Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and Neoliberal Institutionalism Compared

JENNIFER STERLING-FOLKER

University of Connecticut

This article compares constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism and argues that in their reification as paradigms in competition, the IO theoretical community is making far too much of what are relatively small differences between them in the metatheoretical scheme of things. These claims are substantiated by comparing functionalism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism. Such an examination reveals that they all depend on the same mechanism of functional institutional efficiency in order to account for social change. Thus when constructivism has been utilized as an explanation for change and transformation, it has tended to reach many of the same conclusions, and in the same manner, as other variants of liberal IR theory. In addition, this comparison reveals that, despite its assumption of exogenous interests, neoliberal institutionalism relies implicitly on an identity transformation in order to account for cooperation’s maintenance. Such a transformation is entirely consistent with constructivist expectations. The choice between neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism is not paradigmatic and is merely a choice between explaining short-term, behavioral cooperation in the moment or its development into communal cooperation in the future. The article concludes with some general observations regarding why this parallel has occurred and what its implications are for our understanding of IO.

Since the end of the Cold War the study of international organization (IO) has witnessed a renewed interest in subjects such as norms, ideas, learning, and identity-formation.¹ The accumulated study of these subjects has produced what one reviewer has called “the constructivist turn in IR theory” in which theorists open up “the black box of interest and identity formation,” and argue that “state interests emerge from and are endogenous to interaction with structures” (Checkel, 1998:326).² This constructivist turn has elicited a great deal of attention, and

¹ Several authors provide overviews of prior theorizing on each of these subjects. For learning see Levy, 1994:280, fn. 2; for ideas see Woods, 1995:163–66, and Jacobsen, 1995; for norms see Raymond, 1997:208–13, and Kowert and Legro, 1996; and for identity see Kratochwil and Lapid, 1996.

² Kowert and Legro also use the term “sociological turn” (1996:453). The works Checkel reviews include Finnemore, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996; and Klott, 1995. For other examples of constructivism see the works of Adler (1997); Deszler (1989); Carlsnaes (1992); Kubalkova, Onuf, and Kowert (1998); Kratochwil and Lapid (1996); Onuf (1989); Ruggie (1998); and Wendt (1987, 1992, 1994); as well as the works cited by Checkel in his footnote 28 and those cited by Hopf (1998).

its rise among the ranks of IR theories has been so rapid that it is now frequently assigned the paradigmatic space once reserved for Marxism.3 It is being touted as a new and potentially fruitful theoretical endeavor which offers a direct challenge to existing IR theories and even a “middle ground” between them (Adler, 1997; Checkel, 1998:327).4

This article will argue that neither claim is correct. Constructivism is not a new field of IR theoretical inquiry because it fails to offer a paradigmatic alternative to liberal IR theory and neoliberal institutionalism in particular. This failure can be traced largely to theoretical misapplication. When the goal is to explain social change, constructivists have generally not followed through on the historical indeterminacy implied by the approach itself. As March and Olsen point out, if “identities and competencies are shaped by political activities and interactions . . . arise partly in the context of politics and become embedded in rules, practices, beliefs, and institutions,” then “history is path-dependent in the sense that the character of current institutions depends not only on current conditions but also on the historical path of institutional development” (1998:959).5 Yet many constructivists have been unwilling to commit to this implied indeterminacy. When constructivism is utilized as an explanation for social change, there has instead been a noticeable proclivity to adopt the same functional-institutional causal logic present in almost all variants of liberal IR theorizing. Constructivism has tended to replicate liberal arguments, conclusions, and predictions about the future of international relations as a result.

This association is remarkable for a number of reasons. The first is that constructivism has several theoretical ancestries that are decidedly not liberal in their orientations. While its practitioners trace the origins of constructivism to a variety of sources, postmodernism (or what is commonly referred to as critical theory) is almost invariably on the list of theoretical antecedents.6 Clearly it would be incorrect to argue that the origins of constructivism may be found in liberal theory, since liberalism’s reification of modernity is precisely postmodernism’s intended target. Yet Hopf’s observation that there is a difference between “conventional constructivism” and critical theory is pertinent here (1998; see also Ruggie, 1998:35–36). As he notes, “although constructivism shares many of the

---

3 Lapid argues in a special 1989 issue of International Studies Quarterly that post-positivism should be “the third debate in the field of international relations” (1989:235). Along similar lines, Walt argues that realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism are the field’s three competing paradigms (1998), and Ruggie that it is because neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism may be lumped together on the basis of their shared rational choice methodology that an alternative perspective such as constructivism is so necessary (1998:4–11). For confirmation that this perspective on constructivism is now widely shared within the field, one need look no further than the 50th anniversary issue of International Organization, which uses the juxtaposition of rationalism and constructivism as its organizing theme (Katzenstein et al., 1998).

4 This is not to say that constructivism has not been without its critics. See, for example, works of Checkel (1998:338–47), Copeland (1998); Desch (1998); Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger (1997:190–92); Jervis (1998:976); Lapid (1989:248–49); and Mearsheimer (1994–95).

5 Or as Taylor notes, while there is some descriptive merit in the claim that action and structure are mutually constitutive, “as an approach to explaining social change it is useless,” because it “rules(s) out from the start the possibility of explaining change in terms of their interaction over time” (1989:149; emphasis in original). See also Kowert and Legro, 1996:488–90, and Hoffmann’s discussion of path-dependency and constructivism (1991:15–19).

6 The terms post-structuralism and post-positivism are frequently substituted, and contain a number of different epistemologies including Derrida’s deconstruction, semiotics, and feminist psychoanalytic theory. What these approaches have in common is a “dissatisfaction with what the constitution Enlightenment project has brought about” and an attempt to challenge “the intellectual suppositions upon which Western rationalism and positivism are based” (Gregory, quoted in Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989:xiv; see also Rosenau, 1990, and Smith, 1996. While both Desler and Wendt trace the origins of constructivism to work by Anthony Giddens on “structuration theory” (Desler, 1989:42; Wendt, 1987:356), Wendt later cited a number of other social theories as antecedents, including “cognitivist, poststructuralists, standpoint and postmodern feminists, rule theorists, and structurationists” (1992:593). Ruggie traces the “social constructivist project” to a different set of theorists including the English School, Durkheim, and Weber, but he also acknowledges Giddens and postmodernism as antecedents (1998:11; 28–32); see also Adler, 1997, and Rubalkova, Onuf, and Kowert, 1998.)
foundational elements of critical theory, it also resolves some issues by adopting defensible rules of thumb, or conventions, rather than following critical theory all the way up the postmodern critical path" (1998:181). Thus there is a split between critical IR theorists, such as Ashley and Der Derian, and constructivists, such as Wendt and Ruggie, regarding the application of postmodernism to IR.\(^7\)

The latter retain a shared "commitment to the idea of social science" while critical theory does not (Ruggie, 1998:36), which means that "to reach an intellectually satisfying point of closure, constructivism adopts positivist conventions" and that "where constructivism is most conventional is in the area of methodology and epistemology" (Hopf, 1998:183, 182).\(^8\)

The split between the two is even more fundamental, however, because one of the conventions many constructivists have tended to rely upon in order to explain social change in world politics is functional institutional efficiency. The result is that when it has been utilized as causal explanation, "conventional" constructivism has been far from agnostic about change in world politics. Because it adopts the same causal mechanism that neoliberal institutionalism does and neo-functionalism did before it, it reaches the same sorts of conclusions about social change. Yet many constructivists have insisted that neo-functionalism plays no role in their causal arguments, which is the second reason why the constructivist parallels with neo-functionalism are so remarkable.\(^9\) It is because constructivist explanations rely on a "logic of appropriateness" rather than a "logic of consequences" that they supposedly avoid the demand-driven trap that neo-functionalism and neoliberal institutionalism (as well as realism) fall into.\(^10\) However, despite intention (and perhaps unconsciously\(^11\)), a close comparison reveals strong parallels with prior liberal theorizing. And what this suggests, in turn, is that the foundational insights of postmodernism are being transposed into the field of IR in order to reify the project of modernity.\(^12\) Constructivism has indeed become "conventional" because its arguments have tended to be (neo-)functionalist in orientation and thus confirm liberal expectations about the future of the international system.

