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**THE CONSTRUCTIVIST TURN: CRITICAL
THEORY AFTER THE COLD WAR**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between Third Debate critical theories and the emerging 'constructivist' perspective on international relations. Modern and postmodern critical theories of the Third Debate exhibited a distinctive meta-theoretical profile, privileging epistemological, methodological, and normative critique over substantive analysis of world politics. From the late 1980s onward, three factors reoriented critical theory, prompting a 'constructivist turn': the neorealist and neoliberal backlash, the end of the Cold War, and generational change. Constructivists, or second-generation critical theorists, have sought to clarify the core ontological and conceptual precepts of broadly defined critical theory, and to engage in substantive historical and empirical analyses of aspects of world politics. Despite claims to the contrary, constructivism remains true to the core intellectual commitments of the Third Debate, and should be seen as a positive development, furthering the broad critical theoretic project, and representing a more powerful challenge to neorealism and neoliberalism than Third Debate critical theories, modern or postmodern.

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST TURN: CRITICAL THEORY AFTER THE COLD WAR

*Chris Reus-Smit**

Introduction

The 1990s have witnessed the emergence of a new ‘constructivist’ approach to international relations theory and analysis. Rejecting the rationalist precepts of neorealism and neoliberalism, constructivists advance a sociological perspective on world politics, emphasising the primacy of normative over material structures, the role of identity in the constitution of interests and action, and the mutual constitution of agents and structures. They have honed these assumptions into an increasingly sophisticated set of theoretical propositions about international relations, demonstrated through a rapidly expanding body of empirical research. The impact of constructivism on international relations scholarship has been substantial, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the major axis of debate now lies between constructivists on the one hand, and neorealist and neoliberal rationalists on the other.

This paper is concerned with the relationship between constructivism and third debate critical theory, broadly defined. There are two principal reasons for this focus. First, leading constructivists explicitly identify themselves as critical theorists, tracing their intellectual roots to the Third Debate of the 1980s, and further back to the canonical figures of critical social theory, notably Anthony Giddens, Jurgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault. They have also been among the most prominent, and the most articulate, exponents of critical theory, leading the defence against recent vociferous attacks by neorealists.¹ Second, this self-identification sits uncomfortably with how the work of leading constructivists has been received—or not received—by prominent critical theorists of the Third Debate. With few exceptions, the pioneers of critical international theory have either ignored

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¹ See John Gerard Ruggie, ‘The False Premise of Realism’, *International Security*, 20 (Summer 1995), pp.62–70; Alexander Wendt, ‘Constructing International Politics’, *International Security*, 20 (Summer 1995), pp.71–81; Rodney Hall and Friedrich Kratochwil, ‘Medieval Tales: Neorealist “Science” and the Abuse of History’, *International Organization*, 47 (Summer 1993), pp.479–492; and Friedrich Kratochwil, ‘The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-realism as the Science of *Realpolitik* Without Politics’, *Review of International Studies*, 19 (January 1993), pp.63–80.

the recent wave of constructivist scholarship,² or responded hostilely, condemning what they see as constructivism's masked positivism.³

The paper is divided into four sections. I begin by clarifying the nature of critical theory of the third debate, identifying the principal differences between modern and postmodern variants. I argue that despite their differences, modern and postmodern critical theorists of the first phase privileged epistemological, methodological, and normative/philosophical issues over ontological concerns. In Part Two, I identify three interrelated factors that shifted this orientation: the challenges made by neorealists and neoliberals, the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of a new generation of critical theorists. This reorientation, I suggest in Part Three, is manifest in the recent wave of constructivist scholarship. After exploring the nature of constructivism, and the differences between its modern and postmodern variants, Part Four explores the tensions between constructivism and first phase critical theory. I conclude by arguing that the constructivist reorientation of critical theory toward ontological concerns was not only theoretically and historically inevitable, but it should be seen as a positive development, enabling critical theorists to mount a more powerful challenge to neorealism and neoliberalism, and helping us to transcend the unproductive dichotomy between theoretical and empirical analysis and research.

