

Which Holds the Most Promise? Rationalism and Constructivism in Analyses of Institutions

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合理主義と構成主義の相関性について—国際機関の研究事例より考察する—

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要約

ここ数十年における国際関係学の理論研究では、合理主義(rationalism)と構成主義(constructivism)の有用性と比較優位性が主要な研究題目の一つであるが、その議論の多くは、両者を相反するものと見なす事を前提とし行われてきた。

本論文では、両学派による国際機関の諸研究を事例に挙げ、まず各学派が国際関係に対する考え方の基本としている理論的前提と、国際組織の有用性を論じる際の理論的仮説を分析する。特に、国際組織の研究において両学派の間に存在する三つの主な対立点に焦点をあて、それらの観点から両者の有用性と比較優位性を論じる。

具体的な分析観点とは、以下の三つである。1) 国家の行動に対する国際組織の影響力の源泉は物質的な実利にあるか、あるいは理念や規範にあるのか、2) 国家による国際組織への帰属と順守は道徳的論理に基づくものか、あるいは戦略的論理に基づくものか、そして3) 国際組織における国家の行動基準と決定要因を、あらかじめ決まったものであり独立変数として設定するか、あるいは形成され、変容する対象であり従属変数として見なすか。これらの検討事項に照準を合わせた分析を通し、合理主義と構成主義の説明力の上でのそれぞれの強みと弱みを指摘するとともに、両者の理論上の潜在的共通性を浮き彫りにする。

合理主義と構成主義は必ずしも対立する理論ではない。両学派の間には、理論的仮定上の潜在的な共通点を見出す事もできる。従って、両者を二者択一的にとらえるよりも、むしろ補完的關係にありうる事に着眼した国際組織の分析が、今後の国際政治理論の研究において有益であると結論づける。

Key words: rationalism, constructivism, institutions, border crossings, complementary

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, Robert Keohane, Stephen Krasner, and Peter Katzenstein, the editors of the special fiftieth anniversary issue of *International Organization*, declared that the rationalist-constructivist debate would frame the discipline of the International Relations (IR) in years to come (645–685). Today, almost thirteen years later, the debate over rationalism versus constructivism remains one of the major subjects in IR. Furthermore, regardless of the validity of those scholars' claim, the relationship between rationalism and constructivism has tended to be treated as one of rivals (Ruggie 855–85).¹

By referring to scholarly works on both approaches to the study of institutions,² this article argues that the two theoretical camps of rationalism and constructivism³ do not have to be viewed as opposing forces (Finnemore and Sikkink 887–917). While they have different strengths and weaknesses in their analyses of institutions, both rely on sets of similar assumptions. Moreover, upon close inspection, each approach has sometimes relied on assumptions of the other in explaining their dependent variables. In other words, their treatment of institutions demonstrates that the relationship between rationalism and constructivism sometimes overlaps and can be complementary (Fearon and Wendt 52–72).

This article illustrates the cross-boundary practices and potential complementarity between rationalism and constructivism through the following concepts regarding institutions, as these have often been regarded as major points of contestation between the two schools of thought: the material versus ideational debate over institutions; the discussion of the logic of appropriateness versus the logic of consequences as the driver behind members' adherence to institutions (March and Olsen 943–69); and the debate over the preference formation of institutional members.

1. Rationalist Approaches to Institutions

Rationalism's central assumption is that actors are purposive utility maximizers with rank-ordered preferences. Rationalism, which roughly encompasses neorealism, institutionalism, and strategic choice, is based on methodological individualism, which claims that agents, whether individuals, collective groups, or states, are key decision makers, though neorealism departs from this by emphasizing structure. Rationalism treats agent and structure as separate entities, where structure constrains agents, who are purposive utility maximizers with rank-ordered preferences. They constrain as opposed to constitute each other in neoliberal institutionalism, while structure unilaterally constrains

agents in neorealism and strategic choice. Rationalism generally treats ideas and interest as separate and conceives of interest as material as opposed to social, ideational, or normative, such as ideas and norms. It generally assumes that preferences are exogenously given as opposed to endogenously constituted and that actors follow the logic of consequences as opposed to that of appropriateness.

Neorealists treat institutions as epiphenomenal, as exemplified by John Mearsheimer (5–49). To neorealists, institutions are merely products of the systemic distributions of material capabilities among states and they exert minimal influence on state behaviors. Institutions are virtually outside of neorealists' analysis, which one can argue is their weakness.

