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Duelling constructivisms: a post-mortem on the ideas debate in mainstream IR/IPE

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Abstract: The ideas debate in mainstream IR/IPE was generated by cumulative dissatisfactions with rational choice theory and with Realist tenets. This article examines the contours of this debate and explains how it reached its limit in the form of 'conventional constructivism', a bowdlerised form of critical theory and Gramscian cultural studies. 'Context' and Gramsci's 'common sense', however, are sufficiently equivalent terms to enable productive conceptual connections across the intradisciplinary divide. The overarching obstacle remains the resistance of mainstream IR to integration with other social sciences.

The experience of a critic putting one's ideas 'into context' often rankles and sometimes with good reason. Except in the rare circumstances of equal status, goodwill and an unstinting search for common ground, as expressed perhaps in Habermas' ideal speech situation, the exercise can be a subtly negating one that simply fits an adversary's argument inside one's own framework in order to tell them what they meant to say if only they had sufficient rigour and wit to do so.[1]

This tactic is commonly is wielded by mainstream scholars against those on the disciplinary fringes – and, whenever possible, *vice versa*. The rationales are, for the mainstream, that fringe frameworks such as critical theory and Gramscian cultural studies are of interest only to the degree that one converts these analytical modes into positivist and measurable terms by which means alone they are to be deemed scientific, and, for scholars outside the mainstream, that positivism – which holds no known patent on testable propositions – frequently functions as a device by which to exclude forms of analysis that challenge the scholarly *status quo*.[2]

Scholars at the fringes argue that, as in the classic relation of coloniser and colonised, they have every incentive to study the dominant discourse while the reverse phenomenon is rarely the case.[3] Marginal modes of inquiry accordingly gain

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[1] Jurgen Habermas, 'On Systematically Distorted Communication', in Hans Peter Dreitzel (ed.), *Recent Sociology* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

[2] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann label one variant 'nihilation' in *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 106, 107. One example is the argument that Realists, correctly understood, are not 'really' Realist at all. See Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravscik, 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?' *International Security*, 24: 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 5–55.

[3] Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 48.

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admittance to centre stage debates only if they are presented in compatible terms and can be absorbed into reigning research agendas with minimal disturbance. I examine this subtle filtration process at work in the recent ideas debate in American – virtually synonymous with 'mainstream' – international relations and consider whether the ascent of 'conventional constructivism' forms a new barrier or a boon to alternative frameworks.

If 'historicising IPE', a central goal of non-mainstream scholars, means to promulgate transdisciplinary, non-state-centred and reflexive frames of thinking, then this aim remains dismayingly low on the mainstream agenda.[4] Despite all the attention lavished on a single form of constructivism, one detects little evidence that countertrends such as critical theory or Gramscian cultural studies have made any inroads in the debates that preoccupy American IR journals. In fact, it is unusual even for self-described constructivists to display any awareness of debates in the alternative (and mostly British or, even, continental) journals.[5] There are exceptions, but they tend to prove the rule.

The constructivist 'turn', if it is one, is an enteprise explicitly devoted to 'seizing the middle ground' and succeeds to the degree it has largely by appropriating or approximating alternative critical constructs and concerns.[6] The 'new' research agenda it posits already existed in radical European traditions but could be imported into the mainstream only when palatably rendered, a not unprecedented phenomenon.[7] In any field it is difficult to offer fresh or unfamiliar perspectives in forms other than ones 'readily acceptable to the 'profession.'[8] (Whether critical theory, in the form it takes in British studies, lives up to its avowed standards is an interesting but separate question.)[9] Scanning American IR journals for signs of dialogue with alternative schemas one finds Robert Cox occasionally cited but hardly anyone else who works in a critical theory or Gramscian tradition is ever noticed. This 'silence', as social historians might term it, should be no surprise. Mainstream scholarship, as a recent survey soberly reminds, is not in the business of promoting the 'emancipatory interests' that motivate some other scholars.[10] This pertinent point about purposes has major implications for the ways in which mainstream and non-mainstream scholars grapple with the nature of contexts in political analysis.

In the aftermath of the ideas debate two key questions arise: (1) Has mainstream IR fixed its limit of permissible debate at the border of 'conventional constructivism,' as rendered by Wendt, Checkel, Adler and others? And (2) is there any

[4] Ash Amin and Ronan Palen, 'Editorial: The Need to Historicise IPE', *Review of International Political Economy*, 3: 2 (Summer 1996), p. 209.

[5] See Knud Erik Jorgenson, 'Continental IR Theory: The Best Kept Secret', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6: 1 (March 2000), pp. 1–33. and, almost aberrantly, Ole Waever, 'The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: European and American Developments in International Relations', *International Organization*, 52: 4 (Autumn 1998).

[6] Jeff Checkel, 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory', *World Politics,* 50: 2 (January 1998) and Emanuel Adler, "Seizing The Middle Ground: Constructivisim in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3: 3 (1997).

[7] On the derivative relation of Theda Skocpol's neo-Weberian stance to neo-Marxist scholarship see Paul Cammack, 'Bringing the State Back In?', *British Journal of Political Science*, 19: 2 (April 1989).

[8] Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Constructing a New Orthodoxy? Wendt's "Social Theory of International Politics" and the Constructivist Challenge', *Millennium*, 29: 1 (2000), p. 89.

[9] Beate Jahn, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Critical Theory As The Latest Edition of Liberal Idealism', *Millennium*, 27: 3 (1998).

[10] Ted Hopf, '"The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security*, 23: 1 (Summer 1998), pp. 183–4 .

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prospect for a productive dialogue not only between mainstream IR and critical theory but also between the different kinds of constructivism?[11] Pessimism is not unwarranted, yet one potential bridge is to explore the theme of context-sensitivity, an admitted weak spot in mainstream analyses. The influence that contexts exert upon the interpretation that individuals and collectivities make of their interests and, consequently, their choices has been underplayed in IR because of realist axioms regarding the immutability of systemic imperatives and of national interests. Realists today are more attentive to the influence of contexts upon state behaviour but according to a strictly managerial orientation 'fixing the realm of the possible in terms of permissible social and political actions.'[12] Realists, neorealists and even liberal institutionalists tend to embrace the given distribution of interests and capabilities with the same impatient panache with which Samuel Johnson allegedly refuted Bishop Berkeley's nominalist fancies by giving the nearest stone a swift kick.[13]

By contrast, critical theorists, harking to the 1930s heyday of the Institute for Social Research headed by Max Horkheimer, held that what today are called 'discursive formations' always fashioned our knowledge of the world within a range of possibilities set by the context of historically specific structures of power – a context of which we scholars and citizens are, at best, only partially aware. The project of the Frankfurt School was to devise an 'interdisciplinary materialism' geared to 'pursue philosophical questions with the most refined scientific methods, to reformulate and sharpen these questions in the course of the work, to devise new methods, and yet not lose sight of the larger context.'[14] This larger context – explicitly encompassing those engaged in analysing it – was understood primarily though an unorthodox but fertile blend of Marxism and psychoanalysis.

The critical theorists stressed that a valid macroconceptualisation of political life required rigorous multidisciplinary research in order to illuminate the effects of a given political-economic structure upon institutions and individuals – which have different degrees of autonomy and reflective capacity – and, in turn, their cumulative effects upon that structure. This approach was, so far as critical theorists saw it, *kindergarten* dialectics. Contemporary constructivists are approaching what critical theorists have long taken as their research starting point. For the latter, however, the willingness to understand the importance of context must be infused with the will to change or resist it.[15] Critical theory took pains to distinguish itself from 'traditional

[11] The Frankfurt theorists were divided: at one extreme Adorno 'saw an internal reform of the social sciences as futile'. Horkheimer thought prospects were a bit better. Seyla Benhabib, Wolfgang Bonss and John McCole, *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 11.

[12] Amin and Palen, 'Editorial: The Need to Historicise IPE', p. 212.

[13] Robert Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', *International Studies Quarterly*, 32: 4 (December 1988), pp. 390–1.