Critical theory of the third debate

Critical international theory is a broad church, encompassing modern and postmodern variants. These variants are united by four common intellectual orientations. Epistemologically, critical theorists question positivist approaches to knowledge, criticising attempts to formulate objective, empirically verifiable truth statements about the natural and social world. Methodologically, they reject the hegemony of a single scientific method, advocating a plurality of approaches to the generation of knowledge, privileging interpretive strategies. Ontologically, they challenge rationalist conceptions of human nature and action, stressing instead the social construction of actors' identities, and the importance of identity in the constitution of interests and action. And normatively they condemn value neutral

² This tendency is clearly evident in recent essays by Richard Ashley and Andrew Linklater. See Richard Ashley, 'The Achievements of Post-Structuralism', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.240–253; and Andrew Linklater, 'The Achievements of Critical Theory', in Smith, Booth, and Zalewski (eds), *International Theory*, pp.279–300.

³ See, for instance, Jim George's critique of Wendt and Ruggie in his *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994), p.127.

theorising, denying its very possibility, and calling for the development of theories explicitly committed to the exposure and dissolution of structures of domination.⁴

United by these general orientations, modern and postmodern critical theorists stand together in opposition to the dominant rationalist theories of neorealism and neoliberalism.⁵ Yet important differences separate the two critical perspectives. In reviewing several of the most important works in critical theory, Mark Hoffman usefully distinguishes between the ‘critical interpretivism’ of modern approaches and the ‘radical interpretivism’ of postmodern.⁶ Postmodernists reject all foundationalism, decrying post-enlightenment efforts to establish Archimedean points from which to assess the validity of analytical and ethical knowledge claims, arguing that such attempts silence and marginalise alternative experiences and perspectives, in turn producing and reproducing relations of domination. They thus shun the sovereign stance of judgement in favour of the dissenting stance of unmasking.⁷ Modernist critical theorists shy away from such radicalism, adopting what Hoffman calls a posture of ‘minimal foundationalism’.⁸ While acknowledging the contingent nature of all knowledge, and recognising the connection between morality and power, they nevertheless hold that some criteria are needed to distinguish plausible from implausible interpretations of social life, and minimal consensually-based ethical principles are required for meaningful emancipatory political action.⁹

Despite these differences between modernists and postmodernists, critical theory of the Third Debate exhibits a distinctive metatheoretical or quasi-

⁴ For general surveys of critical theory, see Yosef Lapid, ‘The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 33 (1989), pp.235–254; Jim George and David Campbell, ‘Patterns of Dissent and the Celebration of Difference: Critical Social Theory and International Relations’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1990), pp.269–293; and Mark Hoffman, ‘Restructuring, Reconstruction, Reinscription, Rearticulation: Four Voices in Critical International Theory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20 (1991), pp.169–185.

⁵ I use the term ‘rationalist’ when referring to theoretical perspectives based on choice-theoretic assumptions, not in reference to British international society theory. From this perspective, neorealism and neoliberalism represent the principal rationalist theories of international relations.

⁶ Hoffman, ‘Restructuring’, p.170.

⁷ See Richard Ashley and R.B.J. Walker, ‘Reading Dissidence/Writing the Discipline: Crisis and the Question of Sovereignty in International Studies’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1990), p.368.

⁸ Hoffman, ‘Restructuring’, p.170.

⁹ T.J. Biersteker, ‘Critical Reflections on Post-Positivism in International Relations’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 33 (1989), pp.263–267; and Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1990 Second Edition), pp.207–226.

philosophical profile. With the noted exceptions of Robert Cox's and James Der Derian's pathbreaking work, critical theorists of both persuasions focused on the epistemological, methodological, and normative assumptions and implications of the dominant rationalist theories of neorealism and neoliberalism, seldom applying the conceptual and methodological apparatus of either modern or postmodern critical theory to the analysis of world politics.¹⁰ Taking their cue from Frankfurt School theorists, particularly Habermas, modernist critical theorists placed epistemological and normative concerns at the fore. Criticising rationalist theories for privileging technical knowledge and an ethic of control, they called for an emphasis on emancipatory knowledge and an ethic of liberation from structures and processes of domination.¹¹ Without ignoring normative concerns, postmodern critical theorists focused on epistemological and methodological issues. Neorealists and neoliberals were chastised for seeking objective, empirically verifiable laws of international relations, and for embracing positivist methodological procedures. Like all texts, it was argued, international relations is amenable to multiple interpretations, and open to an equally wide range of interpretive strategies. Given this preoccupation with epistemological, methodological, and normative concerns, it is not surprising that critical theory of the Third Debate was inward looking, concerned primarily with critiquing the prevailing discourse of international relations. While frequent allusions were made to the analytical potential of a critical theoretical stance, modernist and postmodernist scholars alike made little effort to clarify their core ontological propositions, or to explore them through any systematic analyses of world politics.