In contrast, neoliberal institutionalists treat institutions as important independent factors that shape state behaviors and promote cooperation among states. To them, institutions are more than mere products of state power and interests. When they are able to provide benefits that outweigh costs (such as providing information and reducing transaction costs), institutions become consequential by facilitating cooperation among states. This is because neoliberal institutionalists assume that states seek absolute gains as opposed to relative gains, which, according to neorealists, discourage states from cooperating (Grieco 485–507). In other words, to neoliberal institutionalists, institutions can sometimes influence states' behaviors. They resort to material factors in explaining sources of institutional influences: cost-benefit calculations (Keohane 85–109; Keohane and Martin 39–51 ; Gourevitch 139–147), efficiency (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 761–99) and functionality (Wallander 705–36).

Nevertheless, neoliberal institutionalists focus on the material benefits of institutions and neglect the ideational and social ones. This limits their ability to explain. One could argue that neoliberal institutionalists' strength lies in their explanatory power to help us understand how cooperation can be achieved in an anarchic environment. Yet, their weakness is their focus on material merits at the expense of normative elements such as ideational and social benefits in the study of institutions (Wendt 1019–49). This could legitimize any institution, even those with evil norms and values such as Nazi Germany and the military of pre-World War II Imperial Japan, as long as they produce material benefits.

Another weakness lies in neoliberal institutionalists' inability to explain actors' behaviors as driven by the logic of appropriateness, in which actors take action for the reason of being right. For example, the ongoing effort for the expansion of the number of non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council is a change that can be better explained not by efficiency but by a normative reason: though the larger number generally reduces efficiency in decision making, it is more representative of the

membership of the United Nations and thereby more democratic. Democraticness, which dictated the change in institutional structure, is an ideational good outside of the scope of neoliberal institutionalists' analysis.

Another major weakness is that neoliberal institutionalists are limited in the types of institutions that they can study; due to their state-centric, unitary actor assumption and their focus on systemic analysis, they are limited to interstate institutions. Institutions acting on the domestic level and between the domestic and international levels and non-interstate international institutions such as international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are outside of their analysis. Nevertheless, this weakness can be mitigated by the use of the strategic choice approach, as its major strengths lie in transcending levels of analysis and employing a unit of analysis that is not limited to states.

2. Constructivist Approaches to Institutions

In their approach to institutions, constructivists are methodological holists who maintain that actors cannot be studied separately from their environment and vice versa. They assume that agent and structure are mutually constitutive, not only constraining but also transforming each other's identity and interest. Constructivism endogenizes norms, identity, and preferences instead of treating them as givens. Its early proponents, such as Audie Klotz (451–78) and Richard Price (613–44), treat ideas and interest as separate, whereas other constructivists such as Martha Finnemore (153–85) together with Kathryn Sikkink (887–917) do not separate them and conceive interest as both social and material. Constructivists generally assume that actors follow the logic of appropriateness. All of these assumptions are applied to constructivists' study of institutions.

Constructivists as well as neoliberal institutionalists challenge neorealists' claim that institutions are epiphenomenal, and they treat institutions as both independent and dependent variables. What makes constructivists different from neoliberal institutionalists is not whether institutions matter, but how they matter. Constructivists assume that institutions are mutually constitutive with agents or structure. They give more powerful roles to institutions than neoliberal institutionalists do. They argue that institutions are able to transform the identities and interests of agents and/or structure, whereas neoliberal institutionalists, in contrast, generally conceive institutions as sometimes consequential simply by constraining state behaviors. In addition, constructivists resort to social factors such as norms and ideas as sources of institutional influence, whereas neoliberal institutionalists resort to material factors. One could argue that this is one of their strengths. For example, the persisting desire for former Warsaw Pact members to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) cannot be fully explained without the constitutive identity that the NATO can provide its members as fully modernized liberal democracies.

One could argue that China's persistent desire to become a members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and to hold the Olympics in Beijing in 2008 and the World Exposition in Shanghai in 2010 were desires not only for trade and economic benefits but also for the constitutive identities that the WTO, the Olympics and the World Exposition could respectively provide to China as a full-fledged member of the free trading world and as a fully industrialized modern state.

Another difference is that constructivists look at institutions from different angles; they are interested in studying the origins of preferences (interests, identity, norms) and how preferences change over time. Neoliberal institutionalists focus on how well the features of an institution meet the interests of its members.

Unlike neoliberal institutionalists, constructivists are not limited to the study of interstate types of institutions due to their non-state-centric and unitary actor assumptions and their non-focus on systemic analysis, which is their strength. They can analyze institutions that operate on the domestic level and between the domestic and international levels, as well as non-interstate types of international institutions such as international NGOs.

However, constructivists have weaknesses as well. Despite their criticism of rationalists for taking preferences as exogenously given, they tend to take norms as key independent variables, and thus as given, when conducting empirical research (Kowert and Legro 451–97; Lake and Powell 31–4). Audie Klotz's study on the global norm of racial equality (451–78) and Mark Zacher's study on the norm of territorial integrity (433–68) are cases in point. Though efforts have been made to problematize norms and institutions, as can be confirmed in studies of sovereignty by John Ruggie (261–85), James Caporaso (1–29), and Samuel Barkin and Bruce Cronin (107–30), this is not yet a general tendency at this point. Overall, they lack a theory of agency (Checkel 324–48).

