Constructivism as Professional Practice in the US Academy

Jelena Subotic, *Georgia State University*

What does constructivism in American international relations (IR) mean as a field of practice? What is the professional experience of doing constructivism in US IR, not only as a "style of reasoning" (Pouliot 2007), but as an actual everyday professional practice? Where Zarakol (this issue) surveys constructivism's position within IR as judged by major journal gatekeeping practices, I instead turn to measuring the position of constructivism within US IR from the position of the *profession*.

This inquiry is that much more timely because it follows on the successive waves of the widely read Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) survey that claims that constructivism is becoming the most popular theoretical framework in IR. I gathered large amounts of data to look at job placement of US constructivists, availability of graduate courses on constructivism, presence of constructivism in graduate IR theory survey courses, and constructivist graduate student production. My analysis challenges TRIP survey optimism by finding structures of paradigmatic hierarchies in US IR in the areas of academic jobs, graduate training, and curriculum development. My findings have profound implications for understanding the development and sustainability of a professional paradigm. More significantly, they raise serious ethical questions about the scholarly responsibility of teaching and practicing constructivism to our students, to the profession, and to the IR field at large.

The 2012 TRIP World Faculty Survey report authoritatively declared: "For the first time, more scholars adopted a constructivist approach than either a realist or liberal framework. The surge in constructivist work, which focuses on the roles of ideas and identity in shaping state preferences and institutional outcomes started in the 1990s and shows no signs of leveling off" (Avey et al. 2012, 92). To further make the case about the now dominant role of constructivism in IR, the 2012 TRIP survey lists constructivist Alexander Wendt as the scholar "with the most influence on the field of IR," and of the five scholars considered by TRIP respondents to "do the most interesting work," two were constructivists: Wendt and Martha Finnemore (Avey et al. 2012).

The most recent 2014 TRIP survey finds that among 1,562 US (not global) IR scholars surveyed the largest percentage, 32%, refused to self-identify paradigmatically; but of those who did, the highest percentage self-identified as constructivists (20%), followed by 18% realists, and 15% liberals (TRIP 2014). The previous TRIP survey in 2012 reported 22% self-identified constructivists, 21% liberals, 16% realists, and 2% Marxists (Avey et al. 2012). So, the TRIP survey tells us it is a great time to be a constructivist—they have the most numbers, the most influence, and do the most interesting work.

But does this TRIP optimism accurately represent the lived experience of being a constructivist in the US academy today? Where are all these US constructivists and how do they practice their profession?

METHODOLOGY

A few notes on scope. First, my analysis focuses only on constructivists at US universities. The situation in Europe, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere is much different in many ways, including the very different academic systems, different curriculum structure, as well as a different nature of the job market. Because the US is by far the largest global academic market, the professional position of US constructivists is worthy of closer scrutiny.

Second, I also exclude from my analysis constructivists employed at liberal arts colleges. I am interested in the long-term health of constructivism as a professional practice in US IR, and having regular graduate courses, examinations, and a sustainable record of PhD placement are indispensable for that effort.

Third, I only looked at the top 50 political science departments according to the widely referred to *US News and World Report* (*USNWR*) rankings, as well as the top 25 IR departments as ranked by respondents to the TRIP survey. It is certainly not a controversial statement to argue that the visibility and imprint of constructivism on the profession is higher from the perch of a top 50 political science/IR department than from its lower rungs. From a practical standpoint, teaching in a top 50 department yields professional dividends such as the ability to place your (constructivist) students into another PhD-granting institution, thereby continuing the genealogy. Many lower-ranked institutions either do not have PhD programs, or if they do, their students would be most likely placed in a nondoctoral program, thus ending the reproductive cycle of the paradigm.