This emphasis on the epistemological, methodological, and normative over the ontological was understandable, even desirable. Few would deny that the first stage in establishing any new perspective is necessarily the critique of existing theoretical canons, and the anticipation, if not articulation, of alternative modes of understanding. In this respect, critical theory of the Third Debate served the

¹⁰ See, in particular, Robert Cox's *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); James Der Derian's *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); and some of the essays in James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro, *International/Intertextual Relations* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989).

¹¹ Key statements of this position are, Richard Ashley, 'Political Realism and Human Interests', *International Studies Quarterly* 25 (June 1981), pp.204–236; Robert Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10 (Summer 1981), pp.126–155; Andrew Linklater, 'Realism, Marxism, and Critical International Theory', *Review of International Studies* 12 (1986), pp.301–312; and Mark Hoffman, 'Critical Theory and the Inter-Paradigm Debate', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 16 (1987), pp.231–249.

valuable purpose of fracturing and destabilising the rationalist hegemony in international relations theory.

Movement beyond such metatheoretical or quasi-philosophical critique was impeded, however, by the widespread assumption that a tight constitutive link existed between the discourse of international relations theory and the practice of post-1945 international relations. This assumption took a number of forms, frequently articulated together. At times a connection was drawn between realist scholarship and American foreign policy. It was frequently argued that realist theory generated and maintained the conceptual logic underlying the post-1945 distribution of global power and authority. In Michael Banks' words, "order", "balance" and "vital interest" became self-serving justifications for intervention, for an East–West arms race and even for anticommunist dogma'.¹² At other times the hegemony of rationalist 'problem-solving' theories was linked to the persistence of conflictual Cold War institutions and inequitable global economic structures. According to Richard Ashley, 'neorealist theory allies with, accords recognition to, and gives expression to those class and sectoral issues...that are actually or potentially congruent with state interests and legitimations'.¹³ Whatever form it took, the general proposition was clear. Neorealism, as the dominant rationalist theory, was hegemonic not only in the sense that it structured international relations theory, but also in the sense that it rationalised and structured the practice of international relations. As Jim George has reiterated recently, 'the positivist–realist image of the world "out there" has *become* reality, and the foundationalist approach to knowledge has become the *only* legitimate way of understanding global human society'.¹⁴ From such a standpoint, exploring the dominant discourse of international relations theory is not considered a prelude to substantive analysis but the very essence of such analysis.

Forces of change

In the last six years, three mutually reinforcing factors have prompted the reorientation of critical international theory, producing what I broadly label 'the constructivist turn'. The first of these was the rationalist response to the critique levelled by critical theorists. In one of his noted letters to the margins, Robert Keohane admitted that many aspects of international relations defy narrowly focused rationalistic analysis, conceding that the reflectivist stance of critical theorists promised significant insights into the intersubjective bases of

¹² Michael Banks, 'The Evolution of International Relations Theory', in Michael Banks (ed.), *Conflict in World Society* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984), p.9.

¹³ Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.270.

¹⁴ George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, p.223.

international relations, particularly institutional construction. He went on to claim, however, that critical theorists 'have been more adept at pointing out what is omitted in rationalistic theory than in developing theories of their own with *a priori* content. Supporters of this research program', he argued, 'need to develop testable theories, and to be explicit about their scope', a view he reiterated with Judith Goldstein in 1993.¹⁵ Echoed by other mainstream scholars, such arguments met with less than receptive responses from several leading critical theorists. In his emblematic reply, Rob Walker repeated the critique of rationalist structuralism, and accused Keohane of trying to squeeze critical theory within the claustrophobic confines of the dominant Lakatosian model of theory construction.¹⁶ While this response correctly identified Keohane's motives, the underlying point was not so easily shaken: critical theorists had to move beyond critique to apply their conceptual and methodological precepts to interpreting aspects of international relations or become increasingly irrelevant.

The second factor was the end of the Cold War. As in the past, international change was a more effective catalyst of theoretical change than the dialectical interplay of competing theoretical perspectives. The relatively peaceful dissolution of the Soviet bloc, and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union itself, shook the foundations of international relations theory, with two specific implications for the development of critical theory. First, it undermined the explanatory hegemony of the dominant rationalist theories, particularly neorealism. Empowered by the perceived failure of rationalists to predict, let alone comprehend, these revolutionary transformations, critical theorists went on the offence. Friedrich Kratochwil argued that the end of the Cold War was a 'crucial test' of neorealism's capacity to explain international change. 'The search for invariable laws of international politics has not only significantly reduced the set of interesting questions', he wrote, 'it also led to premature closure', closure that obscured the very dynamics of recent systemic change.¹⁷ Ironically, the end of the Cold War also exposed the limitations of Third Debate critical theory, bringing us to the second implication. The constitutive link critical theorists had drawn between the dominant discourse of international relations theory and international practice was

¹⁵ Robert O. Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', in Robert O. Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder: Westview, 1989), p.174. Also see Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane (eds), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p.6.

