e.g. exploitation, subordination, environmental degradation) are not identified and analyzed
- Neorealism: constructs a biased picture of the world that needs to be exposed and criticized



11

Feminism

- Women are a disadvantaged group in the world, both in material terms and in terms of a value system that favors men over women
- Gender specific perspectives on IR investigate the inferior position of women in the international political and economic system, and analyses how our current ways of thinking about IR tend to disguise as well reproduce a gender hierarchy



12

Constructivism (social constructivism)

- The most important aspect of international relations is social, not material.
- This social reality is not objective, or external, to the observer of international affairs.



13

Constructivism (social constructivism)

- The social and political world, including the world of international relations, is not a physical entity or material object that is outside human consciousness.
- Therefore, the study of international relations must focus on the ideas and beliefs that inform the actors on the international scene as well as the shared understandings between them.



14

Ideas and beliefs (1)

- Ideas and beliefs matter in IR
- The claim is not that ideas are more important than power and interest
- The claim is rather that power and interest have the effect they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up
- Power and interest explanations presuppose ideas



15

Ideas and beliefs (2)

- Wendt (1995: 73): “500 British nuclear warheads are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons” because “the British are friends and the North Koreans are not”.
- What matters most is how the actors perceive each other, i.e. their ideas and beliefs



16

Four types of ideas (Nina Tannenwald)

- **Ideologies or shared beliefs:** set of beliefs that reflect the social needs of a group, class, culture (e.g. liberalism, Marxism...)
- **Normative beliefs:** beliefs about right or wrong (e.g. human rights, good governance)
- **Causal beliefs:** beliefs about cause-effect, means-end relationships. Provide strategies on how to achieve objectives (e.g. nuclear deterrence and MAD)
- **Policy prescriptions**



17

Structures and actors

- Structures are not given things that actors/agents can do nothing about
- Structures exist only through the mutual interaction of actors/agents
- Wendt: “A social structure exists, has effects, and evolves only because of agents and their practices”
- Agents can change structures
- Because ideas and perception can change, states do not have to be enemies: “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt 1992)



18

Wendt's constructivist conception of social structure

- Social structures consist of three elements:
 - ❑ Shared understandings and knowledge
 - ❑ Material resources
 - ❑ Practices
- Social structures are defined in part by shared understandings, expectations and knowledge
- These constitute the actors in a situation and the nature of their relationship

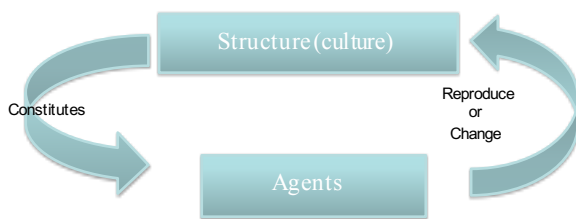
19

An example

- **Security dilemma**: a social structure composed of social understandings in which states are so distrustful of each other that they make worst-case assumptions about each other's intentions (they tend to regard each other as enemies)
- **Security community**: is a structure composed of shared knowledge in which states trust one another to resolve conflicts through peaceful means

20

Transformational model



21

Theoretical Perspectives

- **At the individual level**
 - ❑ Individuals, especially elites, are major units and most important actors.
 - ❑ Individual elites or “epistemic communities” play a key role in transforming language and discourse about international politics.
 - ❑ Social groups and collective identities are also major agents in the international area.

22

Theoretical Perspectives

- **At the state level**
 - ❑ States behavior is shaped by elite beliefs, collective identities, and social norms.
 - ❑ Individuals in collectivities forge, shape, and change culture through ideas.
 - ❑ National interests are the result of the social identities of these actors.
 - ❑ State power is the power of ideas, culture, and language.

23

Theoretical Perspectives

- **At the international system level**
 - ❑ Whether the system is anarchic depends on the distribution of identities, not the distribution of military capabilities.
 - ❑ “Anarchy is what states make of it.” (Wendt)

24

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Theorizing about Theory

- ❑ There exists no single general-purpose theory able to account for all questions regarding international relations.
- ❑ Wendt, “constructivism is not a theory of international politics”; rather, it helps to “clarify the differences and relative virtues” of alternative theories.

25

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Theorizing about Theory

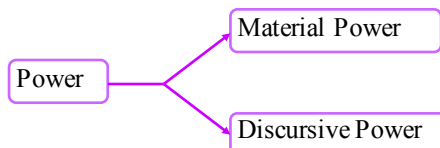
- ❑ Theories of international politics are often contested on the basis of ontology and epistemology.
- ❑ Critical theory argues that since there is no single objective reality, a general theory is impossible to achieve.
- ❑ Constructivists turn to discourse analysis to answer the questions of IR.

26

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Ideas, Identities, and Interests

- ❑ Power is more than brute force; ideas are a form of power.



27

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Ideas, Identities, and Interests

- ❑ Constructivists believe in the power of knowledge, ideas, culture, ideology, and language, that is, discourse, or how we think and talk about the world.
- ❑ The discursive power is the power to produce inter-subjective meanings within social structures, and actors' ability to persuade others to accept their ideas.

28

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Ideas, Identities, and Interests

- ❑ Constructivists: behavior is shaped by elite beliefs, identities, and social norms; ideas and discourse are the driving forces that shape the world.
- EG: security dilemma vs. security community



29

Theoretical Hypotheses

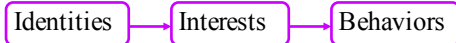
➤ Ideas, Identities, and Interests

- ❑ Ideas and identities shape state behavior by defining national interests.
- ❑ Identities tell you and others who you are and they tell you who others are, implying a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of actions in particular domains, and with respect to particular actions.