Finally, my scope concerns are also about inclusion: I utilized a very broad definition of who is a *constructivist* in the US (a scholar who bases the inquiry on the assumption that the world is socially constructed and that international actors are engaged in mutually constituted social relationships with one another). I included all faculty who self-identified as IR constructivists, but also those comparativists with cross-subfield interests (international political economy, human rights) who employed any type of a constructivist approach, as well as

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doi:10.1017/S1049096516002201
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096516002201 Published online by Cambridge University Press

those faculty working in nonconstructivist but constructivism-friendly traditions (feminism, critical theory, international historical sociology, international ethics, postcolonial theory, postmodernism). I wanted to give the TRIP assessment the benefit of the doubt and possibly overcount the presence of constructivists in the US academy.

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Data Collection

To make an exhaustive count of US constructivists in 50 top-ranked political science departments, I counted all self-identified IR faculty on department websites. I included both political science and public/international policy schools where relevant. When department websites did not separate faculty by field, I analyzed each faculty profile to determine what subfield the scholar contributed to. When a scholar contributed secondarily to IR (e.g., comparative/IR), I counted that faculty member as IR. I excluded all nontenure-track and emeriti faculty because they typically do not supervise PhD dissertations, which is a critical function for my analysis. I then made individual determinations of which faculty are constructivist, using the broadest possible definition, as discussed above.[1]

In addition to looking at job placement, I also analyzed the content of graduate IR field theory courses. It is becoming increasingly clear that to get at the elusive evaluation of scholarly impact, we need to look at measures such as presence of work in syllabi and not only in publications (Colgan 2016; Hagmann and Biersteker 2014). I searched for all publicly available graduate seminars in IR theory among the top 25 IR departments ranked by TRIP. If the department website did not include syllabi, I searched individual websites of each IR faculty.[2] I then counted the percentage of constructivist work present on the syllabi among the required reading, omitting recommended reading because I wanted to get a sense of what IR faculty considered the students absolutely needed to know, regardless of their personal interests. As in the counting exercise on job placement, I employed an extremely broad definition of what is a *constructivist reading*, to err on the side of overrepresentation.

FINDINGS

The data I collected paint a much different picture of the position of constructivists in the US academy from what the TRIP surveys indicate.

Among the top 50 political science departments in the US according to *USNWR*, only 31 out of a total of 499 tenure-track faculty work broadly in constructivism and constructivist-friendly paradigms: only 6%. In the top 25 IR departments ranked by TRIP, I identified 23 out of a total of 292 IR faculty, or 8%.[3] *USNWR* also has a separate top 10 IR programs ranking list, in which constructivists would be represented by 5 faculty out of a total of 120, or 4%. In fact, there seems to be an inverse relationship between the presence of constructivist faculty and prestige: in the general ranking of the top 10 political science departments according to *USNWR*, there are two constructivists (both, however, in a public policy, not political science department).

The analysis of graduate syllabi reveals that, among the top 25 TRIP departments, there is no independent graduate seminar on constructivism or some common constructivist interest such as, for example, norms or identity. There are, however, many specialized graduate courses in realism, power, institutions, cooperation, and other core IR theoretical concepts. Constructivism is being mentioned or discussed in most IR theory syllabi, but its presence on the syllabi is 13% and in many syllabi constructivism is suggested under recommended, and not required reading.[4] These two sets of data are related because the paucity of constructivists in top 50 departments means that it is rare for a constructivist to teach a field IR seminar, which could be one way of possibly assuring a higher visibility of constructivism in graduate syllabi.

The weak constructivist presence in top departments' IR field survey courses indicates an unproblematized assumption that a PhD student about to take comprehensive exams should master the fundamentals of rationalist IR, but there is not a complementary expectation that she has to possess an equally adequate knowledge of constructivism. Constructivism, in its actual practice, is just not seen as indispensable to IR graduate education as other paradigms are. This is what Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (2005) remarked on a decade ago when lamenting the hegemony of quantitative over qualitative/interpretive approaches in graduate training: "political science enacts exclusionary definitions of legitimate knowledge" (374).

DISCUSSION

So how can these findings be squared away with TRIP survey's grand proclamation that constructivism is now the prevailing paradigm in IR? An obvious explanation is that most of the constructivists in TRIP surveys are clustered outside of the top 50 departments or in liberal arts colleges. In other words, constructivists certainly exist in the profession, but they have difficulty reproducing the paradigm since most of them work in nondoctoral institutions or produce students who don't get hired into a PhD-granting institution.