¹⁶ R.B.J. Walker, 'History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 18 (Summer 1989), pp.163–183.

¹⁷ Friedrich Kratochwil, 'The Embarrassment of Changes', pp.63–64. Also see the essays collected in Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds), *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

clearly not as tight as many had suggested. If neorealism was a hegemonic discourse, then the end of the Cold War demonstrated that its constitutive influence extended little beyond the boundaries of the discipline. Significant realms of political practice, even narrowly defined international practice, displayed a remarkable degree of autonomy from the discourse of power politics. Overall, the analytical space opened by the failure of the dominant rationalist theories to explain international changes, and the destabilisation of the assumed simple connection between theory and practice, compelled critical theorists to shift their focus from disciplinary critique to substantive analysis.

The third and final factor was generational change. Inspired by the insights and inroads of the Third Debate, a new wave of critical theorists has recently emerged. Encompassing modernists and postmodernists, this group includes, among others, Jens Bartelson, Daniel Deudney, Audie Klotz, Richard Price, Janice Thomson, Alexander Wendt, and Cynthia Weber.¹⁸ Forging their intellectual and scholarly identities in the 1990s, this new generation of critical theorists has been more animated by the analytical challenges of the rapidly changing global order than by the epistemological, methodological, and normative peculiarities of rationalist international theory. Unwilling to concede the analytical high ground, they have taken up the rationalist gauntlet, clarifying critical theory's core ontological and conceptual precepts and demonstrating them through concrete historical and empirical interpretive analyses. As we shall see, much of their work responds to the tenor of the times, focusing on dimensions and dynamics of systems and systemic change. Together, these scholars have reoriented critical theory, replacing the metatheoretical and quasi-philosophical focus of the 1980s with an emphasis on ontological questions and analysis. While Andrew Linklater and other critical theorists of the Third Debate have sketched research agendas, and several have made significant analytical contributions, much of the running is being made

¹⁸ Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Daniel Deudney, 'The Philadelphian System: Sovereignty, Arms Control, and Balance of Power in the American States–Union, Circa 1797–1861', *International Organization*, 49 (Spring 1995), pp.191–229; Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle Against Apartheid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Richard Price, 'A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo', *International Organization*, 49 (Winter 1995), pp.73–104; Janice Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Cynthia Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46 (Spring 1992), pp.391–420; and Alexander Wendt, 'Collective Identity Formation and the International State', *American Political Science Review*, 88 (June 1994), pp.384–396.

by younger, more junior scholars, pursuing the dual goals of refining critical theory and explicating world politics.¹⁹

The constructivist turn

These second generation critical theorists have been broadly labelled 'constructivists', in view of their characteristic concern with the social construction of world politics. Whether modernist or postmodernist in orientation, they advance three core ontological propositions. The first of these asserts the primacy of normative, or ideational, structures over material structures. This is partly because constructivists hold that systems of meaning define how actors interpret their material environment. As Wendt puts it, 'material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded'.²⁰ A further reason for privileging the ideational over the material, associated with the second proposition below, is the constructivist emphasis on how actors' social identities shape their interests and actions, and social identities, they contend, are defined by institutionalised meaning systems. 'All institutions have a *structural* dimension', Wendt and Duvall argue, 'made up of one or more internal relations or *constitutive principles*, that generates socially empowered and interested state agents as a function of their respective occupancy of the positions defined by those principles'.²¹

Their second ontological proposition, already anticipated above, asserts that identities constitute interests and actions. Neorealists and neoliberals consciously

¹⁹ Andrew Linklater outlined a research agenda focusing on the normative, sociological, and praxeological dimensions of inclusion and exclusion in world politics. See 'The Problem of Community in International Relations', *Alternatives*, 15 (1990), pp.135–153; and 'The Question of the Next Stage in International Relations Theory: A Critical Theory Point of View', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 21 (1992), pp.77–98. Aspects of this program, and related lines of enquiry, have been taken up by other Third Debate critical theorists. See Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet Empire's Demise and the International System', in Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds), *International Relations and the End of the Cold War*, pp.127–166; John Gerard Ruggie, 'Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations', *International Organization*, 47 (Winter 1993), pp.139–174; and David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992). Linklater's most recent work also exhibits greater ontological engagement. See 'Citizenship and Sovereignty in the Post-Westphalian State', *European Journal of International Relations*, 2 (1996), pp.77–103.