It is difficult, as a result, to sustain the claim that constructivism can provide a neutral alternative to both neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism for the...

---

\(^7\) Hopf lists as critical IR theorists Campbell, Walker, and Weber. Ruggie labels the former "post-modernist" constructivism (adding Peterson to the list), his own work (along with Haas, Kratochwil, Onuf, Adler, Finnemore, Katzenstein, and Eshstain) as "neo-classical" constructivism, and Wendt and Dessler "naturalistic" constructivism (1998:35-36).

\(^8\) Or as Checkel put this, because "constructivists do not reject science or causal explanations: their quarrel with mainstream theories is ontological, not epistemological" (1998:327). Of course the extent to which these conventions are "defensible" is highly questionable from a postmodern perspective. See, for example, Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989; Folker, 1996; Rosenau, 1990; and Smith, 1996. Ruggie does recognize and grapple with this issue to some extent (1998:38-39).

\(^9\) Ruggie claims, for example, that constructivism "has no direct antecedent in international relations theory," and although he acknowledges a personal theoretical debt to neo-functionalism, he also insists that his own collection of constructivist arguments effectively jettison its core assumptions (1998:11, 42, 46-47, 131). In a similar vein, Finnemore is careful in National Interests in International Society (1996) to differentiate her constructivist explanation for the diffusion of norms from a functionalist or demand-driven explanation. As she puts it, "in the cases I investigate, state officials were not responding to any pressing demands or obvious crises. They were not looking for a solution to a problem" (1996:12). On the other hand, some constructivists explicitly connect their work to neo-functionalism and liberal theory, for example, Wendt (1992:425; 1994); Dessler (1989:468-73); Zacher and Mathew (1995:156); and Cardnaes (1992:263).


\(^11\) Ruggie himself raises this issue when he notes: "It is true that neo-functionalism embodied many of the methodological and philosophical precepts that we now recognize to be social constructivism, but it did so largely unconsciously" (1998:11; my emphasis). Since Ruggie acknowledges having been schooled in neo-functionalism (1998:xii, 42), one might infer from his own statement that it continues to influence his arguments albeit unconsciously.

\(^12\) As one student of postmodernism in its literary context has put it, "I was charmed to discover that, to the extent that post-structural techniques had made their way into IR theory proper, they had been imported . . . to affirm something like the millennial end product of the liberal project" (Folker, 1996:12-13).
exploration of international political phenomena. Nor is it possible to sustain the asserted distinction between constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism which has been taken for granted by practitioners and critics alike. Constructivists have tended to reify this distinction by arguing that their primary target is “systemic rationalism” or “neo-utilitarianism” rather than realism. Yet in emphasizing their differences with neoliberal institutionalism, constructivists have made far too much of what are relatively small distinctions in the metatheoretical scheme of things. Not only do constructivists and neoliberal institutionalists rely on the same functional-institutional logic to explain social change, they actually share the same ontology so that neoliberal institutionalism is “rationalist” only to a point. Ultimately constructivism makes explicit an assumed but unexplored step in situational strategic liberal arguments which accounts for the maintenance of cooperation. Thus when the metatheoretical commitments made by constructivists and neoliberal institutionalists are closely compared, one discovers that the epistemological and ontological differences disappear, and they turn out to be complementary theories within the larger framework of liberal IR theory.

These arguments will be explored in the sections that follow. In order to establish the theoretical links between constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism, the argument proceeds on two separate although interrelated fronts. The first is to focus on constructivism and trace out its reliance on the same logic of functional institutional efficiency which serves as a mechanism to promote cooperative change in neo-functionalism and neoliberal institutionalism as well. The second front is to focus on neoliberal institutionalism in order to demonstrate that its theoretical differences with constructivism are not as definitive as the constructivist literature would lead one to believe. Presented in this manner, the arguments of this article could serve as a critique of neoliberal institutionalism, since they demonstrate that it fails to hold its own methodological choices constant by smuggling in an identity transformation consistent with constructivist expectations. The implications of this are left unexplored, however, since the article’s goal is to serve as a corrective to the flawed but increasingly accepted wisdom that constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism are paradigms in competition.

Interests and Identities in Functional, Neo-functional, and Neoliberal Institutional Theorizing

As theories of IR, functionalism and neo-functionalism developed after WWII in association with the study of the EU. One of the most influential scholars of functionalism was David Mitrany, who argued for the “functional selection and organization of international relations,” which meant “the binding together [of] those interests which are common” (1943:32). Functionalism further assumed that “following the selection of an area of common interest or concern comes the organization of the international will and effort” so that obtaining common interests served as the primary motivation for institutional creation and adaptation (Sewell, 1966:23). Thus the extent to which a set of institutions or social practices effectively obtained interests also determined the extent to which individuals and groups would find those institutions desirable.

There was, as Sewell observed, a clear “utilitarian strand woven into the functionalist conception of obligation,” yet much of the functionalist literature put this utilitarianism into the language of problem-solving (1966:50). Mitrany complained about a propensity during “periods of transition that reformers are more ready to fight over a theory than to pull together on a problem,” and captured the tone of the functionalist literature when he argued, “I do not represent a

theory. I represent an anxiety” (1948:350). The anxiety to which Mitranr referred, and the emphasis on problem-solving rather than interest fulfillment, was due to functionalism’s anti-statist orientations. Its proponents were firmly convinced that the nation-state was the problem that prevented common interests from being obtained effectively, and Mitranr characterized “the principle of state equality” as “that most disruptive and intractable of international principles” (1943:29).14

Implicit in much of the functionalist literature was the idea that the condition of interdependence was an environmental circumstance that demanded institutional innovation.15 The nation-state’s inability to obtain common interests in interdependent conditions manifested itself as problems, dysfunctions, or the incomplete satisfaction of interests, thus generating a demand for new institutional arrangements.16 And because common interests could not be obtained with the existing territorial divisions reified by national institutional structures, those institutions had to be transcended.17 Institutional form would instead follow function because “the organizational component of each functional unit is intimately related to the need which it is to satisfy” (Mitranr, 1943:35), and the new institutions would be “functionally efficient” because they matched a pre-given collective interest to demands for how to best obtain them in the interdependent, environmental context. The functional approach was hopeful rather than “debilitating” in this regard, because “the separation of functional needs into specific tasks and their reassignment to new structures will itself presumably ease the strain wrought by the present disparity” between “functional assignments and ‘outgrown administrative divisions and instruments’” (Sewell, 1966:33).

According to functionalism, then, institutions and social practices are ultimately selected by the environment on the basis of their ability to effectively obtain pre-given collective interests. Functionalism is, at its heart, a story about institutional evolutionary adaptation in which common interests, needs, or purposes are the motivation for institutional creation, but the institutional particulars are determined by environmental circumstances. Thus a functional account of the historical development of institutions necessarily involves an evaluation of institutions according to their efficiency at obtaining a given interest in the given circumstances, a point March and Olsen’s schematic of institutional histories underscores (1998:957).

Because, as Wendt notes, collective social practices “cannot change identities and interests if the latter are taken as given” (1992:393), a functional explanation for social change does not involve a story of interest formation. What functionalism is concerned with instead is institutional preference formation. Interests, such

---

14 See, for example, Mitranr’s introduction to his 4th edition (1946:9).

15 It remains unclear in this literature whether interdependence was a new phenomenon or had always existed and human beings were only just becoming cognizant of it. Reinsch provides a typical example in arguing that “recognizing interdependence with other civilized nations of the world” meant recognizing that “there is a broader life; there are broader interests and more far-reaching activities surrounding national life in which it must participate in order to develop to the full its own nature and satisfy completely its many needs” (1911:8, 4). Other early discussions of interdependence include Rappard (1927:818) and Bailey, who argued that “the modern state is brought into contact with other states in almost every aspect of its national existence,” and that “the strands of modern international relations spread to every nook and cranny of the government machine” (1938:279). I would like to thank Joe Grieco for calling my attention to the Bailey article.