30

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Ideas, Identities, and Interests



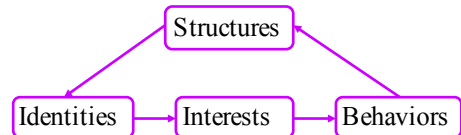
- ❑ National identities are multiple and changing, therefore national interests are multiple and changing.
- ❑ National interest is not pre-given and state behavior is not predetermined.

31

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Identities, Cultures, and Int'l Structures

- ❑ Structures constitute state identities and interests.
- ❑ Actors also constitute structures.



32

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Identities, Cultures, and Int'l Structures

- ❑ Structures are determined by the distribution of ideas and identities.
 - shared knowledge
 - practices
 - material resources
- ❑ Collective inter-subjective norms and practices are critical to the meaning of structure.

33

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Identities, Cultures, and Int'l Structures

- ❑ The distribution of identities is indicated by the degree of collective identities or shared identities.
- ❑ Collective identities are indicated by international cultures since cultures determine how states identify each other.
- ❑ Wendt identifies 3 kinds of international structures exemplified by three cultures.

34

Cultures and International Structures

Cultures	Hobbesian	Lockean	Kantian
Roles	Enemies	Rivals	Friends
Collective Identities	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Security Systems	Competitive: observe no limits on the use of violence	Individualistic: use violence but refrain from killing one another	Cooperative: do not use violence to settle disputes
International Structures	Anarchic, egoist, and self-help	Anarchic, self-help, but cooperative	Anarchic, but other-regarding
Theoretical Paradigms	Realist	Liberal	Constructivism

35

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Norms, Institutions, & Security Community

- ❑ In the view of constructivists there are many possible worlds
- ❑ In principle it is possible to move beyond "realist" anarchy through the creation of a more harmonious and peaceful international system.
 - a "pluralistic security community"

36

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Norms, Institutions, & Security Community

❑ Key characteristics of a “pluralistic security community”:

- non-violent problem solving (Deutsch)
- mutually accepted values (Deutsch)
- dependable expectations (Deutsch)
- positive collective identity (Adler and Barnett)

37

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Norms, Institutions, & Security Community

❑ To achieve such a “peace system,” the key is to alter state identity and to transform how states think about themselves and their relationship with other states.

❑ That is, to cultivate and bolster positive and constructive collective identities.

❑ “Identities reduce uncertainty.”

- EG: nuclear weapons in different hands

38

Theoretical Hypotheses

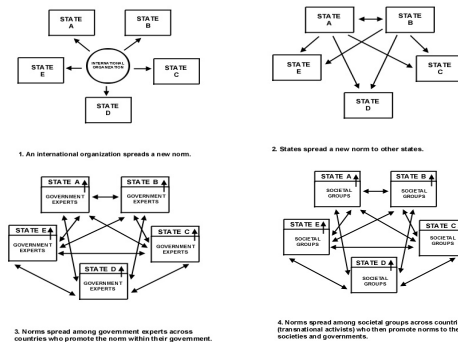
➤ Norms, Institutions, & Security Community

❑ International norms:

- Ethical principles about how actors should behave.
- Mutual expectations about how actors will behave in certain situations.
- Social identities, indicating which actors are considered to be legitimate.

39

Four Paths by which Norms Spread



40

Theoretical Hypotheses

➤ Norms, Institutions, & Security Community

❑ Focus on the role of norms as constitutive, constraining, or enabling.

❑ Norms and institutions play a central role in the process of transforming the fundamental nature of international politics and creating a more cooperative and peaceful world.

- security dilemma vs. security community

41

PARADIGM IN BRIEF

The Paradigm of Critical Paradigm

Key actors	Individuals, social groups, collective identities
View of the individual	Major unit, especially elites; motives contingent upon social discourses
View of the state	State behavior and national interests shaped by elite beliefs, collective norms, and social identities
View of the international system	Whether anarchic depends on the distribution of identities; nothing explained by international structures alone; belief in evolutionary change
Core concerns	Possibility of theorizing; power of ideas; mutual constitution between agents and structure; gender equality

42

PARADIGM IN BRIEF	
The Paradigm of Critical Paradigm	
Major approaches	Deconstruct concepts; advocate normative innovation through construction of new images; cultivate positive collective identities
Policy prescriptions	Establish a pluralist security community by changing norms, institutions, and collective identities
Central concepts	Idea; discourse; identity; inter-subjective understanding; culture; norms; institution; security community
Major theorists	Wendt, Katzenstein, Hopf, Adler, Sylvester

43

In Sum: Contributions and Limitations

➤ Two basic claims:

- ❑ The fundamental structures of int'l politics are social rather than strictly material (opposes materialism).
- ❑ These structures shape actor's identities and interests, rather than just their behavior (opposes rationalism).

44

In Sum: Contributions and Limitations

➤ Contributions

- ❑ It returns international scholars to the foundational questions of IR (state, sovereignty, and theory).
- ❑ It opens new substantive areas to inquiry (gender).
- ❑ It elucidates the sources of power in ideas and how ideas shape identity.

45

In Sum: Contributions and Limitations

➤ Limitations

- ❑ It overemphasizes the role of ideas, identities, and discourses, and underestimates the role of power in shaping dominant identities and discourses.
- ❑ It does not adequately address a critical aspect of the realist worldview: the problem of uncertainty and deception.

46

Theoretical Paradigms Compared

➤ Theory in Action: Analyzing the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War

- ❑ The realist paradigm
- ❑ The liberal paradigm
- ❑ The radical paradigm
- ❑ The constructivist paradigm

Zhongqi Pan

47