Why does this matter? There is tremendous empirical evidence to demonstrate the many ways in which academia is not a meritocracy, but instead an oligarchy of top departments, which hire students from other top departments, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and inequality (Oprisko, Dobbs, and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096516002201 Published online by Cambridge University Press

DiGrazia 2013). Recent analysis of academic career paths across different disciplines (Clauset, Arbesman, and Larremore 2015) found evidence of the profound hierarchy regulating academia, leading the authors of the study to conclude:

> These results are broadly consistent with an academic system organized in a classic core-periphery pattern, in which increased prestige correlates with occupying a more central, better connected, and more influential network position … strong core-periphery pattern has profound implications for the free exchange of ideas. Research interests, collaboration networks, and academic norms are often cemented during doctoral training. Thus, the centralized and highly connected positions of higher-prestige institutions enable substantial influence, via doctoral placement, over the research agendas, research communities, and departmental norms throughout a discipline. The close proximity of the core to the entire network implies that ideas originating in the high-prestige core, regardless of their merit, spread more easily throughout the discipline, whereas ideas originating from low-prestige institutions must filter through many more intermediaries. (4)

My analysis suggests the same patterns of core–periphery, status hierarchy, and institutionalized inequality also plague the discipline of International Relations in the US, which could explain the stunning discrepancy between the TRIP survey's general view of the place of constructivism within US IR and its actual practice on the ground.

This peripheral position of constructivism then has structural consequences for the broader IR field. We know from sociological institutionalism that organizations (such as academic departments) imitate those organizational models they find legitimate and aspirational (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). What happens at the academic "top" signals accepted practices to the lower-ranked departments. For example, it is standard practice for universities to designate peer and aspirational institutions against which they measure themselves. My home institution, Georgia State University, even displays the list of such aspirational universities on its website.[5] Periodic academic program reviews often model organizational change on accepted practices in top departments, which departments then use to change curricula, demand resources, or advocate for hiring in underserved areas (Deardorff 2016). A classic example of the influence of top schools on the larger discipline is the story of how decisions at Harvard in the late 1940s almost wiped out the academic discipline of geography in the Unites States (Smith 1987).[6] For constructivism in the US, then, the observed marginalization in hiring and graduate teaching in top schools is going to be reflected as a desirable practice in the lower ranks, radiating further out toward the academic periphery.

For all the problems Zarakol identifies in constructivists getting their work published and cited in places with high visibility, this may be the least of their problems. Constructivists may, in fact, be structurally in a worse position when it comes to *practicing* constructivism of the everyday. This state of constructivism in the profession is important not only for the lived experience of faculty employment, resources, status, and prestige, it is also extremely important for the reproduction of the paradigm through graduate supervision, as well as for the vibrancy and resiliency of the constructivist research agenda. These findings, therefore, complement Zarakol's contribution on the stigmatization of constructivism in major IR journals. My analysis points to the profound stigmatization of constructivism in US political science departments. Publishing in top journals and getting citations is indispensable for the health and growth of scholarly work; however, just as important is the way in which the profession treats all its members. Where the paradigm lives is not only on the pages of journals, it is in the offices and halls of universities, it is at job talks, it is in the classroom. And here constructivism continues to be marginalized and, in the top departments, even extinct.

CONCLUSION

How did we get here? A thorough historical appraisal of the rise of constructivism as a "pillar of IR theory" (Walt 1998) and its current stall as a professional practice in US IR deserves its own serious treatment, which is beyond the scope of this short essay. It is certainly plausible to argue that much has to do with the omnipresent and unproblematized positivism of US IR,[7] and more broadly with scientism in US academia (Oren 2006). This scientism has certainly gotten more pronounced with the increasing corporatization of higher education and its assessment culture and emphasis on metrics that can be counted and quantified. Within the field of IR itself, many have recently lamented the decline of grand theory and relentless focus on incremental, minimum-publishable-unit-type hypothesis testing (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; Oren 2016). By rejecting scientism, constructivism and its approaches are by disposition and by methodology at an immediate disadvantage in such an academic climate.