16 According to Mitranr, “fidelity to outgrown administrative divisions and instruments” was “hamstringing the new goals” which “clamors for their being linked together in the most suitable practical way” (1945:10), and that while “we are favored by the need and habit of material cooperation, we are hampered by the general clinging to political segregation” (1948:351).

17 Hence the functional approach could move global affairs “beyond the nation-state” (Haas, 1964), because sovereignty’s “content and working . . . could be modified by . . . inconspicuous and partial transfers of authority to international functional organs” (Mitranr, 1943:29), and “the accumulation of such partial transfers in time brings about a translation of the true seat of authority” (Mitranr, 1946:9).
as the maximization of economic wealth or retention of political office, are differentiated from preferences as the particular policies and practices an actor might adopt in pursuit of those interests. One might argue that functionalism is interested in the “social construction” of preferences within a given set of collective interests and contextual circumstances, yet clearly functionalism is not “social constructivism” as the latter has been described by its proponents. It does not recognize “the fact that the specific identities of specific states shape their perceived interests and, thereby, patterns of international outcomes” (Ruggie, 1998:14), “that through interaction, states might form collective identities and interests” (Wendt, 1994:384), or that “interests are not just ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered; they are constructed through social interaction” (Finnemore, 1996:2). In fact, the relationship between social practices, identity, and interests is inverted. The functional creation and innovation of institutions depends on the extent to which a set of pre-given interests are obtained, and identity is not an antecedent to interests but is itself a result of functional institutional efficiency related to interest and environment. Individuals want to obtain the pre-given interests more than their identities are shaped by the social practices in which they have been engaged. Thus functionalism assumes that new identities will be supplied (or “socially constructed”) as circumstances warrant.

Small wonder, then, that functionalism assumed a relative ease in the ability “to breed a new conscience” in “non-political” tasks once the functional way revealed that it “would promise something for the purge of necessity” (Mitrany, 1943:40, 29).

By the early 1960s functionalism had spawned a neo-functionalist variant which recognized the difficulties in defining an interest as “non-political,” as well as the necessity for persuading “political actors in several distinct national settings . . . to shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new and larger center” (Haas, 1961:366–67). Yet even with its greater sensitivity to these issues, neo-functionalism continued to assume that once the cooperative regional effort began to reap greater benefits, loyalty to the regional institutions would gradually develop (Lindberg, 1963:6; see also Haas, 1958:16). The continued reliance on functional assumptions about interests, institutions, and identity led neo-functionalists to overestimate the degree to which elite identities and loyalties could be changed by strategic interaction. It assumed that the desire to maximize their assigned interest was what motivated elites, and so the transference of loyalty and identification in neo-functional theory was like the loyalty a consumer might give to the store with the most competitive rates on its charge card.  

19 Milner provides an example of this common distinction: “Interests are the stable foundation on which actors’ preferences over policy shift as their situation and the policy arena vary. Preferences are a variable; interests are not” (1997:15, fn. 4). Kratochwil and Ruggie point out that this separation is basic to what they refer to as “instrumentalism,” which presumes “that it is always possible to separate goals (presumably expressed in principles and norms) from means (presumably expressed in rules and procedures), and to order them in a superordinate-subordinate relationship” (Ruggie, 1998:99).

20 As Haas put it, integration was to be “conceived not as a condition but as a process” which “relies on the perception of interests . . . by the actors participating in the process” so that “interest will be redefined in terms of regional rather than a purely national orientation” (Haas, 1958). Loyalty-shifting and interest-redefinition would occur first among national elites who would find themselves “sucked in” to cooperative efforts and “would transfer their support and loyalties away from national authorities towards the Community institutions in return for the satisfaction of vital interests” (Webb, 1983:17–18).

21 Or as Webb put it, neo-functionalism continued to assume that “the staking of claims and demands in return for exchanges of political loyalties reinforced the authority of the system as a whole,” and it “regarded this pattern of political activity as directly transferable to an international setting” (1983:17). It never strayed far from Mitrany’s original assumption that “each of us . . . is in effect a collectivity of functional loyalties; so that to build up a world community, . . . is merely to extend and consolidate it also as between national sections and groups” (1959:647).
Because functionalist theorizing continued to engage in what Sewell noted was “soft-pedaling the human aspects involved” with social change (1966:38), it was hardly surprising that neo-functionalism failed to accurately describe or predict the process of cooperation in Europe.22 Not only did it become the subject of widespread criticism, its own proponents eventually suggested that the pursuit of other theoretical approaches might be more fruitful (Haas, 1975, 1976).23 And one of the best known revisions of neo-functionalism was what later became known as neoliberal institutionalism, which included the study of international regimes as well as the condition of interdependence upon which regime causality was explicitly premised.24 Although interdependence had already played a role in early functionalist theorizing, it did not attain theoretical prominence until after neo-functionalism had run into trouble and its first manifestations were the study of “transnational relations” (Keohane and Nye, 1971).25 Keohane and Nye later adopted the term “complex interdependence” and specifically acknowledged their “debt” to neo-functionalism (1989),26 as did Keohane (1984:7–9, 66–67), who helped add hegemonic decline to the roster of pertinent environmental circumstances.

What marked neoliberal institutionalism as a theoretical ancestor to Mitrany’s functionalism was its reliance on that same functional institutional logic. Neoliberal institutionalism assumed that while the major industrials shared a number of common interests, chief among them was the capitalist pursuit of profit and therefore the motivation to adopt whatever methods would most efficiently maximize it (Keohane, 1984:79, 209).27 Hence neoliberal institutionalism assumed, as with other functional variants before it, that institutional innovation was based on ability to effectively obtain given collective interests in given environmental circumstances, and that as circumstances changed, so too would institutions.

Neoliberal institutionalism was different, however, in its attempt to hold not only interests constant but identity transformation issues as well. Constructivists have tended to harp on the theory’s assumption of exogenous interests as its primary weakness.28 Wendt has even asserted that the “nascent sociology of international community” in neo-functional thought was somehow “lost in the economics of international cooperation developed by realists and rationalists” (1994:394). This is simply a misrepresentation of the historical theoretical record. While it was true that prior functional theorizing was not as careful (or self-conscious) about making its assumptions explicit (and often added to the confusion by referring to the re-definition of interests rather than preferences), exogenous interests had clearly been present in liberal functional theorizing all along.

And while neoliberal institutionalists were certainly more overt in their subscription to this assumption, this was only because they believed they could tap into a potential advantage of exogenous interests overlooked by prior functionalists. If interests were held constant and identity a function of interests, then

---

22 Even a cursory glance at the study of identity in psychology underscores how “soft-pedaled” it was, and reviews of this literature may be found in Bloom, 1990; Druckman, 1994; and Mercer, 1995.


24 Thus I have included under the neoliberal institutional rubric standard regime works (Krasner, 1983; Keohane, 1984) and interdependence works such as those by Keohane and Nye (1977); Rosecrance (1976); Hanrieder (1978); and Rosecrance (1986).

25 Transnational relations were argued to have grown since the nineteenth century, thus creating a new context in which “cooperative action is likely to create new international institutions to cope with increasing interdependence” (1971: 375, 395).

26 Keohane and Nye expressed their belief that “many of the insights from integration theory could be transferred to the growing and broader dimensions of international economic interdependence” (1989:247–48), and in this endeavor they were encouraged by Haas himself, who suggested that neo-functionalism be “both included in and subordinated to the study of changing patterns of interdependence” (1975:86).