[14] Max Horkheimer, 'The State of Contemporary Social Philosophy and The Tasks of An Institute for Social Research', in Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 32.

[15] They aimed 'to show how repressive interests were hidden by the supposedly neutral formulations of science no less than ontology and, in this way, the movement always retained a commitment to the sociology of knowledge and the critique of ideology (*ideologiekritik*). This internal or immanent encounter with the existing order, however, retained a transcendent or utopian component. The objective was to foster reflexivity, a capacity for fantasy, and a new basis for praxis in an increasingly alienated world. Critical theory, in this way, stood diametrically opposed to economic determinism and any stage theory of history. It sought to examine the various "mediations" between base and superstructure.' Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 3. Also Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1973), pp. 103, 105.

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theory' which the Frankfurt school argued had obscured the underlying interests and purposes of societal actors.

Critical theory, Horkheimer writes, 'was incompatible with the idealist belief that any theory is independent of men or has a growth of its own.'[16] No less than for Karl Korsch or Georg Lukacs in the Western Marxist tradition, philosophy for Antonio Gramsci was never 'purely contemplative, theory itself engenders practice' and it exerted 'practical, even political consequences, even if it is avowedly non-political.'[17] Habermas characterised the Frankfurt project as pursuing 'philosophy by other means, namely the social sciences,' and with no inhibitions about crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to create an appropriate analytical synthesis for the study of societies.[18] Critical theory, thus understood, forms a key component in the analytical arsenal of many scholars on the margins of the discipline, as odd as it seems to describe as 'fringe' a theoretical mode that is considered a major player in international studies outside the United States.[19]

Any scholar who spends significant time in the US and the UK cannot help but be struck by the virtually parallel universes inhabited by American and British IR scholars (for whom neo-Marxist influences have long been part of the post-imperial mainstream).[20] The conservative slant of American IR studies preceded congressional witch-hunts but McCarthyism certainly quietened what few dissident voices there were.[21] A slowly waning legacy of the latter in the social sciences is discouragement not only of radical scholarship but even of any questioning of state-defined managerial imperatives in the American sphere of influence. Today this cross-Atlantic schism in IR studies may stem more from disciplinary boundary maintenance. Every lively debate in British international studies also appears in American academe, though usually in the adjacent fields of comparative politics, historical sociology and public policy where American IR specialists traditionally have been reluctant to tread.

Still, at the brink of the 1990s, mainstream scholars significantly conceded that ideas, under certain circumstances, do matter; and this concession opened up opportunities for multidisciplinary explorations and cross-fertilisations.[22] A spate of ideas-oriented arguments quickly emerged or, in some cases, were resurrected. Here I assess why neither a critical theory nor Gramscian-based approach, despite high visibility elsewhere in the profession, made a direct or acknowledged impact in the debate at a time when so many attempts were made to integrate an ideational

[16] Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 240.

[17] Thomas Nemeth, *Gramsci's Philosophy: A Critical Study* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986), p. 15. Also Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 6–7.

[18] Jurgen Habermas, 'Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work', in Benhabib, *On Max Horkheimer*, p. 50.

[19] I preface cultural studies with 'Gramscian' to indicate that there are other currents within that variegated field. The version I believe most compatible – indeed, almost interchangeable – with Frankfurt critical theory stems from Stuart Hall's trail-blazing work.

[20] On American and British IR practices see J. K. Jacobsen, 'Are All Politics Domestic?: Perspectives on the Integration of Comparative Politics and International Relations Theories', *Comparative Politics*, 22: 4 (October 1996).

[21] See Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Beacon Press, 1999).

[22] For a Realist response see John Mearsheimer, ''The False Promise of Institutionalism', *International Security*, 19: 3 (Winter 1994–95).

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dimension. In ensuing sections I introduce pertinent insights from psychologically-trained analysts, examine the American debate about ideas, assess prospects of a 'theory of contexts' as a bridge, and conclude with an assessment of the relation of constructivism to critical theory, and of both to mainstream (mainly American) scholarship. My central argument is that 'conventional constructivism', as now inducted into the mainstream, poses severe limitations for IR studies, and that engagement with (if not wholehearted acceptance of) the 'critical' variant of constructivism improves analytical sensitivity to the intricate interaction of ideas and interests, the 'mutual constitution' of agent and structure, and the role of the investigators in whatever they are investigating.

Rationality and contexts

The first task is definitional. Context is 'that which environs the object of our interest and helps by its relevance to explain it.'[23] In standard usage a context is the background against which we pose pertinent facts. Contextualising is assumed to be unproblematic; one merely brings to light salient features of the environment, like silhouettes.[24] In a second and quantitative sense 'contextual analysis' comes into play when examining 'the way the relationship between two variables (for example, two individual-level variables, or perhaps an individual and a context variable) may change systematically, for individuals, across groups which are set up to differ in a systematic way on a group-level variable.[25]

Finally, in a critical – not just critical theory – tradition, a context, when brought into what an interested agent portrays as its proper focus, imbues data with a new meaning. One reconfigures the context – the very sinews of everyday common sense – and sees a larger or different picture, incorporates new factors and shifts the relative importance of various explanatory factors according to one's training, interests, ideational inclinations and unconscious predilections. What is desirable in one context – privatising public transport, capital punishment, an international anti-drug war – may appear perfectly pernicious when placed convincingly in another.[26] Only the way the world is viewed changes but this activity triggers actions that can alter the physical world.

Whether globalisation or whatever the third way is are viewed as desirable things hinges on how cultural notions of justice inflect one's experience when interpreting events or evaluating arguments. Results often depend on the capacities of competing elites to attach or align their particular agenda to public norms, beliefs, and values.

[23] Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Dilemma of Context* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), p. 1.
[24] This is assumed even when scholars distinguish between a 'proximate context' (in which a specific policy operates) and 'macro context' (including ramifications in larger political and economic spheres), Martin Rein and Donald Schon, 'Reframing Policy Discourse', in Frank Fischer and John Forester (eds.), *The Politics of Problem Definition: Shaping The Policy Agenda* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 154–5.
[25] Herman J,. Loether and Donald G. McTavish, *Descriptive Statistics for Sociologists: An Introduction* (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1974), pp. 285–90.
[26] See James Tully (ed.) *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

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Hence, corporate CEOs do not talk about escaping from the law (it sounds unpatriotic). Instead they promote the goal of greater efficiency – a 'harmonization of national laws that will remove barriers and encourage greater trade'.[27] A congressional bill designed to slash aid to the poor was dubbed the 'Personal Responsibility and Job Opportunity Act'. The political world doesn't turn, it spins, and it is hard for the nimblest to keep their footing in this slippery interpretative milieu.

Few participants in the ideas debate aimed at anything more ambitious than expanding the conceptual base of reigning models. Ideas usually were seen as factors to be plugged into dominant frameworks or else as *ad hoc* devices. There was no intention that an ideas-oriented model, however well grounded, could become a rival to Realism/neo-Realism, liberal institutionalism, or the rational choice methods that increasingly suffuse them. It seems all the more extraordinary that a highly idealist version gained entry. Still, in mainstream studies what distinguishes a palatable ideas approach from 'soft' cultural or psychological models is that ideas are explicit programmatic ways of organising institutions, and their distributions of benefits and costs. These ideas are 'shared beliefs', which exclude idiosyncratic and leader-specific notions. By definition they can be intersubjectively validated. So one may be attentive to cultural and/or psychological insights if they adhere to this shared character. The next section examines historical insights about the application of rationalist models as presented by social scientists, who in a non-Marxian but dialectical vein, had come to conclusions very similar to those drawn by critical theorists. The 'silences' in rationalist social science extend well beyond treatment of Marxian scholarly critiques.