Constructivists' other weakness is their case selection bias (Jervis 971–91; Checkel 324–48). They select only good norms that produce positive changes for institutions. Studies on the abolition of colonialism by Neta Crawford and on the abolition of slavery by Audie Klotz are such examples. They need to include evil norms in their study of institutions in order to enhance their explanatory power.

3. Border Crossings and Complementarity

The relationship between rationalism and constructivism has typically been regarded as one of rivals. However, upon closer inspection, one can see that their relationship sometimes overlaps and can be complementary.

It is common to view the divide between the two approaches in terms of the former relating to material factors and the latter to ideational factors. On the rationalists' side,

Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane argue that explanations that emphasize ideas are rivals to rationalist explanations that emphasize preferences (3–30). This implies that preferences (interests) are not ideas and are thus materials. On the constructivists' side, John Ruggie asserts that rationalism treats ideas either not at all or only as secondary (855–85). In short, early proponents on both sides regard the material versus ideational issue as a dichotomy between these two analytical approaches.

Yet, the divide is not so clear in this regard. Each approach has invaded the terrain of the other. For instance, the basic structure of the rationalist explanation is that “Desire + Belief = Action” (Wendt 113–35). This means that ideas are a central element of the rationalist explanation. Some neorealists use ideational factors as their major independent variables (Katzenstein 1–32; Dessler 123–37). Stephen Walt’s balance of threat theory (275–316) employs “a perceived threat,” an ideational factor, as his major independent variable. Jack Snyder’s *Myth of Empire* relies on ideology, another ideational factor, as his independent variable, to explain a state’s expansionist foreign policy. Meanwhile, constructivists sometimes employ material factors as their independent variables: Mark Zacher argues that his *instrumental* variable is more dominant than his ideational variable to explain the rise of territorial integrity norm (215–50). Samuel Barkin and Bruce Cronin rely on the material variable of power, specifically the principles and beliefs of a *dominant* coalition out of wars, to explain changes in sovereignty’s interpretation (107–30). Thus, ideas matter to rationalists and material factors matter to constructivists.

The divide lies in *how* ideas matter. Rationalists who take account of ideas and treat them as causal variables perceive them as existing independently of other agents or structures. Meanwhile, constructivists, while treating ideas as both causal and constitutive, tend to stress their constitutive role. Yet, this is within the shared consensus that ideas matter and thus does not validate the divide of material versus ideational. In addition, constructivists have not succeeded, at this point, in explaining constitutive mechanisms between ideas and agent or structure (Checkel 324–48).

The logic of consequences versus the logic of appropriateness is another cited divide between rationalist and constructivist analyses of institutions. However, it is inaccurate to state that actors almost exclusively follow the logic of appropriateness in constructivists’ scholarships. Some constructivists nevertheless incorporate the logic of consequences into their research: Andrew Cortell and James Davis’s work on U.S. security and trade policy illustrates the instrumental use of norms (collective security norm, norm of free trade, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) by actors (the U.S. President, the semiconductor industry) whose behaviors are based on the logic of consequences to further their objectives (451–78). Audie Klotz’s study on the global norm of racial equality partly employs the logic of consequences in explaining behaviors of actors (the U.S.

Congress and the Reagan administration) who adopted an anti-apartheid policy to protect their strategic and economic interests in South Africa (451–78).

Furthermore, different behavioral logics may hold with different segments of the norm cycle and its interactions with institutions (Finnemore and Sikkink 887–917). In Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's *Activists Beyond Borders*, the behavior of transnational advocacy networks is based on principles and values, that is, the logic of appropriateness. In contrast, in Alexander Cooley and James Ron's "NGO Scramble," an NGO's behavior is based on the logic of consequences (to satisfy fund/contract providers at the cost of producing suboptimal outcomes for their survival) (5–39). The former study deals with the norm stage *before* internalization and the latter deals with the norm stage *after* internalization. This implies that actors behave according to norms at the norm formation stage, and constructivists can better explain their behaviors at this stage. However, actors behave strategically after the norm is internalized, and rationalists can better explain their behaviors at this stage. In other words, these examples show the complementarity between rationalism and constructivism. Rather than trying to determine which type of logic is correct, it would be more fruitful to investigate under what conditions each type of behavioral logic holds.

Preference formation, another major contested point, is not a fundamental divide. It is common to assume that rationalists generally take actors' preferences as exogenously given, while constructivists do not, instead endogenizing actors themselves (Ruggie 855–85). Yet, the division line is not clear, and there are reasons to be cautious about drawing a clear line between the two on this point.