27 See, for example, Keohane, 1984:24; 27; Keohane and Nye, 1977:40; and Rosecrance, 1986.

logically one could treat identity as constant as well. This avoided the “nascent sociology” ascribed to by neo-functionalists who, despite their greater attention to identity transformation issues, had never really considered the complexities involved. The adoption of exogenous interests was thus believed to be a real improvement at the time since, as Keohane noted, it avoided the impression that the theorist “must ‘smuggle in’ idealistic assumptions about motivations” (1984:67). By holding identity constant, neoliberal institutionalism could also reject neo-functional teleology which had envisioned a particular institutional end-point for the functional process. When, in the mid-1960s, the European nation-state reasserted itself again in the form of Charles de Gaulle, it was that teleological tendency that proved so visibly damaging to neo-functional theorizing.

Neoliberal institutionalism attempted to salvage the logic of functional institutional efficiency from the teleological orientations of its immediate ancestor by positing that environmental circumstances were constantly evolving. This meant that more diffuse institutional patterns and collective social practices could be explained with the same functional logic. And the beauty of it was that it allowed liberal scholars to work within the nation-state paradigm rather than opposed to it, thus side-stepping the issue of the nation-state’s continued viability which had posed such a problem for neo-functionalism. In this neoliberal institutionalism was rejecting the original “functionalist conception of ‘state’ as a static and uncreative entity” (Sewell, 1966:34), and arguing instead that state elites could be partners in a process that would not, at least in the short term, displace the nation-state but rather assist it in meeting its own interests.

Thus the nation-state was still the primary barrier to effectively obtaining collective interests in new environmental conditions, but neoliberal institutionalism now posited that its inhibiting effects were felt only at the level of strategic perceptions. Elites failed to recognize the ineffectiveness of the strategies they employed, because their strategic judgment was clouded by an unquestioned reliance on unilateralism held over from the days when the nation-state could obtain its interests autonomously. The offending perceptions were treated as by-products of behavior, rather than of identity or interest. And as with functionalism, neoliberal institutionalism derived a hopeful prescription from its analysis of these dysfunctions based on the nature of interdependence itself, which it argued would promote a process of simple learning among state elites about the greater efficacy of multilateralism instead. This was an interesting twist on functional logic, but ultimately a theoretically untenable one since neoliberal institutionalism retained functionalism’s anti-statist orientations (a point also observed by Little [1996:82]). Thus it continued to assume that the desire on the part of state elites to obtain a given collective interest could be causally privileged over the domestic social practices and institutions in which elites were already involved, which give their activity its meaning in the first place, and which, as Ruggie puts it, “specify what counts as that activity” (1998:22).

---

29 This was also implied by the distinction between “simple” and “complex” learning which neoliberals frequently utilized. See, for example, Nye, 1987:380; Keohane and Nye, 1989:34–36, 232–34, 240–41; and Keohane, 1984:97–101; see also Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rütteger, 1997:146; Jonsson, 1993:218; and Levy, 1994.


31 In this it may actually have been closer to Mitray’s original formulation than neo-functionalism. Each functional sector was to be organized “according to its nature, to the conditions under which it has to operate, and to the needs of the moment” (Mitray, 1943:34), and as a result the institutions were supposed to be “flexible emanations of the need in question, integrally and uniquely related to the status of that need over time” (Sewell, 1966:10; see also p. 68). Thus Mitray entertained the idea that some interests might indeed be best obtained via local and national functional organizations, while others could prove to demand regional, intra-regional, and global organization.

Functional Institutional Efficiency in Constructivist Arguments

Given that constructivism could not appear to be more different theoretically, how is it possible to assert that the same functional logic that binds neoliberal institutionalism to prior functional theorizing is present in constructivist theorizing as well? Most constructivists recognize that the two are inherently incompatible and are therefore careful to distance their accounts from functionalism. Ruggie argues, for example, that in an effort to examine more diffuse patterns of “institutionalization,” rather than the expectationally limiting outcome of “integration,” he “jettisoned the neofunctionalist expectation that political community among states necessarily implied organization above states, as well as the assumption that functional contexts possess inherent logics which affect that outcome” (1998:42). Similarly, Finnemore and Sikkink argue that constructivists can avoid being labeled functionalists when they reject “arguments about the intrinsic characteristics of the issue” and emphasize institutional contradictions “as a barrier to any sort of teleological argument about their effects” (1998:908).

Yet these caveats reflect a basic misunderstanding over what constitutes a neo-functional argument and what makes an argument necessarily functional in the first place. As neoliberal institutionalism demonstrates, it is quite possible to separate a functional-institutional logic from teleology if one assumes that environmental circumstances are evolving as well.35 It is the coupling of pre-given collective interests with external circumstances that distinguishes a functionalist account of institutional innovation and change, because the combination leads almost inevitably to an argument that the function of institutions and social practices is to efficiently achieve particular goals for a collective within the larger context. Any argument that adopts this basic formula, even if careful to avoid pre-specified institutional end-points, is going to produce a story about institutional selection based on “functional institutional efficiency.” It is going to end up positing, as March and Olsen observe, that the “rules, norms, identities, organizational forms, and institutions that exist are the inexorable products of an efficient history,” and that “surviving institutions are seen as uniquely fit to the environment, thus predictable from that environment” (1998:958). And in this regard March and Olsen are certainly correct to use the label “functional institutionalism” to characterize constructivist arguments (1998:958).34

This is because in each of the constructivist accounts that will be reviewed here some sort of collective interest is assumed as pre-given and hence exogenous to social interaction. Alternative terms are utilized to describe the pre-given collective interest, and they also take a variety of forms. According to Wendt, for example, “corporate needs” or “appetites” include traditional concerns with “physical security” and “aspirations for a better life,” as well as with “stable social identities,” and “recognition as an actor by others” (1994:389, 385). In some of Ruggie’s work the interest is described as a “social purpose” or “task” and it involves “international production” or “free trade” (1998:64, 48, 66). But elsewhere it is a “problem” or need to “deal with those dimensions of collective existence that [are] irrediculously transterritorial in character” such as “generic forms of international ‘collective action problems’” (1998:118–19, 189, 190–91, 266). Alternatively, Finnemore refers to “duty” or “obligation,” and her pre-given collective interest involves the need simply “to be appropriate” to the social practices in which others are engaged (1996:29; see also Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:901–3).

35 As Scruton notes, “functional explanation has sometimes been thought to be a kind of teleological explanation, but this seems wrong,” because a teleological explanation is “any explanation of some event or process in terms of its end rather than its origins” while “a function is not a condition which necessarily postdates the occurrence of what it explains” (1982:499; see also Nagel, 1961).

34 Along similar lines, Zacher and Matthew’s review of the strands of liberal IR theory includes constructivism as an example of “institutional liberalism,” along with Mitrany and Haas (Zacher and Matthew, 1995:133–37).
Yet despite the difference in terminology, and at least in some cases the untraditional content of these collective interests, in each account they lie outside or beyond social interaction to change. They are then coupled with an examination of shifting environmental circumstances and within the analysis serve as the means by which actors can recognize absent interests (and dysfunctions) that are not being effectively obtained with existing social practices and institutions. It is because these collective interests are exogenous that actors willingly accept innovation in their social practices and institutions. And in each case the type of story produced about those innovations involves how institutional preferences, but not interests, have been socially constructed. In other words, each of the constructivist examples scrutinized here adopts the same explanatory formula that can be found in functionalism, neo-functionalism, and neoliberal institutionalism.

Wendt’s “pre-theory” of collective identity formation and the international state is a case in point (1994). His corporate appetites “provide motivational energy for engaging in action at all and, to that extent, are prior to interaction, but they do not entail self-interest in my sense, which is an inherently social phenomenon” (1994:385; my emphasis).35 When he does later refer to “self-interest,” what he really means are institutional preferences (and the identities associated with them) for “how a state satisfies its corporate interests,” which, he argues, “depends on how it defines the self in relation to the other, which is a function of social identities” (1994:385; my emphasis).