²⁰ Wendt, 'Constructing International Politics', p.73.

²¹ Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, 'Institutions and International Order', in Ernst Otto-Czempiel and James N. Rosenau (eds), *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989), p.60.

bracket questions of interest formation, treating preferences as exogenously determined givens that exist prior to systemic interaction. Constructivists, on the other hand, argue that understanding how interests are constituted is the key to explaining a wide range of international phenomena that rationalists have either misunderstood or ignored. For instance, according to Audie Klotz, the development of international sanctions against the South African apartheid regime cannot be explained without reference to how the interests of leading states, particularly the United States, were institutionally redefined during the 1980s.²² To explain preference formation, constructivists focus on actors' social identities. For, as Wendt contends, 'Identities are the basis of interests':

Actors do not have a 'portfolio' of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead they define interests in the process of defining situations...Sometimes situations are unprecedented in our experience, and in these cases we have to construct their meaning, and thus our interests, by analogy or de novo. More often they have routine qualities in which we assign meanings on the basis of institutionally defined roles. When we say that professors have an 'interest' in teaching, research, or going on leave, we are saying that to function in the role identity of 'professor', they have to define certain situations as calling for certain actions.²³

Wendt appeals to the social identities of states to understand the practice of self-help under anarchy, Klotz uses it to explain the redefinition of American interests with regard to South Africa, and Koslowski and Kratochwil invoke it to illuminate the impact of Soviet new thinking on the end of the Cold War.

Their third ontological proposition claims that agents and structures are mutually constituted. As we have seen, constructivists stress the way in which normative, or ideational, structures 'define the meaning and identity of the individual [actor] and the patterns of appropriate economic, political, and cultural activity engaged in by those individuals'.²⁴ But in spite of the considerable constitutive power they attribute to such structures, constructivists insist that they do not exist independently of the knowledgable practices of social agents. Following Anthony Giddens and other structurationists, they contend that social structures are nothing more than routinised discursive and physical practices that persist over an extended temporal and spatial domain. 'It is through reciprocal interaction',

²² Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations*; and Audie Klotz, 'Norms Reconstituting Interests: Global Racial Equality and U.S. Sanctions against South Africa', *International Organization*, 49 (1995), pp.451–478.

²³ Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It', p.398.

²⁴ John Boli, John Meyer, and George Thomas, 'Ontology and Rationalization in the Western Cultural Account', in George Thomas et al (eds), *Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society, and the Individual* (London: Sage, 1989), p.12.

Wendt argues, 'that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests'.²⁵ By emphasising this interactive relationship, constructivists lay claim to a richer understanding of state agency and a more dynamic conception of international systemic structures.

Like critical theory of the Third Debate, constructivism takes modernist and postmodernist forms. The shift away from high epistemological, methodological, and normative debate toward greater analytical engagement has, however, shelved, if not entirely defused, some of the more contentious differences between the two orientations. Constructivists of both persuasions now uphold the importance of question driven research. Richard Price, one of the leading young postmodern constructivists, puts it this way: 'Methodologies should be judged by their value in opening up insightful, important, and fruitful avenues of inquiry and their ability to provide appropriate answers to the questions they pose'.²⁶ Echoing these views from a modernist standpoint, Peter Katzenstein writes that 'when all is said and done, scholars do their best research because of the political problems and the intellectual puzzles that engage them, not because of the sage advice of prophets of the profession'.²⁷ The principal difference between modernist and postmodernist scholars lies, then, in the types of questions that engage them. Postmodernists tend to focus on 'how' questions, while modernists focus on conventional 'why' questions. Price usefully illustrates this distinction with reference to the taboo against chemical questions. He writes:

The usual questions posed of this taboo are those of causal explanation: why were CW not used by the European belligerents in World War II, and what is the role of the probationary norm against CW in effecting this behavior?...The interpretive puzzle of questions, on the other hand, is a different one: how is it that CW have come to be regarded as less legitimate than other weapons? Of what meanings does the CW taboo consist?²⁸

In spite of the different questions they pursue, their common concern with the constitutive role of intersubjective meanings leads modernist and postmodernist constructivists alike to embrace a broadly defined interpretive methodology.