Psychology, science and 'silences'

Regarding B. F. Skinner's behaviourist fancies, a New Yorker cartoon long ago depicted two lab rats inside a cage chatting about a nearby scientist. One rodent brags: 'Have I ever got that guy trained. Whenever I press this lever, he gives me a pellet.' The point is that the subject, even in loaded-dice circumstances, 'elaborates and participates in that to which it responds' – that is, the stimulus intervenes according to what it signifies in the situational context for the subject.[28] In the field of psychology the notion of the isolated reflex or response was exposed long ago as 'a pathological dissociation of organismic activity prominent only within the luxurious confines of a laboratory – an anthropomorphic illusion.'[29] Human beings – if not ensconced in Dachau or held at gunpoint – are even more difficult to control or divine. 'A human being does not only have a hand and a heart', Crozier observed. 'He also has a head, which means that he is free to decide his own game. This is what almost all proponents of human relations theories, as well as their early rational proponents, tend to forget.'[30]

[27] William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 34.
[28] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 45.
[29] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: 1962), pp. 67–174.
[30] Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1967), pp. 158, 162.

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In mainstream IR literature those beneath leadership level are regarded as 'natives' once were in the anthropological canon. These subalterns 'could be observed enacting their culture, fulfilling cultural obligations, and behaving in culturally appropriate ways, but they were not expected to be self-conscious or reflective, capable of subjectivity, choice or contestation,' a critic writes.[31] 'The cultural scripts that constructed them were written by "us"; these told them who they were and how they should behave. [Today, by contrast, through their own eyes] we see culture in the making as well as in the doing: how agency and structure interact, how culture shapes self, and how self shapes culture.' Constructivists, in their unduly restrictive social-psychological view of identity – a conceptualization of identity arising in reactive fashion from the 'reflective appraisals' of others – do not seem to fully grasp this otherwise congenial point. Even George Herbert Mead had a far more active, and arguably subversive, view of the perceiving subject than some disciples appreciate.[32] Still, constructivism improves upon rational choice theory in its view of the beings inhabiting its modelled universe.

Rational choice theory depicts its individuals as optimising under a given set of constraints. But are constraints impervious to interpretative variations? For the sake of convenience interests are regarded as given and prior to the beliefs held by actors, so that ideas are relegated to the limbo of unexplained variance. Rational choice concedes that ideas can be important 'because unique predictions cannot be generated through an examination of interests and strategic interaction (utility functions and payoff matrices) because almost all 'games with repeated play have multiple equilibria.'[33] The translation of 'interest into appropriate policy' (and preceding that, preference) is problematic.'[34] Because actors cannot guarantee the consequences of their actions, it is the 'expected effects of actions that explains them'. In short, what actors expect is elaborated 'in their heads' although the evidentiary basis for these expectations is not.

The mind lives 'on images, absorbing and re-creating them as a basis for all understanding and action': these shared images are 'the means of symbolically combining inner emotional experience with various prevailing ideological currents' in a given time and place.[35] When wielding this potent imagery, Erikson observed, 'no actor and no effective innovator is really independent, nor can he dare to be entirely original: his originality must consist in the courage and singular concentration with which he expresses an existing imagery – at the proper time.'[36] This imagery – 'magic of the marketplace', 'peace through strength', 'Germany encircled',

[31] Lloyd I. Rudolph, 'The Self Constructing Culture: The Ethnography of the Amar Singh Diary' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 September 2000, pp. 3557, 3558.

[32] George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 114. See the discussion of Mead in Floyd W. Matson, *The Broken Image:* Man, Science and Society (New York; Anchor Books, 1964). pp. 170–175. Mead may be closer in spirit to Stuart Hall than to Harry Stack Sullivan's theory of 'reflected appraisals', which is the usual touchstone of the conventional constructivists.

[33] Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane (eds.) *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 17; Kowert and Legro, 'Norms, Identities and Their Limits', pp. 456, 461.

[34] Goldstein and Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, pp. 13, 240.

[35] Robert J. Lifton, *History and Human Survival* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 23.

[36] Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York, Norton, 1955). Put bluntly: 'creativity is the last thing wanted in any culture because of its potentialities for disruptive thinking', Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York: Vintage, 1963), p. 288.

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'evil empire' – cannot be spun out of nothing nor used any way one pleases, and when the context changes, so too will the credibility of the image, or the applicability of the model.

Rational choice itself is derived from a context-bound image of the way minds work. Fair enough when applied with caution, but formal frameworks generate irrational behaviour when practitioners are insensitive to context-dependence. In Vietnam, local combatants on both sides of the 17th Parallel regarded the typical Western equation of what is real with what is countable (body counts, tonnage dropped, sorties flown) as a very violent form of mysticism indeed.[37] What was overlooked by authorities – apart from all discouraging data – was the overspilling of 'disintegrative tendencies into the realm of idea systems and images [causing] a breakdown not only of social institutions but of the shared symbols necessary to ordered existence – symbols defining rhythms of life and death, group loyalties, and the nature of reality'.[38] Rational reward-punish models employed by policymakers misunderstood the history, motives and strategies of their opponents.[39] What invariably gets lost is the connection between normative ends and instrumental means.

So a rationalist model, by deprecating 'soft' phenomena of culture or social psychology, frustrated the aims for which it was intended to be the most effective means.[40] One might have more confidence in hard-nosed realists if they were not inclined to such startling misjudgements as the claim that America lost the Vietnam war 'due to deficiencies of our ally' and declaring culture irrelevant because the NVA and Viet Cong, on one hand, and the South Vietnamese army, on the other, 'were products of similar strategies and political cultures'.[41]

Culture is an extremely slippery and problematic term, but that is hardly a good reason for abandoning or deriding its use. 'One often is forced to resort to broad definitions', as critical theory-oriented scholars note, such as 'any interpersonally shared system of meanings, perceptions and values'.[42] Still, even the way pain is experienced depends on 'genetic endowment, and on at least four functional factors

[37] Michael Novak, *The Experience of Nothingness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 35.

[38] Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, pp. 216–17.

[39] In contrast to a 'conventional warrior mentality', a former central committee member contends that in the NLF, 'every military clash, every demonstration, every propaganda appeal was seen as a part of an intelligible whole: each had consequences far beyond its immediate apparent result. It was a framework that allowed us to view battle as a psychological event and to undertake negotiations in order to strengthen the military posture. The Americans seemed never to appreciate fully this strategic perspective . . . It was after all a traditional Vietnamese approach to warfare, a technique refined over centuries of confrontation with invaders more powerful than ourselves.' Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), pp. 86–87, 212.

[40] Why policymakers cling to such models despite persistent adverse 'feedback' has not to my knowledge been the subject of the application of rational methods.

[41] Michael C. Desch, 'Culture Clash: Assessing the Impact of Ideas in Security Studies' *International Security* 23, 1 (Summer 1998), p. 147. 'The functions, actions, and values of officers and soldiers are the inevitable consequence of the kinds of societies they are seeking to create or defend. This social context defines the character of the officer corps and the soldiers, their relationship to each other, and their human, social and economic impact on the population. Strategy mirrors this reality and in turn weighs strongly on the balance of forces. This framework exerts an overriding influence on soldiers' motivations in battle and an army's ability to endure protracted war. In this vital regard the Vietnam War was from its inception a very unequal battle between radically different kinds of armies.' See chapter 20, 'The Character and Consequences of the Two Vietnamese Armies' in Gabriel Kolko, *Vietnam: Anatomy of War* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 252.

[42] *Millennium* 'Special Issue on Culture in International Relations', 22, 3 (Winter 1994), p. 376.