So what is to be done? Some of these problems could be addressed by the conscious and stubborn effort to influence graduate curriculum and graduate examination procedures: by making sure that all comprehensive exams include a serious test of basic premises of constructivism. A step before that is to offer constructivist IR courses, or to insist that a general IR theory course includes much more constructivist content. This also requires challenging rationalist methodologies and

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assumptions in graduate education: arguing for a balance between the reification of quantitative methods courses (Schwartz-Shea 2003) and substantive theoretical courses, including specialized courses in constructivism. This means advising more doctoral students.

This effort, however, is likely to run against the current self-fulfilling prophecy of the US IR academic profession: the US market is such that a constructivist student has even less of a chance of getting a job than a rationalist/quantitative student, an assumption the data presented in my essay would support. There is an issue of professional ethics here that we rarely, if ever discuss. What should we advise our students to do, with a clear conscience, even while we try to change the institutional culture and preferences? Should dissertation advisors candidly present the employment prospects of students with a deep qualitative, interpretive dissertation versus prospects of students with much more risk-averse positivist work that would at least get them a shot at an interview? Should we warn students that pursuing this kind of research would most likely make them unmarketable for top US jobs, but possibly quite desirable in other parts of the world? But would this strategy in the end also be self-defeating and lead to further self-marginalization in the discipline?

For constructivism in the US, then, the observed marginalization in hiring and graduate teaching in top schools is going to be reflected as a desirable practice in the lower ranks, radiating further out toward the academic periphery.

I think our best course is to be candid to students while continuing to focus our efforts on changing the status quo by joining similar existing attempts to diversify the academy in various ways. There is no doubt that academic and paradigmatic pluralism are good for everybody. New research shows that diverse (identity-wise and paradigm-wise) academic departments are more productive overall (Bosquet and Combes 2013). There are increasing calls for closing the gender gap in citations (Maliniak, Powers, and Walter 2013), journal editorial positions (Stegmaier, Palmer, and van Assendelft 2011), and in syllabi (Colgan 2015), as well as dealing with the persistent problem of lack of diversity among faculty (Moody 2004). My hope is that this essay contributes to this broader, and long overdue, professional conversation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article benefited from many conversations over the years with too many colleagues to properly thank. I very much benefited from the discussions at the Reclaiming Constructivism workshop organized by Oliver Kessler and Brent Steele in Salt Lake City in February 2015. I am especially grateful to Rebecca Adler-Nielsen, Bentley Allan, Michael Barnett, Austin Carson, Liv Coleman, Jarrod Hayes, Ted Hopf, Juliet Johnson, Larry Markowitz, Daniel Nexon, Doug Rose, Joe Soss, Brent Steele, and Ayse Zarakol for deep engagement with my argument, as well as Ana Martin, Meshack Simati, and Diana White for research assistance. ■

NOTES

1. The data were last updated in July 2016.
2. This method generated a total of 36 graduate IR field seminar syllabi from TRIP–defined top 25 IR departments (excluding the three non-US departments in this ranking).
3. Non-US universities Oxford, Cambridge, and London School of Economics that made the TRIP top-25 list were excluded from my analysis. The relatively high number of constructivists in the TRIP ranking compared to *USNWR* is the result of the TRIP top 25 including American University, where I counted 6 faculty working in constructivism and constructivist-friendly paradigms. *USNWR* ranks American at #68.
4. The median presence of constructivist work was 12%, the maximum 37%, the minimum 0%.
5. http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwire/peer/regentsproposed.html.
6. I thank Juliet Johnson for alerting me to this case.
7. For example, while the 2014 TRIP survey identifies that 61% of US IR scholars are self-identified positivists, only 33% of UK IR, 40% Canadian IR, and 31% Australian IR scholars self-identified as positivists (TRIP 2014).

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