Modernist constructivism has assumed two principal forms. Modifying Waltz's classic typology, I have elsewhere termed these variants 'third image con-

²⁵ Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It', p.406.

²⁶ Price, 'A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo', p.103.

²⁷ Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Symposium on the Role of Theory in Comparative Politics', *World Politics*, 48 (October 1995), p.10.

²⁸ Richard Price, 'Interpretation and Disciplinary Orthodoxy in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 20 (April 1994), p.203.

structivism' and 'fourth image constructivism'.²⁹ The former accepts the neorealist penchant for systemic theory (Waltz's third image), while the latter adopts a more encompassing perspective that seeks to incorporate domestic and international phenomena (Waltz's second and third images combined).

Third image constructivism is exemplified by Wendt's theoretical work. As we have seen, Wendt, like other constructivists, holds that the identity of the state informs its interests and in turn its actions. He distinguishes, however, between a state's corporate identity (its internal human, material, and ideological characteristics), and its social identity ('the meaning an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others').³⁰ Because he is committed to systemic theory, Wendt brackets the corporate sources of state identity, focusing entirely on the constitutive role of international social interaction. This leads him to adopt a relatively narrow conception of the structuration process, simply contending that international institutional structures constitute states as legitimate international actors and state practices in turn reproduce such structures. This concentration on systemic processes is adequate so long as one is not seeking to explain fundamental changes in state identity and social structures. Without introducing non-systemic sources of state identity—such as domestic political culture—at some point in the structuration process, third image constructivism offers an overly static conception of the state and the international system, providing no clue as to how agents or structures change.

Fourth image constructivism, in contrast, is more concrete and historical, consciously shunning Wendtian systemic theorising. Concerned with the dynamics of international change, its leading proponents—Kratohwil and Ruggie—treat domestic and international structures and processes as two faces of a single, global social order. They then consider the mutually constitutive relationship between this order and the state. This does not mean that they deny the existence of domestic and international realms, instead they see this partitioning as a unique historical construct, the chief consequence and characteristic of a distinctly modern political order built around territorial sovereign states. This general perspective has spawned two distinctive, yet complementary, analyses of international change, one focusing on grand shifts between international systems, the other on recent changes within the modern system. The former is exemplified by Ruggie's work on the shift from the medieval system of rule to the modern, where the principle of sovereignty

²⁹ Christian Reus-Smit, 'Beyond Foreign Policy: State Theory and the Changing Global Order', in Paul James (ed.), *The State in Question: Transformations of the Australian State* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996), p.187.

³⁰ Alexander Wendt, 'Collective Identity Formation and the International State', p.385.

supplanted the old heteronomous mode of unit differentiation.³¹ The latter is typified by Kratochwil's recent work on the more limited, if equally perplexing and contentious, question of why the Cold War stand-off between the superpowers came to such an abrupt conclusion, sparking, among other things, the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.³² Both authors focus on how domestic and international social phenomena interact to determine the rules that structure international orders, employing this fourth image constructivist perspective to explain both systems and systemic change.

Postmodernist constructivism has also taken two forms, though the distinction here is less one of analytical perspective than empirical focus. In general, postmodernist constructivists are concerned with excavating and interpreting the intersubjective meanings that comprise the institutional arrangements structuring international political life. Employing the genealogical method of Nietzsche and Foucault, they seek 'to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us'.³³ Most of this work addresses the foundational institutions of modern international society, especially the constitutive principle of sovereignty.³⁴ For instance, by systematically exploring historical cases of intervention, Weber asks how 'is the meaning of sovereignty fixed or stabilised historically via practices of international relations theorists and practices of political intervention?'³⁵ In addition to this work, several postmodern constructivists have turned their attention to the constitution of issue-specific international institutions. The objective here is to identify contending discourses and show how they change, to clarify major points of contention over standards of acceptable behaviour, and to ascertain those strategies that create, transform, or destroy the social relations that sustain a given regime discourse.³⁶ Price's work on chemical weapons is by far the best example of this work, providing the most persuasive explanation yet for how chemical weapons came to attract a

³¹ John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis', *World Politics* 35 (1992), pp.261–285; and Ruggie, 'Territoriality and Beyond'.

³² Kratochwil, 'The Embarrassment of Changes'; and Koslowski and Kratochwil, 'Understanding Change'.

³³ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.81.

³⁴ See Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty*; and Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*.

³⁵ Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty*, p.3.