First, some rationalists do not take preferences as given. For example, Andrew Moravcsik endogenizes preferences (515–53). He seeks to explain changes in states' foreign policy preferences by drawing on domestic politics. James Fearon and David Laitin endogenize ethnic identities as socially constructed by material reasons (to strengthen elites' hold on power) in explaining ethnic violence in Africa (845–77). Strategic choice can endogenize preferences: what is taken as exogenous in one round of interaction can be problematized and investigated in another (Frieden 39–76), though preferences have to be kept fixed within the same round of interaction and it cannot deal with cases in which preferences change within the same interaction (Lake and Powell, 3–38).

Second, for some rationalists, including strategic choice theorists, the choice of exogenous versus endogenous preferences seems to be purely analytical rather than a substantive claim about the world. In fact, Jeffrey Frieden argues that it is more of an analytical convenience for which strategic choice takes actors as exogenously given (39–76) and David Lake and Robert Powell claim that it is a methodological bet (3–38).

Certainly, there is a danger to this. Constructivists would counter-argue that

methodological choices have implications on substantive claims about the world, and their plausible counter-argument is valid: when preferences are analyzed as endogenous, the possibility of social change is implied. Meanwhile, choosing to take preferences as given implies that one accepts the circumstances and the status quo bias as they are without questioning hidden power dynamics or institutional biases which may underlie the circumstances. This obscures possibilities for social change when necessary. Accordingly, the choice does not end as analytical and leads to a substantive claim about the world (status quo acceptance by taking preferences as given, and pro-social changes by taking them as endogenous). Yet, to treat preferences as independent variables and dependent variables are two different research tasks that cannot be conducted at the same time. In fact, constructivists tend to take norms as given when conducting empirical researches. After all, whether to treat preferences as given or endogenous does not have to be a major ontological difference between the two approaches.

Last but not least, there have been efforts to treat the two approaches as complementary by combining their respective treatments of preference formation. James Fearon and David Laitin demonstrate how rationalism and constructivism can be combined to offer a powerful explanation about ethnic identity (845–77). Jeffrey Legro emphasizes the need to supplement the rationalist two-step research by investigating the preference formation (influenced by culture) first, rather than focusing on the interaction of actors maximizing exogenously given preferences (118–37). In short, preference formation is not a deep divide between rationalism and constructivism.

Conclusion

Despite their respective weaknesses, both neoliberal institutionalists and constructivists offer a strong challenge to neorealists' approach that claims institutions are epiphenomenal, and they both provide valuable insights into how institutions matter from different perspectives.

Meanwhile, despite the common perception of them as rivals, rationalism and constructivism also have areas of agreement, and the differences in their research approaches can sometimes serve as complementarities. Instead of trying to decide which approach is better, a study based on a non-zero sum view of the two would be more fruitful. The most promising path is to investigate conditions under which different behavioral logics hold, various preference formation mechanisms take place, and diverse combinations of norms and material factors explain the emergence and the functioning of institutions. At the same time, both camps should improve their respective weaknesses. Rationalists should expand their unitary actor assumption to institutions other than states, while constructivists should strive for rigor and specification, such as theorizing agency.

On the whole, the two approaches are increasingly overlapping and can often be complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

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Notes

- 1 See also Katzenstein, Peter, Keohane, Robert, and Krasner, Stephen, eds. *Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999; Goldstein, Judith and Keohane, Robert, eds. *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- 2 Institutions referred to in this paper primarily consist of interstate regional/international organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), and the World Trade Organization (WTO); non-interstate international/regional/domestic organizations such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in civil society campaigns, including Green Peace and Amnesty; and other entities that are often regarded as influential to international politics as nation states.
- 3 The author acknowledges that constructivism is a broad school of thought and is thus not homogenous. Within constructivism, thin constructivists such as Wendt, Dessler, Finnemore, Sikkink, and Katzenstein embrace positivism. They assume that it is possible to explain phenomena in social science in the same way natural science explains its phenomena, and they seek to build objective knowledge about how the world is through causal theorizing. On the other hand, pragmatist constructivists such as Ernst and Peter Haas and thick constructivists such as Onuf and Kratochwil are proponents of post-positivism. They generally reject the notion of social scientific progress and are explicit about how the world should be. Nevertheless, in this paper the author treats constructivists as one camp, in contrast with rationalists, in the sense that constructivists all share the assumption that agent and structure are mutually constitutive and that they can not only constrain but also transform each other. For studies on diversity within constructivism, see Fujioka, Yuka. "Are Explanatory and Normative Analyses Rivals in the Study of International Relations?" *International Political Economy* 24(2009):59-70; Zehfuss, Maja. "Constructivism in International Relations: Wendt, Onuf and Kratochwil." *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation*. Ed. Karin Fierke and Knud Erik Jorgensen. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001; Zehfuss, Maja, *Constructivism in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

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