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other than the nature and intensity of the stimulus: namely, culture, anxiety, attention, and interpretation. All these are shaped by social determinants, ideology, economic structure and social character.'[43]

Even in diagnosing mental illness, culture defines certain symptoms as legitimate so that patients can latch onto approved ways of expressing their underlying anguish, whether this be invoking evil spirits, hysteria or genetic maladies.[44] For Williams culture consisted of 'known meanings and directions, what the members are trained to; [and] the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested' and is 'always both traditional and creative'.[45] Culture requires its due, even if in the futile exercise of converting it into terms congenial to a positivist agenda.[46] I say 'futile' not because this cannot be done in principle but because no definition of culture which allows for adequate complexity and reflexivity (as Williams implies) ever pleased positivists, who cannot conceive that they themselves may form a 'culture' and not the last word in science, and to whom every 'soft' concept looks manipulable and untrustworthy.[47]

Yet ideas cannot be infinitely manipulable because an inhibiting cultural context – what Gramsci called 'common sense' – exists. Common sense, for Gramsci, 'define[s] the terms of public political discourse; it is embodied in social practices and therefore must be considered a material force' and 'civil society' is the sphere in which the struggle to define the categories of common sense takes place.[48] I suggest below that context can function as a mainstream counterpart to Gramsci's 'common sense' – a sufficiently equivalent term that permits conceptual connections to occur across the intradisciplinary divide between mainstream scholars and constructivists, and between rival constructivist camps. (Horkheimer and Adorno, of course, despised 'common sense' when construed as a keen folk wisdom.) In non-mainstream studies the Gramscian definition of 'the constitutive character of common sense' has been put to provocative use.[49] Should and can mainstream scholars be lured by, or prodded into, the need to develop a counterpart theory of contexts ?

Realists often allow that social beliefs influence how actors relate their interests to changing material circumstances (different contexts). For one domestic example, the reason why sterilisation of 'mentally defective' people was spurned in Britain in the 1930s, and welcomed in 19 US states, Scandinavia and Germany, was rooted in 'the moral and ideological environment', this eugenical measure 'infringed fundamental ideas about individual rights and social responsibility' in Britain.[50] Citizens' judgements in both domestic and international realms seem to be shaped not only by

[43] Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (New York: Bantam, 1976), p. 132.
[44] Joel Pfister, 'Cultural History of Emotions in Psychological Life', in Joel Pfister and Nancy Schnog (eds.) *Inventing The Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 18,19.
[45] Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', in his *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 4.
[46] Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. xiv.
[47] See, for example, Ido Oren, 'Is Culture Independent of National Security? How America's National Security Concerns Shaped "Political Culture" Research', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6: 4 (2000) pp. 543–71.
[48] Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 112.
[49] Jutta Weldes, *Constructing National Interests: The United States and The Cuban Missile Crisis* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 241.
[50] Matthew Thomson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and Social Policy, 1870–1959* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 299.

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calculations of material advantage and by propaganda but are mediated or balanced by collective notions of what is ethical in a given context too. A theory of contexts seems in order.

From a critical theory perspective, struggles about meaning are struggles about power – although, for critical theorists, reflexivity justifiably is intertwined with force only in order to mitigate violence, or its arbitrary use.[51] Scholars who promote policies purely on their scientific merits tend to get rudely awakened as to how ideas are adapted to suit the agendas of self-aggrandising groups.[52] This is not to say that ideas mean exactly what their sponsors want them to mean; economic ideas, and the contexts in which they are presented, are contestable and never ultimately settled, at least not by argument. At the conclusion of the recent ideas debate, which saw a guarded welcome of 'conventional constructivists' into the mainstream, many scholars belatedly arrived at many of the same conclusions as critical theorists, if by a more roundabout and dubious path. The key liability of this latest disciplinary development is that ideas, whose power was beginning to be appreciated again, tended to become untethered from interests.

Reconnoitring the ideas debate

Peter Hall's influential volume on Keynesianism examined the ways in which ideas affect coalition-building and how 'administrative-political processes affected the selection of economic ideas'.[53] What matters is not the idea's intrinsic force in a given context but whether the idea reconciles the interests of elites within the institutional processes of a state so that a coalition emerges to enact the resulting agenda. The more powerful the sponsors, the more powerful the ideas. Goldstein went a step further in arguing that the 'power of the idea itself explains its acceptance', but her trade policy study consistently retreated into a political sponsorship argument.[54]

The unabashedly idealist case advanced by some contributors – that ideas exert a force all their own – was never persuasive.[55] The inherent snarl is that the claim that the 'power of the idea itself explains its acceptance' first must demonstrate that interests are interpenetrated by ideas, then these same ideas must be shown to exert influence untainted by the very interests they have just been shown to inter-

[51] Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, p. 107.

[52] See Robert Reich, *Locked in The Cabinet* (New York: Knopf, 1997). On domestic welfare reform, see the profile of Professor David T. Ellwood in The *New York Times Magazine*, 8 December 1996; and, on defence policy, see the JASON group case related in Christopher P. Twomey, 'The Vietnam War and The End to Civilian-Scientist Advisors in Defense Policy', *Breakthroughs*, IX: 3 (Spring 2000) .

[53] Peter Hall (ed.) *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism Across Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Essentially the same argument is advanced in a Gramscian guise by Steve Bernstein who looks at the 'social fitness of new norms with extant social structure' in his 'Ideas, Social Structure and The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6: 1 (March 2000), p. 465.

[54] Judith Goldstein, *Ideas, Interests and American Trade Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 2, fn. 1.

[55] J. K. Jacobsen, 'Much Ado About Ideas: The Cognitive Factor in Economic Policy', *World Politics*, 47: 2 (January 1995).

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penetrate.[56] This was an untenable move that anyone acquainted with critical theory would spot immediately. The hypothesis was afflicted by the tempting manoeuvre where interests are shown to become embedded in an idea (such as Keynesianism) whose institutionalisation supposedly proves that agents were mesmerised by the 'power of ideas' all along. One loses sight of the materialistic motives driving the success of an idea and so one ends by fetishising ideas. Ideas and material circumstances, according to critical theory and Gramscian cultural studies, axiomatically are found together, mutually influence one another, and are not reducible one to the other. The mainstream's challenge, as shown in the next section, was to arrive at a similar proposition without hauling tainted theoretical baggage along.

Mainstream scholars readily agree that ideas affect groups by influencing how they relate their interests to circumstances, and they agree that ideas trigger changes of the context – which itself is comprised of intellectual precepts and institutional arrangements fixing the limits of permissible action. At times the context itself can be at stake in contests among groups promoting rival projects. This context affects the kinds of issues that appear salient, by creating or altering expectations – that is, creating the 'background psychological operating system' within which new ideas and interpretative ploys come into play.

While ideas alone do not create interests, mainstream scholars concede that material constraints are subject to some significant degree to the ideas or to the perceptions that actors have about them. Ideas and interests are both concepts and therefore are ideas because 'interests are perceived through the lenses of the existing ideologies in various historical settings'.[57] But it does not follow from this tricky proposition that interests are 'only' ideas that change once we change our view of reality. It is impossible to describe an action without reference to the ideas and meanings that inform it.[58] The intrinsic interlacing of material interest by ideational influences appears to be an infernally difficult concept to grasp. Few positivists or even constructivists comprehend this point, and when they do, they slip quickly back to an interest *versus* ideas dichotomy or else begin to fetishise the power of pure discourse.

Take a prominent scholar's survey of IR in which he equates the 'ideational approach' with a diarrhetically relativist rendition of constructivism emphasising 'the capacity of discourse to shape how political actors define themselves and their interests, and thus modify their behaviour'.[59] Discourse is described as if divorced from interest or power. The author informs us that this approach 'largely replaced Marxism as the pre-eminent radical perspective in international affairs' when, in fact, important variants of constructivism stem precisely from this 'replaced' tradition.[60] In fact, the project of cultural studies aims to demonstrate that political economy is thoroughly 'cultural without ceasing to be material' and 'that what students of literature and art call "cultural" is economic, not as base to superstruc-

[56] Goldstein, *Ideas, Interests and American Trade Policy*, p. 2 fn. 1.
[57] Robert H. Jackson, 'The Weight of Ideas in Decolonization: Normative Change in International Relations', in Goldstein and Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, p. 37.
[58] Rodney Barker, 'Hooks and Heads, Interests and Enemies: Political Thinking As Political Action', *Political Studies*, 48: 2 (2000), p. 224.
[59] Stephen M. Walt, 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', *Foreign Policy*, 110 (Spring 1998), p. 34.
[60] Ibid., pp. 40, 41.