When Wendt then turns to the possible formation of collective identities, the desire to obtain pre-given corporate interests is the reason why actors accept change in their existing identities, while environmental circumstances determine the extent to which and in what way identity innovation will evolve. Given his frank enthusiasm for prior integration theory, it should come as little surprise that “rising interdependence” is the first of two systemic processes with “direct causal impacts”:

As the ability to meet corporate needs unilaterally declines, so does the incentive to hang onto the egoistic identities that generate such politics, and as the degree of common fate increases, so does the incentive to identify with others. As interdependence rises, in other words, so will the potential for endogenous transformations of identity. (1994:389; my emphasis)

Similarly the “transnational convergence of domestic values,” by which Wendt means capitalism and democracy, increases the likelihood that collective identities and institutions might be formed, because, “as heterogeneity decreases, so does the rationale for identities that assume that they are fundamentally different from us” (1994:390; my emphasis). In both instances Wendt adopts the same assumptions about institutions and identities that functionalism and neo-functionalism had relied upon as well. Identity is a function of whichever institution and set of social practices best obtains a set of exogenous interests in the given systemic circumstances.37 Given the structure of this argument, it is impos-

---

35 His own distinction in another context, that “social life is ‘ideas all the way down’ (until you get to biology and natural resources),” suggests that corporate interests might be biological rather than social (Wendt, 1995:74).

36 As for other causes, structural contexts “merely inhibit or facilitate,” and it is only after the necessary systemic processes have had their effects on corporate needs that strategic interaction then acts as a “sufficient cause” (Wendt, 1994:389–90).

37 Wendt’s treatment of the international state is just as fascinating since he replicates (almost verbatim) Mitrany’s original formulation of functionalism. Because, as Mitrany had put it earlier, “we cannot have a world government before we build a world community” (1948:84), Wendt argues that “collective identity formation is an essential aspect of … a process” involving the “structural transformation of the Westphalian states system” (1994:392). Creation of an international state requires an “identification with respect to some state function” so that “state actors would regard it as normal or routine that certain problems will be handled on an international basis,” which would “relocate individual state actors’ de facto sovereignty to transnational authorities” (1994:392–93).
sible to avoid the conclusion that in attempting to “build a bridge” between integration theory and constructivism (1994:385), Wænt has simply rediscovered functionalism and abandoned constructivism in the process.

In several instances Ruggie also adopts pre-given interests for the sake of analysis and, because he then matches them to shifting environmental circumstances in order to explain social change, his conclusions ultimately depend on the same functional institutional logic. His claims regarding “embedded liberalism,” for example, are premised on the decidedly non-constructivist assumption that “as long as purpose is held constant, there is no reason to suppose that the normative structure of regimes must change as well” (1998:65). The “legitimate social purpose” to which he refers is “free trade” (1998:65–66), which implies the maximization of capitalist profit as an ongoing collective interest. From this Ruggie produces a story about how profit has been pursued, that is, he documents how institutional preferences evolved given the pre-given collective interest and shifting environmental circumstances. Ruggie’s conclusions that “in most cases the new instruments are not inimical to the norms of the regimes but represent adaptations to new circumstances” are hardly unexpected in this regard (1998:83).38

Elsewhere Ruggie speaks in terms of “problems” rather than “social purposes,” which is, of course, highly reminiscent of Mitrany’s own language derived from functionalism’s inherently anti-statist orientations. “Territoriality at Millennium’s End” traces out the origins of “territorial rule” as the “chief characteristic of the modern system” (1998:180). When turning to the subject of its transformation, Ruggie connects the subject to the issue of problem-solving: “having established territorially fixed state formations . . . what means were left to the new territorial rulers for dealing with problems of that society that could not be reduced to territorial solution?” (1998:189). He refers to these problems later as “the social defects” that inhere in the modern construct of territoriality, and defines them “as generic forms of international ‘collective action problems’” (1998:195, 266). A number of examples are provided and discussed more extensively in “Multilateralism at Century’s End” (1998:114), and must represent exogenous collective interests because Ruggie’s premise is that nation-states proved unable to effectively obtain them as circumstances changed and so more appropriate institutions were supplied.39

On this same basis Ruggie goes on to argue that the “exploration of contemporary international transformation” and “the place wherein any rearticulation of international political space would be occurring today” is in the “negation of the exclusive territorial form” and in “the terrain of unbundled territoriality” (1998:195). He has in mind a particular set of institutions that reflect this unbundling, including “regimes, common markets, political communities and the like,” which were developed to resolve collective problems and hence obtain collective interests the nation-state could not:

In sum, nonterritorial functional space is the place in which territorial rulers situate and deal with those dimensions of collective existence that they recognize to be irreducibly transterritorial in character. It is here that international society is anchored, and in which its patterns of evolution may be traced. (1998:191)

38 The functional logic is most obvious in Ruggie’s discussion of the “collective response” to the demise of Bretton Woods which, he argues, “reflects an even greater affinity with the expectations of original regime design than did the arrangements that held in the interval” (1998:84). In other words, nation-states developed a floating exchange rate system because it was actually more efficient in post-hegemonic circumstances than was the original Bretton Woods system (1998:81).

39 The examples include use of common spaces such as oceans and waterways, the maintenance of communication lines, and the maximization of profit. He argues, for example, that “with the intensification of trade,” the original territorially defined communication links led to “costs in profits lost, opportunities foregone, and administrative resources expended,” and produced a situation in which “the incentives are high for states to organize their relations on the basis of generalized principles of conduct” (1998:114–15).
In other words, the nation-state’s inability to meet a set of nonterritorial collective interests in shifting circumstances continues to manifest itself as dysfunctions which then generate a demand for new institutional arrangements. In this way the nation-state might be “unbundled” (or as [neo-] functionalists would have phrased it, “transcended”) because it remains inherently incapable of obtaining these interests. This may be a legitimate conclusion to reach if one is using a functional logic, but it is certainly not constructivism as Ruggie himself has described it.

A functional logic can also be found in Finnemore who posits that actors internalize new social practices “not out of conscious choice, but because they understand these behaviors to be appropriate” (1996:29). It is “a new understanding of necessary and appropriate state behavior” that is “the driving force behind adoption of . . . innovation” (1996:65). Ultimately nation-states want to be like other nation-states, a point Finnemore and Sikkink underscore when they utilize the term “peer pressure” as a covering explanation for the acceptance of new norms (1998:903). Because the nation-state’s identity is shaped “by the cultural-institutional context within which states act,” they argue that all nation-states share a collective desire to be appropriate to that context (1998:902). And because the pre-given collective interest is the need to institutionally conform to what other nation-states believe to be important, the shifting circumstances which will demand institutional innovation to obtain this interest necessarily involve the extent to which “enough critical states endorse the new norm” (1998:902). Whether or not the nation-state will actually internalize the new norm also depends upon ongoing interaction across nation-states which encourages “iterated behavior and habit” (1998:905).

Such an argument clearly depends upon a logic of functional institutional efficiency. The pre-given collective interest in “being appropriate” ensures that institutional innovation across nation-states will be virtually automatic as the definition of what constitutes “being appropriate” changes. That is, the new social practices will be adopted because those practices are more efficient at obtaining this exogenous collective interest in the new circumstances. The entire argument rests upon basic functional assumptions that “man’s behavior is best understood as the overt manifestation of a configuration of internalized norms,” that “man’s obedience to [the state] rests upon a foundation of habit,” and that the “transplantation of man’s obedience (w)as a matter of planned re-habitation” to new norms (Sewell, 1966:48–49).