³⁶ This broad research agenda is outlined by James F. Keeley in 'Toward a Foucauldian Analysis of International Regimes', *International Organization*, 44 (Winter 1990), pp–96–99.

degree of lasting moral opprobrium not attached to other equally horrendous weaponry.³⁷

Compromising critical theory?

The argument so far is that critical theory has entered a new phase, in which modernists and postmodernists alike have sought to elaborate and demonstrate their core ontological propositions through substantive analyses of world politics. In taking the constructivist turn, however, new generation critical theorists have exposed themselves to the charge that they have abandoned, or at least compromised, some of the most important epistemological, methodological, and normative precepts of Third Debate critical theory. This final section explores two potential tensions between critical theory of the 1980s and constructivism.

The first concerns the degree to which constructivists can be accused of flirting with—or wholeheartedly embracing—positivist epistemological and methodological standards and approaches. In offering their substantive analyses of world politics, constructivists have explicitly or implicitly accepted three general propositions: (a) that it is possible, and desirable, to make informed interpretations of aspects of world politics; (b) that some interpretations are more plausible than others; and (c) that the appropriate test of plausibility is the degree to which an interpretation faithfully represents the relevant discursive or material evidence. Given the minimal foundationalism of modernist Third Debate critical theory, it is not surprising that modernist constructivists have been forthright in their acceptance of such propositions.³⁸ What is surprising is that postmodernist constructivists have followed suit, pitting their interpretations against conventional accounts and appealing to the weight of available evidence. Price begins by highlighting the deficiencies of existing accounts of the chemical weapons taboo, and proceeds to provide his own ‘more plausible’ interpretation of the norm’s historical evolution.³⁹ Likewise, Weber seeks to demonstrate the poverty of conventional categorical understandings of sovereignty, and the superiority of her own dynamic conception, through a detailed historical analysis of interventionary state practices.⁴⁰

Does this interpretive stance make constructivists positivists, masked or otherwise? Yes, argues at least one prominent postmodernist of the Third Debate, certainly as far as modern constructivists are concerned. In his impressive ‘reintroduction’ to mainstream international theory, Jim George writes:

³⁷ Price, ‘A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo’. Price’s book on the same subject is forthcoming with Cornell University Press.

³⁸ See Ruggie, ‘Territoriality and Beyond’, pp.168–171; and Wendt, ‘Constructing International Politics’, p.75.

³⁹ Price, ‘A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo’.

⁴⁰ Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty*.

For all the saliency of Wendt's and Ruggie's criticisms of Waltz, there is in Wendt's structuration perspective and Ruggie's perspective, influenced by analytical philosophy themes, a continuing commitment to a unity-of-science thesis and the pursuit of a theory of international reality based on positivist basic assumptions. Their critical 'alternatives', in other words, reinforce the discursive power of the (modernist) orthodox consensus in International Relations and remain of limited value alleviating the 'poverty' of neo-Realism.⁴¹

While elements of Wendt's work may well be susceptible to such criticisms, they sit uneasily with both Ruggie's stated position and research, as well as those of other modern and postmodern constructivists. On more than one occasion, Ruggie has called for a post-positivist epistemological and methodological stance. In 'Territoriality and Beyond' he states:

[U]nderstanding that transformation [from the medieval system of rule to the modern]—and presumably any analogous shift that may be taking place today—requires an epistemological posture that is quite different from the imperious claims of most current bodies of international relations theory. It requires, as Quentin Skinner characterises it, 'a willingness to emphasize the local and contingent, a desire to underline the extent to which our own concepts and attitude have been shaped by particular historical circumstances, and a correspondingly strong dislike...of all overarching theories and singular schemes of explanation'.⁴²

The dissonance between this epistemological vision and the definition of positivism offered by George is striking:

From the nineteenth century on, it [positivism] has energized the more precise quest for a social theory purged of (traditional) metaphysics, from which analytical protocols might be gleaned and scientific, lawlike statements invoked about modern human life. This theme—the projection of reality in terms of a (rational) separation between that which is foundational, irreducible, and eternal and that which is prejudiced by history, culture, and language—remains at the ontological heart of modernist social theory and the dominant (Realist) Tradition and discipline of International Relations.⁴³

It would be difficult, I suggest, to find a single constructivist—modern or postmodern—who subscribes to such epistemological and methodological canons, either in spirit or in practice. Only by adopting an absurdly expansive conception of positivism, encompassing all empirically informed interpretation, could constructivists rightly be accused of embracing positivist principles.

⁴¹ George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, p.127.

⁴² Ruggie, 'Territoriality and Beyond', pp.169–170.