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ture, but in its production, distribution and effects, including effects on reproducing class relations'.[61]

Another mainstream scholar employs the term 'nonmaterial explanations' to characterise ideas approaches, which supposedly 'attach key interest to how states purposes or goals are defined' because 'the ideas that policymakers carry around in their heads are very important in explaining their policy choices'.[62] This misleading formulation again detaches interest from ideas and restores readers to square one without any gain having been made from a decade-long ideas debate. Goldstein and Keohane, to be sure, 'recognise that ideas and interests are not phenomenologically separate', but their prime question 'is the extent to which variations in beliefs, or the manner in which ideas are institutionalised in societies, affect political action' and it is in pursuit of this purpose that slips occur into dubious claims for the force of ideas. This tack also lures them into justifying ideas in terms of their fit to a formal model so that an 'idea as commodity' metaphor ultimately is deployed.[63]

Policymakers, they say, rely on causal models when making choices, and policy entrepreneurs 'depend on ideas about how to translate these forces into a political and economic program'.[64] However, these maps must meet interest-bound criteria so that even 'efficiency is valued only to the extent that the means to a goal adhere to existing ideas, values, and institutions'. Actors are usually very well aware that the rules established in the victory of an economic idea constrains future choices (*via* path dependence), as exemplified by the recent protests against WTO policies.

The constructivist turn, as critical theorists behold it, is what is left after one removes the Marxian cores of critical theory and cultural studies.[65] Alex Wendt phrases his constructivist case as arguing for a 'cognitive, intersubjective conception of science in which identity and interests are endogenous to interaction' rather than 'exogenously given by structure'.[66] Interaction is again divorced from structure, or is left tenuously tied to it (through a 'rump materialism'). Wendt argued that anarchy acquires different meanings for different actors based on pre-existing 'communities of intersubjective understandings and practices' – a proposition that draws us close to the implication that some communities are privileged clubs whose privileges are bestowed by or wrung out of a material culture.[67] This claim approximates a critical theory position but simply is not teased out to any degree that threatens to link identity formation with material forces. The rupture point between conventional and critical constructivists is the former's assertion that 'the

[61] Iris Marion Young, 'Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser's Dual Systems Theory', *New Left Review*, 222 (March/April 1997 [Summer 1992]), p. 120.

[62] Helen Milner, 'International Political Economy: Beyond Hegemonic Stability', *Foreign Policy*, 110 (Spring 1998), pp. 116, 117.

[63] Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, 'Beyond Belief: Ideas and Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3 (1997), pp. 194–5.

[64] Charles Maier, *In Search of Stability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 45.

[65] See George Steinmetz, *State/Culture*, pp. 13–76. 'Any attempt to distinguish the abstract or ideal appearance of the state from its material reality . . . will fail to understand it.' (p. 76).

[66] Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46: 2 (Spring 1992), p. 393.

[67] See Kratochwil, 'Constructing a New Orthodoxy?', p. 95. 'Scientific inquiry is based on certain ethical principles that govern arguments and the allocation of burden of proof' in debates among fallible authorities.

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structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces . . .'[68]

Critical theorists always view ideas and material forces in the realm of power politics as inseparably, if complexly, related. Wendt occasionally allows for the importance of ideas being 'mediated by power relations'.[69] But Checkel and Adler, among others, insist that constructivists are staking out a perfectly sensible middle ground between mainstream scholars and postmodernists.[70] Is this really the case?[71]

Going conventional: a critique

A key perk of mainstream scholars is ample freedom to misconstrue the theoretical character of challengers. Note how constructivism is conveyed for audiences of a major IR journal where the author imposes a neat but invidious distinction between 'critical' constructivism, based on critical theory, Gramsci and Foucault, and 'conventional' constructivism, which is cleansed of unsavoury influences. Critical and conventional versions, Ted Hopf argues, share assumptions about the mutual constitution of actor and society, anarchy as a social construct, power as being both material and discursive and of interests as being variable with the context. So far, so good.

Critical constructivism 'rejects either the possibility of the desirability of a minimal or contingent foundationalism' and regards 'establishing causality as an illusory goal' – which would surprise the Frankfurt critical theorists who assiduously toiled to elaborate a profoundly subtle 'materialist conception of history'.[72] From the inaugural era of the Institute for Social Research through Habermas' endeavour to construct a 'universal pragmatics', practitioners of critical theory exhibited little sympathy for the 'antifoundational' bent of postmodern theorists with whom they

[68] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 1.

[69] Ibid., pp. 132, 330.

[70] Checkel, ' 'The Constructivist Turn', p. 326. Their approach, incidentally, stems from a frequently justified suspicion that ideas get used as rhetorical camouflage for self-interest – a gambit which, where proven, vindicates realists. Rarely noted is the opposite tack that actors motivated by ethics cast their motives in terms of self-interest in order to buttress their case before a wider and less ethically fussy audience. Yet this formulation too misses the point that high-minded ideas inevitably are interwoven with interest.

[71] On the dubious practice of arriving at wise choices by 'splitting the difference', see Alexander Cockburn, *Corruptions of Empire* (New York: Verso, 1987), pp. 199–211. Perhaps ideas are 'distinguished from interests in that ideas-based proposals are driven by principles or values that are informed by a wider perspective on causes and effects, costs and benefits'. M. Stephen Weatherford and Thomas B. Mayhew, 'Tax Policy and Presidential Leadership: Ideas, Interests and the Quality of Advice', *Studies in American Political Development*, 9 (Fall 1995), p. 289. But who suffers from supporting 'tax fairness' if it means that they fork out less tax or reap more services? Who suffers from opposing militarism if the result is oneself or one's children kept out of body bags? Saints are still saints but high-minded behaviour exerts an impact on material fortunes which cannot be ignored

[72] Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism', pp. 183, 198. It is the case though that from Korsch to Adorno and even up to Habermas there is a rejection of the metaphysical foundations of 'traditional theory'. All these critics, however, retain a concern with thematising the whole, whether in terms of a 'totality' (Hegel/Lukacs) or a 'constellation' (Adorno/Benjamin) of fragments. There was never a need for metaphysical foundations in order to thematise the whole: these are very different things.

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are conflated and confused here.[73] It says a great deal about the intellectual insularity of the discipline that no referee or editor had the knowledge or willingness to raise questions about this portrayal.

Critical constructivism aims at 'unmasking power', which is true, while conventional constructivism is 'analytically neutral' as to its attitude to the distribution and nature of power in any society. No scholar evidently has any reason to unmask behind-the-scenes workings and purposes of powerful agents, which is just not a neutral to do. This is exactly the spurious sort of neutrality that critical theory arose to expose. Critical theory supposedly regards 'world politics as an array of fragments that can never add up to a whole' and so deems efforts to construct such a whole as the political imposition of 'some kind of rationalised, naturalised order on irrepressible differences,' which once again muddles up critical theory with a batch of postmodern theories, such as Saussure or Derrida, intent on conducting analysis exclusively within and between texts, as ungrounded systems of signs.[74]

Readers are informed that conventional constructivism aims at 'production of new knowledge and insights based on real understanding' while critical constructivists are interested in such unscientific notions as enlightenment and emancipation – and a presumption reigns here that the former task cannot legitimately be related to the latter.[75] What of The Authoritarian Personality series, the Studies in Authority and the Family project of which it was part, the Studies in Prejudice series and a host of other empirical studies conducted by the Frankfurt school and later followers like Habermas, especially at the Starnberg Institute? The overarching purpose of critical theorists, as Leo Lowenthal put it, was 'to accomplish scientifically meaningful work in a manner that would allow its application to political purposes'.[76] In Horkheimer's heyday, when the psychoanalytic slant was particularly strong, the school's objective was 'to research the psychic processing of economically induced behavioural imperatives and their transformation into specific cultural meanings'.[77] One hardly can come up with a more concisely stated 'constructivist' agenda, and many decades before anyone designated themselves, or were designated, as a constructivist.