In producing functionalist arguments, the most basic tenets of constructivism are violated. Despite repeated assertions that constructivism is about identity and interest formation, none of the constructivist examples scrutinized here are actually about interest formation. In each case an exogenous interest is posited and what follows is a story about the social construction of institutional preferences derived from a functional-institutional logic. This necessarily leads constructivist accounts onto the same post hoc explanatory and predictive track as functionalism.40 Institutions and social practices exist because they fulfill a particular collective need, ergo those that exist must fulfill the need or will be changed accordingly. For such a formula to work, the institutions and practices that already exist and that do not fulfill a transnational collective need must be treated as if they had less causal weight. Institutional innovation occurs because actors want to obtain the pre-given collective interests more than their identities, interests, or preferences are shaped and constrained by the nonsystemic collective social practices in which they have been engaged.

---

40 That is, a functional explanation “enfolds everything in a vague formula: need, functional response, modified need, functionally modified response. We see an agency and assume, in post hoc fashion, a prior or concurrent need; we sense a need and presume an agency or a structural extension will be along shortly” (Sewell, 1966:249–50).
The result is that domestic social practices and institutions are either bracketed in constructivist arguments, or they are pertinent only in the initial stage of institutional preference innovation. This bracketing is, as Checkel observes, “odd, since it is the constructivists, with their attention to practice and interaction, who should be keying upon process and mechanisms” (1998:332). It becomes less odd, however, in light of the functional rather than constructivist logic upon which these constructivist arguments rely. It is because the nation-state and its associated institutions remain the antithesis of the collective that domestic institutions must be treated as less causal if the pre-given collective interests are to be obtained, the appropriate institutions prevail, and social transformation occur. It is no accident that theories of functional institutional efficiency have routinely been advised to pay greater attention to domestic variables, and that after examining several constructivist arguments, Checkel has to offer constructivism similar advice (1998). Yet the problem of inclusion is an intractable one. Any theory that begins with an inherent bias against the potential causality of domestic political institutions and social practices cannot then include their causality in any neutral fashion thereafter.

There is in addition the violation of constructivist tenets about identity itself in each of the constructivist accounts of social change examined here. Far from being created and instantiated through a process of social interaction, identity follows from the combination of exogenous interest and circumstances and so remains a component of the social construction of institutional preferences. Thus the same (neo-)functional perspective on identity transformation is replicated. While identity may indeed serve as an initial barrier to the recognition of more efficacious institutions, the causal prioritization of interests means that the transference of identities and loyalties to those alternative institutions is (despite protestations to the contrary in the literature) theoretically overdetermined.

Because functionalism, neo-functionalism, neoliberal institutionalism, and now constructivism all adopt the same liberal functional-institutional logic, each produces a similar story about how institutional preferences evolve over time. They also reach relatively similar conclusions about which institutions will be created. All of them argue that in current systemic conditions, multilateralism is functionally more efficient in obtaining collective interests than is unilateralism. While functionalism had been relatively more sanguine about this process, the other three recognize that the primary stumbling block to international cooperation lies in the realm of cognition and perception. Thus each posits that the reason cooperation has not been automatic, despite its obvious efficiencies to the practitioners of each of these theories, is because the pertinent state actors have failed to perceive the new systemic conditions in which they operate and cooperation’s greater efficiency in its context.

As a result, all three theories posit that changing perceptions and beliefs will make cooperation more likely and that interaction is part of the formula that will do so. For neo-functionalism the cognitive problem is existing elite loyalties to national institutions which can be overcome or shifted if regional cooperation begins to reap benefits. For neoliberal institutionalism, the problem is that the strategic judgment of elites is clouded by an unquestioned reliance on unilateralism, but greater contact and informational exchanges have the capacity to

---

41 Bracketing occurs in Wendt, 1994:388, and Finnemore, 1996:3, 65–66, while initial stage use occurs in Ruggie, 1998:72, 126–27, and Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:896–99. Finnemore and Sikkink even go so far as to argue that “a government’s domestic basis for legitimation and consent and thus its ability to stay in power” derives from a domestic desire to be internationally legitimate, thus implying that domestic governance structures have no independent causal weight of their own, absent their relation to collective systemic interests (1998:905).

42 Sometimes even by their own practitioners, for example, Keohane and Nye (1989:266; see also Hoffmann, 1995:239; Haggard and Simmons, 1987:513–14; Gourevitch, 1996:371–72; and cites by Hopf [1998:194, fn. 78]).
reveal multilateralism’s greater efficiency. For constructivism the problem is existing national identities, and the solution is not only the greater efficacy of collective identities but also successive acts of cooperation and engagement in discursive rhetoric which equate national-self and collective-self as synonymous (Wendt, 1994:390–91).

Because neoliberal institutionalism parts methodological company with the other two in its attempts to hold identity constant, its claims appear to be relatively modest in comparison. It is concerned only with what Wendt refers to as “behavioral cooperation” (1994:384) and not the development of international community or collective identities. Yet their reliance on the same functional-institutional logic makes constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism more similar than not. While they may differ in their ambitions, they do not differ in how they account for change in the international system, or in the notion that it is still possible to sneak up on and transcend the nation-state with the “functional approach.”

Identity Transformation in Neoliberal Institutionalism

Their common process-based ontology is another way in which constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism are similar. Here the focus is not on constructivism per se but on how neoliberal institutionalism explains international cooperation. Ruggie and Kratochwil have observed that in regime analysis its “epistemology contradicts ontology” (Ruggie, 1998:95). Constructivists take this as a point of departure to argue for the re-introduction of interaction and identity transformation into the theoretical mix. Yet contrary to both constructivist and neoliberal assertions, a closer examination of neoliberal institutionalism reveals that it does not actually exclude the possibility of collective identity transformation from its analysis. In fact, it concurs with constructivism that identity can be transformed through interaction and that collective identities will form around the norm of cooperation itself. Thus Ruggie and Kratochwil are correct only to a point because, at some unspecified link in the neoliberal causal chain, the contradiction between epistemology and ontology is resolved in favor of ontology.

What is meant by a process-based ontology is the meta-theoretical commitment to human interaction as the sole component to social reality. All liberal IR theory, whether it is (neo-)functionalism, constructivism, or neoliberal institutionalism, makes this commitment. The terms “institution,” “structure,” and “process” are frequently used interchangeably in the liberal literature to denote the “particular human-constructed arrangement(s)” that “involve persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations” (Keohane, 1989:162–63, 1990:175). Processes are the collective practices, both formal-material and ideational, that human beings create and practice in order to interact with one another and achieve particular goals (Keohane, 1989:10, 1990:175).

A process-based ontology allows for the possibility that changes in the nature of interaction can also change identity, interests, and hence behavior. It directs the scholar’s “attention to the institutions and patterns of interaction created by human beings that help to shape perceptions and expectation, and therefore alter the patterns of behavior that take place within a given structure” (Keohane, 1990:175). It is on this point that constructivists have taken neoliberals to task, since exogenous interests exclude not simply the necessity of identity transforma-

---

44 This may be compared to the environmentally based ontology of realism which treats anarchy as a physical reality separate from yet affecting social reality (Mearsheimer, 1994–95:41; Sterling-Folker, 1997; Frankel, 1996:xiii).
tion in order for cooperation to occur, but also its possibility, at least in the short term. As Wendt puts it:

Interests are formed outside the interaction context, and then the latter is treated as though it only affected behavior. This can be merely a methodological presumption, but given its pervasiveness in the current debate it may also be seen as an implicit hypothesis about world politics: systemic interaction does not transform state interests. (1994:384; see also Adler, 1997; Ruggie, 1998)

One of constructivism’s contributions to IR theoretical debates has been to highlight the inherent tension between a process-based ontology and the assumption of exogenous interests which lie beyond the scope of social interaction to effect.