⁴³ George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, p.223.

The second potential tension concerns whether or not constructivists continue to uphold the strong normative commitments of Third Debate critical theory, particularly those advanced by Frankfurt School inspired theorists such as Linklater and Cox. ‘Critical theory’, Cox argues, ‘allows for a normative choice in favour of a social and political order different from the prevailing order, but it limits the range of choice to alternative orders which are feasible transformations of the existing world’.⁴⁴ Focusing on the extension of moral community, Linklater has disaggregated this general emancipatory project into three specific tasks: (a) the normative task of reconciling universalist ethics with particularistic obligations; (b) the sociological task of exploring the expansion and contraction of political community; and (c) the praxeological task of investigating how states and other actors can create new communities and identities.⁴⁵ Constructivists might rightly be accused of neglecting the first of these tasks—Linklater and others have clearly taken the lead in this respect. This does not mean, however, that constructivists have contributed nothing to the broader emancipatory project of critical theory. In fact, as far as the sociological and praxeological tasks are concerned, the most innovative and insightful research has come from constructivists. Their work on the parameters of systems and systemic change, their explorations into the fluidity of sovereignty, their explanations of the ideational foundations of basic institutional practices, their accounts of humanitarian norm formation, and so on, illuminate not only the dynamics of territorial and non-territorial community formation, but also the scope for reformist political action.

In sum, although constructivists have reoriented critical theory away from the epistemological, methodological, and normative critique of dominant rationalist theories of international relations, this move has not violated the broad intellectual commitments of Third Debate critical theory. The danger of such compromising is nevertheless real. Rationalism remains the dominant epistemological and methodological stance within international relations, and powerful incentives exist within the discipline to frame substantive analyses in choice-theoretic and positivist terms. Furthermore, once buried in the substantive analysis of international change, sovereignty, institutional construction, and norm formation, it is easy to lose sight of the critical and emancipatory purposes of such research. Two things are needed, I suggest, to preserve the critical integrity of constructivism. First, constructivists have to maintain a high degree of reflexivity, critically reflecting on the relationship between their current research and the epistemological and methodological precepts of the Third Debate. Second, they need to engage more consciously and systematically with those critical theorists who are presently

⁴⁴ Cox, ‘Social Forces’, p.210.

⁴⁵ Linklater, ‘The Question of the Next Stage’; and Linklater, ‘The Problem of Community’.

exploring the normative bases of non-exclusionary forms of political community. Both of these imperatives require Third Debate critical theorists to engage with constructivists, by entering into serious dialogue about the epistemological and methodological implications of the constructivist turn, and by using constructivist insights to inform normative theorising about political community. Hopefully, a high degree of reflexivity on the part of constructivists, and active engagement by Third Debate theorists, will not only avoid compromising critical theory, but greatly enhance its further development.

Concluding remarks

This paper has identified two phases in the evolution of critical international theory: the first focusing on the metatheoretical foundations of international relations theory, the second concentrating on the substantive analysis of world politics. This is not to suggest that critical theorists made no substantive analyses in the first phase, nor is it to argue that epistemological, methodological, and normative critique died with the end of the Cold War. Rather, I have tried to identify a general shift in the orientation of critical international theory, to provide some explanation for that shift, and to consider whether the constructivist turn violates any of the guiding epistemological, methodological, and normative precepts of critical theory.

Critical theory after the constructivist turn, I suggest, poses a far greater challenge to rationalist international theories than did critical theory of the Third Debate. First phase critical theorists certainly destabilised the conceptual and philosophical foundations of rationalism, but prior to the end of the Cold War, and before the constructivist turn, neorealists and neoliberals could appeal to the heuristic power of their theoretical assumptions, however barren and exclusive. Constructivism deprives them of this defence of last resort. The constructivist turn also opens up avenues for productive engagement between international relations theorists and the more empirically inclined. Because of its focus on the discourse of international theory, critical theory of the Third Debate did little to overcome the gulf between theorists and empiricists, and it may well have reinforced it. Constructivists, in contrast, depend on the knowledge provided by area specialists, foreign policy experts, and authorities on particular international issues and problems. It may also be the case that constructivism can provide a useful framework of analysis for such research. Finally, the constructivist turn challenges Australian and British international relations scholars to rethink the nature and contribution of American scholarship. Not only is the most creative constructivist work taking place in the United States, it is occurring in elite Ivy-League institutions and being published in premier journals. Rationalism may still be dominant, but critical theory is no longer in the margins.

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