Hopf avers that only conventional constructivists wish to 'discover identities and their associated reproductive social practices' and offer a responsible empirical account of 'how these identities imply certain actions'. As unveiled by conventional constructivism, the power of a social practice, Hopf explains, is to 'produce intersubjective meaning within a social structure' – which rather nicely also matches up

[73] See Rudiger Bubner, 'Habermas' Concept of Critical Theory', in John Thompson and David Held, *Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980), p. 50–1.

[74] Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism', p. 199. On the critical theory-compatible contributions of Bakhtin, see Andrew Chadwick, 'Studying Political Ideas: A Public Political Discourse Approach', *Political Studies*, 48 (2000).

[75] Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism', p. 185.

[76] Leo Lowenthal, *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists: Lectures-Correspondence-Conversations* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. 1989), p. 238. Indeed, a 1930 survey revealing the underlying authoritarian attitudes of German working class and lower middle class supporters of the SDP stirred the School to begin plans to relocate – a rare instance where research probably saved the researchers' own lives (pp. 245–6).

[77] Wolfgang Bonss, 'The Program of Interdisciplinary Research', in Benhabib, *On Max Horkheimer*, p. 120.

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with a Gramscian 'awareness of the material nature of ideology and of the fact that it constitutes a practice inscribed in apparatuses'.[78]

Critical constructivism 'aims at exploding myths associated with identity formation whereas conventional constructivists wish to treat these identities as possible causes of action'.[79] But what do these imputed identities, which are loosely defined as the 'basic character' of states, stem from? Did the American state under Jimmy Carter have the same 'basic character' as the American state under Nixon, or did the second Reagan administration have the same 'identity' as his first administration?[80] Identity would be a very mercurial thing if the answers were all in the affirmative. Just what are the domestic and international components, and who are the agents involved, in creating (and recreating) this 'basic character'? You don't have to be a critical theorist to tell that identity 'cannot be constituted without reference to place, to conditions of existence' that help to define 'who we are' and 'what we are doing here'.[81] Conventional constructivism relies on Mead's and follower Harry Stack Sullivan's view that the 'self is made up of reflected appraisals' – a zealously passive notion that is extended to the way states supposedly acquire identities. Yet utilising Sullivan's own term 'parataxic distortion,' one easily poses the scenario that, given such passivity, one's identity is likely to be composed of nothing but parataxic distortions, that is, the sum of distorted identifications in which all the deluded participants – who internalise one another's misapprehensions – consensually validate a Lewis Carroll reality.[82]

Hopf observes that conventional constructivists really offer no causal theory of identity construction and that critical theory is 'more advanced in this regard but it comes at a price that one may or may not be willing to pay', which is an admirably candid appraisal.[83] Hopf and the conventional constructivists speak of many possible identities available for each state (a proposition that keeps scrutiny fixed at state unit level), but not of many identities – bearing diverse interests and projects- competing within each state for power.[84] So much for 'second image reversed' studies

[78] Chantal Mouffe, 'Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci', in Tony Bennett, Graham Martin, Colin Mercer, Janet Woolacott (eds.) *Culture, Ideology and Social Process* (London: Open University, 1987), p. 223.

[79] Hopf, ' The Promise of Constructivism', pp. 183–4.

[80] See, for example, Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out there in The Wild Blue Yonder: Reagan, Star Wars and The End of The Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[81] Ronald Lipschutz, *Global Civil Society and Global Environmental Governance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 220.

[82] 'These psychotic elaborations of imaginary people and imaginary personal performances are spectacular and seem very strange. But the fact is that in a great many relationships of the most commonplace kind – with neighbors, enemies, acquaintances, and even statistically determined people as the collector and the mailman – variants of such distortions exist. The characteristics of a person that would be agreed to by a large number of competent observers may not appear to you to be the characteristics of the person toward whom you are making adjustive or maladjustive movements. The real characteristics of the other fellow at that time may be of negligible importance to the interpersonal situation. This we call parataxic distortion.' Harry Stack Sullivan, The *Psychiatric Interview* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1956), pp. 24–5. On Sullivan's relation to the 1920s 'Chicago School' of Mead, Dewey and Cooley see Helen Swick Perry, *Psychiatrist of America: The Life of Harry Stack Sullivan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 251–60.

[83] Hopf, ''Promise of Constructivism', p. 193.

[84] Lipschulz, *Global Civil Society*, p. 197.

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and for linking domestic and international realms of politics.[85] Curiously, one finds a ready recognition in this literature that factions compete for dominance within substate organisations, such as the military, though not in the overall apparatus of the state itself.[86] (This oversight stems, in part, from the interchangeable use of 'state' and 'government.' – and not only or universally by conventional constructivists.)[87]

Identities rarely are 'reconstituted'. What usually is at stake in such constructivist studies are political projects of domestic groups striving to demonstrate to dominant elites (where they do not already comprise part of these elites) that a preferred course of conduct is in their interest too. Does it really make sense to say that industrialists and bankers were 'reconstituted' in their grudging acceptance of Keynesianism and welfare state policies in the early postwar era? This was no small change, but how embedded does this liberalism appear today? In the US and UK, are corporations and banks – not to mention the state – reverting to their 'pre-reconstituted' (pre-Keynesian) identities? The surface clearly is all that is being scratched by such a question. Still, what even the conventional constructivist literature usefully, if not uniquely, emphasises is that there are usually several paths – with different immediate consequences for the distributions of costs and benefits – by which to accomplish a particular goal.

In assigning meaning, however, Hopf finds that conventional constructivism's amazingly hazy notion of identities and identity-formation does the analytical service of reducing uncertainty.[88] The implicit interest that a critical constructivist detects here is the managerial mission to control uncertainty even when, by different criteria, uncertainty can be a 'good thing' – indicating, for example, that the range of participants and of policy choice is widening or that the governing coalition is reformulating its views to meet changed conditions. Ultimately, Hopf praises conventional constructivism's 'nonpareil richness of the elaboration of causal/constitutive mechanisms in any given social context' – nonpareil except for a critical constructivism rooted in critical theory.

On theories of contexts

For non-mainstream scholars a latent theory of contexts already is found in Gramscian studies where, as Weldes, Rupert and others have sketched, interpellation and articulation comprise the stuff of common sense, and porous lines are drawn

[85] Wendt, to be fair, observes that his target is Waltzian system level theory, which he criticises at the system level, and does not want to give short shrift to domestic factors. Wendt, 'On the Via Media: A Response to Critics', *Review of International Studies*, 26: 1 (2000).

[86] See Jeffrey Legro, *Cooperation Under Fire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 20 and Elizabeth Kier, 'Culture and French Military Doctrine Before World War II', in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, pp. 186–215. Compare this approach to the use of currents in analysis of grand strategy in Franz Schurmann, *The Logic of World Power* (New York: Random House, 1974), Paul Joseph, *Cracks In The Empire* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), and Michael Brenner, *Nuclear Power and Non-Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[87] Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, 'Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security', in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. 37, fn. 13. Wendt does make such a distinction in *Social Theory of International Politics*.

[88] Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism', p. 188.

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between this 'common sense' and allegedly sophisticated theories. What are required then are mainstream counterparts with which to critically engage. Minimally, any such theory will be forced by this competition to give an account of how ideas arise from and alter social structure (and if not, why not), provide a defensible concept of causal relations regarding links between the cognitive–cultural and the socio-economic spheres, demonstrate why the analyst is or is not implicated in the analysis, and what the consequences and/or remedies are.

Laffey and Weldes are on the right track in saying that competing conceptions of causal relations ultimately were at stake in the ideas debate.[89] They argue, as did the critical theorists, that ideas are 'inextricably embedded in material practices and other social relations because power relations are entailed in all representational practices'.[90] Further, the ideological effects of representations 'are closely bound up with the contexts in which they are deployed'.[91] Examining core values (which presumably form part of Weldes' 'security imaginary'), Herman adds that the use of force against an ally might be unthinkable whereas against an enemy it would be easy due to 'the image of the other actor and the norms this image defines as relevant'.[92] Where the image (say, Iraq in 1989 and Iraq in 1991) springs from and why it takes the form it does, are questions that no ideational school of thought has sorted out convincingly.