Yet despite its epistemological commitments, neoliberal institutionalism ascribes to the same process-based ontology as well. The self-interested actor’s freedom of choice is always initially embedded in a set of larger social practices, which typically include capitalist-market economics and the shared norms and institutions that are associated with it. Keohane and Nye’s argument, for example, “that a set of networks, norms, and institutions, once established, will be difficult either to eradicate or drastically to rearrange” is premised on the assumption that existing social structures do have an impact on individual choice (1989:55). This impact is also implied by the definition of regimes most commonly employed in the neoliberal institutional literature. Actor expectations in a given issue-area converge around principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures which have relevance because they are the social practices in which elites are already engaged when the regime analysis begins (Krasner, 1983). Thus neoliberal institutionalism already recognizes what Wendt labels the “fundamental principle of constructivist social theory . . . that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them” and that “it is collective meanings that constitute the structures which organize our actions” (1992:396–97).

The agency-structure balance does appear to be askew in neoliberal institutionalism, since it initially holds embedded practices and their transformative capacities constant in its argument while privileging agency in the moment. Yet ultimately the theory allows social interaction to have transformative effects on interests and identity, because successive acts of cooperation actually have the potential to affect intersubjective meanings. The theory only holds interests constant in order to explain why cooperation is initially chosen. It assumes that state elites are motivated to cooperate in conditions of interdependence and declining hegemony because doing so allows them to maximize capitalist profit more efficiently than unilateral strategies. Thus states are motivated by the discovery not only that “independent self-interested behavior can result in undesirable or suboptimal outcomes,” but also that joint decision-making does produce “the optimal nonequilibrium outcome” (Stein, 1983:120, 139). States are willing to develop regimes and adjust their behavior accordingly because they come to recognize that regimes “can correct institutional defects in world politics” and

45 See also Keohane, 1984:56, 1993:289.
46 As Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger put it, “while it appears to be accepted that states are ultimately constituted by the fundamental norms and rules of an international society . . . socialization sets states free to engage in rational behavior when it comes to solving collective action problems. As long as the deep normative structures of an international society remain unchanged they will not have any further impact on particular choices” (1997:161). In yet another theoretical parallel, critics have noted that this same sequential causal ordering can be observed in constructivist arguments as well (Kowert and Legro, 1996:457, fn. 11, 469; Checkel, 1998:332, 335).
“may become efficient devices for the achievement of state purposes” (Keohane, 1983:154).

However, in order to explain why cooperation is maintained, which has been the primary subject of interest to most regime theorists, it actually stops holding interests constant and allows cooperative interaction to affect identity. Because regimes are themselves social institutions, Keohane and Nye argue that “in the long run, one may even see changes in how governments define their own self-interest in directions that conform to the rules of the regimes” (1989:259; see also pp. 54–56). More specifically, “the principles and norms of regimes may be internalized by important groups and thus become part of the belief systems which filter information” as well as “alters the way key participants in the state see cause-and effect relationships” (1989:266). Along similar lines, Keohane asserts it is a “fact that people adapt their strategies to reality,” and that “adaptive strategies of institution-building can also change reality, thereby fostering mutually beneficial cooperation” (1984:30). In other words, once cooperation is associated with efficient interest maximization, the incentive to continue cooperating is reinforced, and iterated cooperative acts produce a progressively expanding commitment to the cooperative effort. This means that long-term participation in regimes has the potential to induce more than simple learning involving perceptual changes about strategic behavior. Iterated acts of cooperation can lead to an internalized commitment to the social practice of cooperation itself.

Indeed, this is precisely Keohane’s argument in After Hegemony (1984). The value of existing regimes lies not in their efficiency but in the difficulties of having obtained some level of multilateralism to begin with. Thus “international regimes embody sunk costs, and we can understand why they persist even when all members would prefer somewhat different mixtures of principles, rules, and institutions” (1984:102; see also pp. 210, 215, and 254). As a result, regimes can “make a difference to actors’ beliefs by helping to ‘lock in’ and to further develop the learning that had prompted their creation” (Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger, 1997:147–48). Successive acts of cooperation create what both Krasner (1983:361–62) and Jervis (1991:92:51) have called a reinforcing “feedback” loop which is inexplicable if the specified exogenous interests were actually being held constant.

In arguing that elites commit to the practice of cooperation in this way, neoliberal institutionalism strays from its own attempt to hold identity constant. Elites were assumed to commit to cooperation on the basis of its ability to efficiently maximize their utility function within a given systemic context. At some point in time, however, it appears that continued interaction has the capacity to induce a commitment to multilateralism in whatever form it has taken and regardless of its efficiency. Economic elites continue to commit to the multilateral practices not because they believe they are the most efficient means for maximizing economic interests, but because the practices are themselves affecting how elites define efficiency. An identity and interest transformation is being implicitly assumed here, and it is occurring as a direct result of interaction among state elites.

Thus neoliberal institutionalism actively implies a possibility that, according to Wendt, is consistent with a constructivist explanation for cooperation:

Even if not intended as such . . . the process by which egoists learn to cooperate is at the same time a process of reconstructing their interests in terms of shared

---

47 See also Keohane, 1984:10–11, 49–50; and Bergsten and Henning, 1996:144.
48 Stein also argues that “regimes actually change actor preferences,” because actors develop vested interests in them and so “their very existence changes actors’ incentives and opportunities.” As a result, actors “who previously agreed to bind themselves out of self-interest may come to accept joint interests as an imperative” (1983:138–39).
commitments to social norms. Over time, this will tend to transform a positive interdependence of outcomes into a positive interdependence of utilities or collective interest organized around the norms in question. (1992:417; see also Hopf, 1998:191)

As a social practice in its own right, cooperation begins to re-shape intersubjective meanings and hence re-constitutes elite identities and interests according to cooperative norms. There is no practical difference between neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism as a result, because in order to explain why cooperation is maintained, neoliberal institutionalism simply drops its initial commitment to exogenous interests and identity in favor of its ontology.

While one could quarrel with the way in which neoliberal institutionalism chronologically arranges the agent-structure relationship, the theory cannot be faulted for ignoring the preconditioning relevance of social institutions to agents. It is for this reason that the constructivist critique of neoliberal institutionalism, as well as its insistence that it offers a fundamentally different perspective on international affairs, misses the mark. Because they share a process-based ontology, neoliberal institutionalism ultimately concurs with constructivism that social practice has the capacity to transform identities and interests. The theory can, of course, be faulted for having muddied its own methodological waters and for claiming that it holds self-interests constant when clearly it does not. But choosing between neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism amounts to explaining short-term, behavioral cooperation in the moment or its development into communal cooperation and systemic transformation in the future. The choice depends not on paradigmatic differences, but upon the theorist’s own ambitions in delineating the time-frame of the cooperative phenomenon under scrutiny.

Why Have Birds of a Feather Flocked Together and Why Does It Matter?

If constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism do not offer competing paradigmatic choices, why has constructivism become the “third debate” on the research agenda of American IO theorists? Although such a question should be subject to more systematic scrutiny, here I can only offer ad hoc, subjective observations informed by work on prior “great debates” in the field.49 One of the obvious patterns in these prior debates is the extent to which the rise and fall of theoretical alternatives is events-driven. As Kahler observes, “some theories have been buried and others privileged, not by careful tests internal to the discipline but by apparent anomalies thrown up by recent history” (1997:42; see also Waever, 1998:691). This pattern tends to give the field what Kahler calls “a peculiar volatile quality” (1997:42) or what Rochester observes is a “faddish” appearance in its “lurch from one research agenda to another in response to the ebb and flow of current events” (1986:803). And in this context, the end of the Cold War, as Waever puts it succinctly, “reads time to leave neorealism” (1998:691–92).

Yet while empirical events may have provided a necessary or permissive opening for the development of alternative theories, it does not explain why it is constructivism that has been the post–Cold War’s chief beneficiary of the IR theoretical tendency to lurch with international affairs. Why not an alternative informed by biopolitics, as Somit and Peterson have called for (1999), or a world system history approach as described by Denemark (1999)? Why was it constructivism, which at least as its practitioners have tended to use it amounts to yet another variant of liberal functional IR theory, that filled the theoretical void? One possibility is that it was a matter of chance and that the tendency to rely on

49 For example, those of Kahler (1997); Hoffmann (1995); Jervis (1998); Schmidt (1998); Alker and Biersteker (1995); Rochester (1986); Strange (1983); and Waever (1998).
functional logic in order to operationalize constructivism is accidental. It seems almost inevitable that postmodern insights developed earlier in the humanities would eventually find their way into IR theorizing proper, and the end of the Cold War served as the triggering event in that regard.