The critical theory/Gramscian approach scrutinises the play of organised interests always striving to gain the interpretative upper hand, propagating their views in elite circles and public forums, and seeking sympathetic decision-making sites (congressional committees, the executive branch, the courts, regulatory agencies, and so on) in which most favourably to wage their fights. Conventional constructivism can aid us here although there remains a strong tendency, despite its avowed concern to sort out the murky process of 'mutual constitution', to weight structure over agency and, indeed, to eschew agency altogether.[93] This happens because many constructivists – even some who wield critical theory or Gramscian sympathies – search for, and are captivated by, speech (linguistic) structures through which, as the notorious post-modernist phrase goes, people are 'spoken'.

Germain and Kenny clearly regard it as a failing that, for Gramsci, consciousness 'could not be understood independently of the exigencies of the economic sub-structure'.[94] Apparently, no theoretical advance is possible until released from such exigencies. Why this is necessary is not explained by authors who apparently regard the inclusion of any role for economics at all as vulgar economic determinism. Weldes in a Cuban missile crisis study succumbs to this postmodernist bent. After making much of variable meanings that can be attached, apparently at the pleasure of the authorities, to 'visceral feelings' about the discovery of the missiles, the

[89] Laffey and Weldes, 'Beyond Belief,' p. 209.
[90] Ibid., pp. 210.
[91] Ibid., p. 211.
[92] Richard K. Hermann, James F. Voss, Tonya E. Schooler and Joseph Ciarrochi, 'Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata', *International Studies Quarterly*, 41: 1 (January 1997), p. 423.
[93] Checkel, 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations', p. 325.
[94] Randall D. Germain and Michael Kenny, 'Engaging Gramsci: International Relations Theory and The New Gramscians', *Review of International Studies*, 28: 2 (January 1998), p. 12. See responses by Craig Murphy and Mark Rupert two issues afterward.

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'security imaginary' – a pool of working concepts, disparate rules of thumb and half-baked beliefs – gathers irresistible cultural momentum and supposedly determines the outcome. In the wobbly span of a single sentence the United States is endowed with a 'well-established cold war identity' but still suffers from an 'always precarious self.'[95] The American state – a unitary actor, or embodied momentarily as such by Excomm – is an insecure and highly sensitive entity which nonetheless ignores Europe – also a unitary actor – which does not share the same common sense as the US about Cuban missiles, or later, Vietnam, the 'evil empire' and much else. States, funnily enough, seem able to turn identity-formation 'receptors' on or off depending on whether it seems advantageous to those in charge, or is forced upon them. Conventional constructivism's influence crowds out Gramsci here. Yet actors clearly can rise above (or sneak around) the 'security imaginary' too, as JFK clearly and fortunately did.

Actors devise self-interested but plausible interpretations of changing circumstances, and promote programmatic messages to the citizenry (or those potential allies within it) to reinforce dominance or to displace that of others. People can 'reconfigure what is happening to attain their own advantage or meet their needs'.[96] Indeed, as Goffman shows, even patients in total institutions elude self-identification with the roles imposed upon them by 'working the system' for forbidden advantages.[97] Of course, one should be wary of cheery portrayals of citizens as 'rascally independent decoders of texts, forever spinning off his or her own individualised forms of resistant readings'.[98] As evidenced in the success of the 'political correctness' bogeyman concocted in the 1990s, 'well-targeted money can create debates out of thin air'.[99] While ideas are interpreted within the context into which they are inserted, the context itself is not an inert background although dominant groups are all too happy to portray a favourable one as 'the way the world works'.

Yet all political actors 'work' their environments in light of changing circumstances and play upon the ideational elements available in their cultural contexts to protect or to advance their concerns, and are well aware that rivals do too.[100] To be implemented, the 1995 Framework on Climate Control, for example, had to have different social meanings, each of which is context-dependent, but each of which may be 'essentially contested' by other parties. '[R]eports on the International Negotiating Committee meetings directed to prepare for the first Conference of the Parties in March 1995, and that meeting itself, suggest that numerous different social meanings still stalk the meeting halls. If this is so, then which meaning(s) are accepted as legitimate, and how their legitimacy is established, become central to the exercise.'[101]

[95] Weldes, *Constructing National Interests,* p. 219.
[96] Alaine Touraine, *The Return of the Actor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), pp. 1–14; J. K. Jacobsen, *Chasing Progress In The Irish Republic: Ideology, Democracy and Dependent Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). pp. 1–31.
[97] Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 130, 305.
[98] Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 25
[99] Susan George, 'How to Win The War of Ideas: Lessons From The Gramscian Right', *Dissent* (Summer 1997), p. 50.
[100] Margaret Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. xxiv.
[101] Lipschutz, *Global Civil Society*, p. 246.

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Similarly, the fraught peace process in Northern Ireland can be consolidated only if rival leaders succeed in presenting the same documents to their respective followers, clothed in persuasive interpretations about the terms of institution-building. The Ulster Unionist Party leader explains why the agreement fastens the six counties forever in the bosom of Britain while his republican *confrères* must argue that it is instead a stepping stone to a united Ireland. Neither group is deceptive in any way that a polygraph can detect: the different contexts in which the Unionists and republicans are situated generate different interpretative possibilities and plausibility. It isn't that Unionists see in the gestalt card image two faces (as is their habit) while Sinn Fein perceives a chalice, they both comply with their audiences' views of the minimum concessions they can live with.

'Given the same measure of racial or cultural pluralism', as Price observes in South Africa, 'different contexts (especially with respect to political institutions and the distribution of resources) equal different outcomes'.[102] Likewise, 'the mere existence of ethnic difference does not produce the politicisation of those differences'.[103] Politicising ethnicity and race can take a variety of forms 'with substantially different consequences for the quality of a society's political life – particularly in regard to levels of political conflict and stability. The introduction of a socially constructionist view of cultural and quasi-cultural (race) identity has sensitised us to the role of context in the derivation of seemingly given and fixed identity.'

Facets of critical theory, through the vehicle of what mainstream scholars might call an interactionist approach, can provide a conceptual bridge to investigate relations between cognitive and socioeconomic processes which retains elements of both while avoiding the excesses of either.[104] As evidenced by the acceptance of conventional constructivism, mainstream studies still resist the historical materialist notion that culture 'must be finally interpreted in relation to its underlying system of production'.[105] Still, there are signs that the need to examine context entails an attendant recognition that norms are 'not divorced from the material world and impervious to the activities of agents such as nation-states' – and substate actors.[106] The concept of articulation can guide formulation of theories of contexts outside its original Marxian realm.[107] The field is tantalisingly open since 'we have no theory for contexts, no rules for it, and no clear idea of what limits it may have'.[108]

Articulation, a familiar term in these pages, links 'elements which have no necessary relation to each other' (for example, what advertising executives do for a living) and 'involves delinking or disarticulating connections in order to link or rearticulate others [and] is a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces, to redefine the possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations – the context – within which a practice is located'.[109] Contexts generate puzzles, which

[102] Robert Price, 'Race and Reconciliation in South Africa', *Politics and Society*, 25: 2 (June 1997), p. 151.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', in Bennett et al. (eds.), *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*, p. 12.
[105] Williams, *Resources of Hope*, p. 7.
[106] Leonard J. Schoppa, 'The Social Context in Coercive International Bargaining', *International Organization*, 53: 2 (Spring 1999), p. 309.
[107] Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservativism and Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 54.
[108] Scharfstein, *The Dilemma of Context*, p. 3.
[109] Grossberg. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, p. 397.

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often are puzzles only so long as we take a particular context as given rather than to see it as both variable and interest-laden. Where one goes from there will vary depending on the degree of awareness one comfortably has that these analytical procedures, and the results they yield, are value-bound too.