But applying postmodernism is tricky business, since it demands that a daunting theoretical balance be struck between agent and structure that recognizes their “codetermined irreducibility” (Wendt and Duvall, 1989:59). This creates what Hoffmann has referred to as “an apparent analytical nightmare,” since it means that “neither agents nor structures have ontological priority” (1999:5). Constructivists have remained optimistic that this nightmare can be addressed without abandoning the social-scientific project altogether and so have relied upon conventions such as pre-given interests and functional-institutional logic. But the optimism is purchased at too high a price since these conventions are ultimately antithetical to the entire enterprise. This may be underscored by noting just how far afield from postmodernism the adoption of such conventions takes constructivism.

Because postmodernism eschews the prioritization of one discourse over another, Biersteker voices a common concern that its application of relativism to IR will “not offer us any clear criteria for choosing among the multiple and competing explanations it produces” (1989:265). Constructivism does not have this problem, as it turns out, because it does adopt a criterion that is derived from existing liberal IR theories. What is produced out of this bizarre amalgamation is the argument that there is “in the post-structural critique of essentialist identity a valuable opportunity, an unproblematic empty space in which a peace-loving humanity can be erected” (Folker, 1996:13). The systemic space beyond existing national identities can apparently be filled with a more rational discourse based on collective problems as they exist “out there” rather than as they exist “in here” where our identities actually originate. Thus constructivists have taken postmodernism to mean that there is a space empty of realist self-help thinking in which a liberal world polity may finally triumph over the nation-state. That postmodernists would recoil from such an argument is obvious.

This suggests, in turn, that an alternative possibility for the rapid rise of constructivism and its relation to liberal functionalism is that it was not accidental at all, but instead an inevitable outcome of the nature of post–Cold War events and the dominance of liberal theorizing in the field of American IR. Prior decades provided a mixed empirical record in which neither realism nor liberalism could declare complete victory. The post–Cold War period differs in that no empirical event has occurred yet to contradict Jervis’ claim regarding the

50 Dessler provides an insightful discussion of the difficulties in developing theory that successfully meets both demands (1989:43). Kratoschhel and Ruggie also discuss a number of epistemological options and ultimately recommend that one adopt interpretive epistemological methods, such as privileging consensual knowledge or the shifting intersubjective frameworks of human discourse and practice (Ruggie, 1998:96). Yet these methods are drawn from critical theory in the humanities, and much could be said about the potential pitfalls of utilizing its methods in the field of IR. See, for example, works by Rosenau (1990); Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger (1997); Lapid (1989); and Biersteker (1989). One of the most glaring difficulties, given that critical theory derives from the study of texts, is determining what constitutes a “text” in the context of IR (other than the work of fellow theorists). For essay collections that attempt to apply discourse analysis to IR, see Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989, and Beer and Hariman, 1996. See also Oonu’s discussion in Kubalkova, Oonu, and Kowert, 1998.

51 For an approach to the agent-structure problem that does not rely on functionalism and thus holds out greater promise, see Jackson and Nexo’s “p/r” approach (1999).

52 Schlesinger has observed this tendency as well, noting that “in the recent vogue for ‘postmodernity’ . . . proponents have been apt to think that the old collectivities may no longer confer identities that command special attention,” thus “opening up potential new spaces of tolerance of the ‘stranger’” (1994:316–17).

53 See works by Keohane and Nye (1989:xii); Kramer (1985:vii–ix); Keohane (1984:9); and Greico (1990:9, 27); as well as Northedge (1976) and Jones and Willett’s discussion of the American attachment to interdependence from a British perspective (1984).
major industrials: “with no disputes meriting the use of force and with such instruments being inappropriate to the issues at hand, we are in unmapped territory” (1991–92:55). Much of the American IR theoretical community has interpreted this unmapped territory as the final vindication of liberal IR theory.54

The extent to which American theorizing about IO is and always has been liberal theorizing goes a long way in explaining how constructivism could become so quickly popular in this post–Cold War empirical context.55 Constructivism would be attractive to a theoretical community already predisposed to a liberal perspective which assumes that because the major industrials share a particular set of constitutive norms in capitalism and democracy, relations among them are motivated more by absolute rather than relative gains. The widespread acceptance of these assumptions would then pave the way for an approach such as constructivism which Haggard notes “is likely to carry more explanatory weight in those more limited areas where some common normative structures exist than in those in which they are absent or extremely broad” (1991:415).

Thus the growing enthusiasm for constructivism may be accounted for, at least to some extent, by Jervis’s observation that “the kinds of theories we find attractive are influenced not only by events but also by our general political orientations” and “normative considerations” (1998:973). An underlying “normative agenda” that is liberal in orientation would also explain why, as Jervis has noted, “constructivists pay little attention to norms and ideas that are both revolutionary and evil” (1998:974). Liberal IR theorizing has also had an historical tendency to co-opt new approaches, with constructivism being perhaps the latest example. Integration, transnational relations, interdependence, and regimes were each touted in turn as new ideas and approaches. As this review has demonstrated, however, each contained the same functional logic that had simply been dressed up in new, albeit sometimes remarkably fascinating, feathers.

The result has been a homogenized field of IO inquiry in which theoretical choice remains limited to either more modest or more ambitious liberal research programs. This homogenization presents few problems if liberal functional explanations for the international system and its transformations are accurate. But normative agendas have a way of skewing explanation for global political phenomena. This charge has frequently been leveled at realism, but liberal functionalism has never been objective in the causal factors it chooses to privilege or denigrate either. This is most obvious in its biased treatment of domestic political variables, which leads it to account for institutional creation and innovation as if it were “problem-solving without politics as a conditioning factor” (Sewell, 1966:38).

This antipathy toward domestic political institutions has informed all variants of liberal IR theory, leading critics to repeatedly charge that liberalism contains no theory of politics.56 And the extent to which liberal theory dominates the study of IO suggests that the field will continue to move steadily away from the study of foreign policy and actual decision-making (Haggard, 1991:405, 416–22). Liberal theorists cannot be entirely blamed for this, since it was neorealism that popularized systemic theorizing, but such an emphasis is actually conducive to liberal theories of social change. Because liberal theory has always been less an explanation for what policymakers actually do and more a prescription of what

55 Hoffmann argues that theorizing about IR has been affected by America’s “ideology of progress” all along (1995:219). Winnerstig backs up these claims with a content analysis of IR journal articles and finds that it is not pro-realist theorizing that dominates the field but pro-liberal theorizing (1999). Even realist theorizing has been affected by the liberal, optimistic beliefs that dominate the American social milieu (Shimko, 1992:299; Waever, 1998:721–22).
they should do, theorizing at the systemic level allows it to avoid having to explain ongoing, empirical anomalies. That is, it avoids having to explain why the identities, interests, and behaviors of policymakers continue to be informed more by the parochial and myopic pulling and hauling of domestic politics and electoral cycles than by the far-sighted practices required of international collective interests and practices.

This is where constructivism could have made a contribution and perhaps still can if it sheds its functionalist feathers. As long as it relies on a logic of functional institutional efficiency, however, constructivism will continue to provide explanations in which political institutions do not serve as conditioning factors but instead remain instruments for collective problem-solving. Thus it deserves the same cogent criticism that Sewell leveled at functionalism in 1966, and for that reason I give him the last word:

The perversity of reality turns us again to the functionalist argument. By what process does it anticipate an elevation from the level of converging ad hoc interests of independent political units to one characterized by a foundation of obligation? We must conclude that it hardly confronts the question. (1966:327)

References