Because you put something in context does not mean you are being critical, but if you are critical, you will put something in context. This is a difference of some importance because the sociology of knowledge, as rendered by Karl Mannheim, also puts everything in context but is mainstream-oriented. The issue here is one of reflexivity, or critique of the intersubjective context in which the subject is operating: what marks critical theory, after all, is less simply a concern with the context than its normative contestation of the context.[110]

Habermas' early work *Knowledge and Human Interests* with its emphasis on the 'ideal speech situation' (rather than his later dalliance with a universal pragmatics) projected an 'emancipatory interest' without which a contestation of the structural context becomes impossible. Only its inclusion in the equation, so to speak, makes the contextual argument critical rather than purely analytic. This, however, raises the question whether there is a place for critical theory in a mainstream unconcerned with radical political aims and norms. Palen is correct that constructivism, as rendered by Wendt, 'arrived at a definition of the task of social science that precludes any form of social criticism'.[111] This is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, a theory of context derived from, or in dialogue with, Gramsci can enable mainstream scholars to conduct deep explorations of relations between agent and structure when sifting out the sources of policy choice. Such a dialogue would keep Gramscians and critical theorists on their toes too.[112]

The Gramscian/critical theory approach makes one, or should make one, exquisitely aware of the material basis of ideology, sensitive to contests to control the political context, and attunes one to the social construction of reality without capitulating to relativist drivel or a fetishism of ideas.[113] One does not construct a context 'by bringing the pieces together, and showing how the pieces fit together [which is] not the same as defining the mode of that articulation, the nature of that fit'.[114]

Who or what else but agents, finally, can articulate this fit and these links? The links do not articulate themselves. The mainstream ideas literature tried to avoid any suggestion that ideas are manipulable entities, although at the same time it quite properly demanded stress on the role of agency. Any hint that agents employ ideas for gain was chalked up as mere or theoretically uninteresting manipulation. Yet it is always agents who put any issue 'into context' just as, in turn, it is analysts such as ourselves who put what those actors do into context too. The issue of 'elite manipulation', and how it is treated in scholarship, is very tricky yet promising terrain for applying and appraising competing theories of contexts. A Vietnam War veteran, for

[110] My thanks to Steve Bronner regarding this point.

[111] Ronen Palan, 'A World of Their Making: An Evaluation of The Constructivist Critique in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 26: 3 (October 2000), p. 592.

[112] Germain and Kenny, 'Engaging Gramsci', p. 21.

[113] The Gramscian notion of ideology 'as a collective structure suggests that it is a product of social action'. Michael Freeden, 'Practising Ideology and Ideological Practices', *Political Studies*, 48: 2 (2000), p. 317.

[114] Laura Kipnis, 'Refunctioning Reconsidered: Towards a Popular Left Culture', in Colin McCabe (ed.) *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 56, 61.

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example, recounts being asked by a classroom of secondary school students decades later if the American antiwar movement had demoralised him in combat:[115]

> What had damaged my morale, I told them, was the discovery that the people we had been sent to defend did not want us there – and indeed, more often than not and with good reason – hated us; that we had been ordered by our government to win the hearts and minds of the people of Vietnam with nothing but rifles and bombs and bullets and American arrogance; that what we were involved in had nothing to do with the cause of liberty and democracy and freedom for which I had enlisted in 1966 at the age of 17; that we were redcoats, not patriots, and that our national leaders had put us up to it; that we were killing and dying for something worse than nothing.

The pupils had been taught that America lost the Vietnam War because wicked protesters undermined troop morale. One may hypothesise that the more citizens accept such unchallenged beliefs, the easier life will be for national leaders and for mainstream analysts. The omitted variables are behaving themselves; the 'data' are conforming. But 'counter-elites', like this veteran, inhabit the public realm too and convey their own sober experiences. So cumulative public judgements about past foreign policy affect the 'identity' of the American State – in the form, in this case, of a Vietnam Syndrome constraining military adventures for which there was formerly *carte blanche*. Can scholars in or out of the mainstream realistically omit this level of analysis, this continuous and crucial conflict over situating facts in their proper contexts?[116]

Conclusion

In mainstream IR ideational factors remained a residual factor within the dominant frameworks of analysis or else were imported in the form of a 'conventional constructivism' which is, if anything, less empirically inclined than critical theory ever was. At the height of the 1990s debate ideational approaches promised to open an analytical avenue between elites, institutions and the public realm as well as to alert scholars to the subtle political dynamics at play when elites devise public policy. Critical theory's point is that political and economic institutions are permeated with 'significations and norms' and that 'even the most discursive cultural practices have a constitutive, irreducible political-economic dimension; they are underpinned by material supports'.[117]

Secondly, rationality is itself a concept and so is the notion of interest, although they are not *only* concepts once they acquire material support and institutional expression. (Indeed, as Adorno pointed out, positivists are reluctant to acknowledge their own emergence from and relation to a particular context, which may account for their reluctance to examine contexts at all.)[118] This formulation, if by no means novel, may be the key contribution that the ideas debate brought to the mainstream.

[115] W. D. Ehrhart, *In the Shadow of Vietnam* (London: McFarland, 1991), p. 17.
[116] 'The very concept of a fact', Horkheimer argues, 'is a social process'. *The Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 82.
[117] Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition: Dilemmas of Justice in a Post-Socialist Age', *New Left Review*, 212 (1996), p. 72.
[118] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Introduction', in Adorno (ed.) *The Positivist Debate in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 5.

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Constructivists of all stripes seem to agree that it is vital to theorise links between subjective experience and social/institutional structures, although constructivists differ radically over the nature of issues such as reifying the state, the proper unit level of analysis, and the adequacy of a social psychological approach for understanding formation of identities.[119]

Rational choice theory, a proponent asserts, 'does not presume that actors possess perfect and complete knowledge about future events. It merely assumes that, given the information they have, they try to pursue the best available means to achieve their ends.'[120] Yet psychotherapists have long strived to detect reasons behind the behaviour of psychotic patients, and therapeutic successes occurred based on this belief that patients' actions are meaningful if one tries to understand their viewpoint. If so, have psychotics evidenced forms of rationality all along? The question arises as to what, according to this elastic criterion, is not rational? What evidence do we need to decide case by case that rational choice is applicable, partially useful, or useless.[121]

Rational theories typically treat contexts as inert backgrounds, independent of activities under study. But the practice of analysing articulation 'does not separate the focus from the background; instead, it is the background that actually articulates the focus [and] the task is made even more difficult when the analyst is located in the context' in which he or she is working. And this is probably the hardest nut to crack. Why weren't mainstream scholars, steeped in realism, drawn more to historical materialism than idealism during the debate? It is at first glance puzzling why scholars, who usually consign ideas to the status of supplements to interest-based paradigms, opened a space for conventional constructivists who skirt so perilously along the edge of philosophical idealism. One explanation is that what unites unlikely allies is that they both are fond of the fiction of the neutral scientific observer who supposedly plays no role in influencing or being influenced by the wider social system. Everything looks exquisitely 'scientific' in a positivist mode when critical theorists and their ilk are not around to chip away at that conceit. Conventional constructivists nonetheless have widened a small breach in IR, perhaps even permitting entry of insights from other social sciences and other frameworks.

Just how 'small [a] part of what constitutes interests is actually material' is a question around which conventional and critical constructivists can engage in useful dialogues.[122] For mainstream IR, entering dialogues not with Marxism *per se* but with psychology, anthropology, and historical sociology would be a considerable step in the direction of 'interdisciplinary materialism'. A serious dialogue by both mainstream scholars and conventional constructivists with critical constructivists would be valuable for all, although each scholar will have to decide for himself or herself whether this game is worth the candle. Still, the competing constructivisms are surely in agreement when Wendt warns that the 'dependence of theory on method' becomes 'problematic if one method comes to dominate a field' inasmuch as in 'such a context, certain questions never get raised, certain possibilities never considered'.[123]

[119] Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Desire All The Way Down', *Review of International Studies*, 26: 1 (January 2000).
[120] HeeMin Kim, 'Rational Choice Theory and The Third World', *Comparative Politics*, 30: 1 (October 1997), p. 98.
[121] Stephen Walt, 'A Model Disagreement', *International Security*, 24: 2 (Autumn 1999). pp. 178–9.
[122] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 114–15.
[123] Ibid., p. 35.

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