

# Constructivism: The Limits of Bridging Gaps



## INTRODUCTION

BY FOCUSING ON THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL IN WORLD POLITICS CONSTRUCTIVISTS HAVE GENERATED THEORETICAL DEBATES WITH A POTENTIAL FOR INTERDISCIPLINARITY THAT LEADS BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY (IR).<sup>1</sup> Especially the role and function of social facts (Ruggie 1998b) and the influence of social practices (Wendt 1987; Koslowski and Kratochwil 1994) have facilitated an enhanced understanding of the social construction of world politics. Theorising the impact of the social has motivated a broad range of research projects and theoretical debate in IR following the observation of once leading United States constructivists that 'Neorealism and Neoliberalism are "undersocialized" in the sense that they pay insufficient attention to the ways in which the actors in world politics are socially constructed. This common thread has enabled a three-cornered debate with Neorealists and Neoliberals to emerge' (Wendt 1999:4). Subsequently, constructivism was established as a counter movement to neorealism and neoliberalism which often are summarised as rationalist approaches to IR.<sup>2</sup> Following debates about ontology among constructivists and rationalists,<sup>3</sup> constructivist theoretical innovations were generated by a range of positions that

emanated from an interest in theorising social ontologies.

This article explores the different conceptual paths generated by the interest in the social in world politics. To that end, it focuses on constructivist work on norms bringing to bear the considerable integrative and interdisciplinary potential which norms have generated as a research object. Thus, not only constructivists but also legal scholars and sociologists consider norms as highly relevant in their respective disciplines. The article scrutinises studies which identify the powerful impact of norms and which have significantly contributed to theory-building based on the constructivist AXIOM of the politically relevant social. It is argued that, despite considerable progress in assessing the impact of the social on key categories in world politics such as *e.g.* actors, institutions, organisations, interaction, and political arenas, the integrative potential of norms, in particular with a view to the oft emphasised bridge-building between opposing standpoints, remains to be scrutinised regarding the impact of the 'constructivist turn' (Checkel 1998) in IR. The article proceeds to apply the bridge metaphor by situating core constructivist contributions as "stations" on a semi-circle above a baseline, *i.e.* the analytically constructed bridge above the epistemological abyss (see Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> As

the following elaborates in more detail, the bridge does extend the terrain for discussion among opposing theoretical positions. However, at the same time, the process of bridge-building offers insights into emerging conflictive issues among constructivists. This article seeks to shed light on these issues. It argues that they are highlighted particularly well by research on norms which has focused on two insights, including first the theoretical challenges of assessing the concept of intersubjectivity and the interrelation between structure and agency (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986; Wendt 1987); and second, the recognition that international politics is not exclusively negotiated in international settings but in transnational and national contexts as well (Zürn 1997; Risse *et al.* 1999; Müller 2001).

So far, the role of norms has been discussed along two questions. The first question of “why comply?” expresses an interest in explaining why states comply with global norms in the absence of institutionalised sanctions in the anarchic international state system (Kratochwil 1984; Chayes and Handler Chayes 1995; Koh 1997; Zürn 1997; Checkel 2001). Accordingly, the analytical emphasis has been set on the regulative function, *i.e.* the ‘effect’ of norms in world politics (Jepperson *et al.* 1996:52) in order to explain opposing and changing sets of institutionalised causal ideas and norms that guide action (Katzenstein 1993:267; Sikkink 1993:161). The second question, ‘what makes the world hang together?’ focuses on normatively and culturally established reference points in the organisation of ‘new transnational political orders’ (Ruggie 1998b; March and Olsen 1998, respectively). It is about the construction and implementation of the meaning of norms which are ascribed a stabilising yet not necessarily a stable role.

According to this perspective, ‘rules and norms are viewed as means to maintain social order’ (Kratochwil 1989:1). They maintain the order of society.<sup>5</sup> Both leading questions have evolved into two distinguishable theoretical approaches. Even though the second approach does not work with explicit reference to the leading question highlighted above, the range of contributions focusing on the societal order in world politics does advance a conception of norms that is clearly distinguishable from the first approach. In what follows, the two approaches are therefore referred to according to the umbrella terms of COMPLIANCE APPROACH and SOCIETAL APPROACH, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Both should be considered as offering complementary and not necessarily competing views on how to study the role of norms.<sup>7</sup> The compliance approach is more closely affiliated with the analytical strand of “modern constructivism” which addresses behavioural change as a reaction to norms (Katzenstein *et al.* 1998). In turn, the substantively broader societal approach brings together various analytical strands of research that are interested not only in the impact but also in the emergence of norms which are explored as constituted by the interrelation between context and sociocultural practices. This understanding has contributed to theory-building and furthering the constructivist debate in particular by facilitating a perspective on theoretical debates beyond the boundaries of IR (see *e.g.* Guzzini 2000; Fierke and Jørgensen 2001).

The following scrutinises constructivist research on norms with reference to the two challenges that are taken as a yardstick for successfully theorising the social, including (1) the theoretical appreciation of intersubjectivity and (2) the horizontal and vertical extension of relevant political arenas in world politics. Both challenges overlap in the cen-

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tral question of how to conceptualise interaction as the process which constitutes meaning (Tilly 1998). The implementation of norms in different political arenas depends on the successful mediation of this meaning. In the 1980s constructivist work focused on precisely this problem. For example, the early work of Wendt (1987; cf. critically Guzzini and Leander 2001) built on the Giddensian concept of structuration which had been developed within the framework of reflexive sociology and which stresses the duality of structures. Thus, according to Giddens (1979:69), the 'structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems.' This originally key insight for any robust assessment of the social construction of reality as a process has been increasingly abandoned however. That shift in theoretical emphasis culminated in the 1990s when the modern strand of constructivism developed a neo-Durkheimian approach to the role of social facts, thus turning away from the early constructivists' insights from reflexive sociology. This functional behaviourist's take on constructivism has inserted a considerable conceptual barrier to furthering the analytical appreciation of intersubjectivity. The step towards analysing the mutual constitution of structure and agency, which was of considerable importance to the beginning of constructivist writing in IR, thus vanished from the forefront of this constructivist strand. As Flynn and Farrell (1999:510-11) comment correctly:

*Instead of fully exploiting the power of the insights they borrow from social theory about the recursive nature of the relationship between agent and structure, constructivists have ended up seeking to demonstrate only that norms as elements of struc-*

*ture (alongside material conditions) can determine the interests and identity of agents, rather than seeking to locate the power of norms in the process whereby they are created in the first place.*

As a result, the crucial question about the emergence and decay of norms remains a theoretical challenge that stands to be addressed by IR scholars to this day (Kratochwil 1984:690; Kowert and Legro 1996; Stewart 2001). The consequence is a conceptually dire straits in IR, posing an important theoretical challenge in the area of norm research, in particular, in the areas of foreign and security policy.<sup>8</sup>

The article's argument will be developed in three steps. The first step offers a concise summary of the core arguments of the constructivist turn and its consequences (SECOND SECTION). The second step critically elaborates the substantive input generated by this turn. This assessment is organised according to variation in research interest and theoretical approach. The different research perspectives are located as stations on a bridge according to their ontological preferences on the one hand, and their respective conceptual distinction from both rationalist and reflectivist standpoints, on the other (THIRD SECTION). The final step highlights the disputed perceptions of the input of the duality of structures on the quality of norms as constructed and structuring. It seeks to demonstrate that, while the innovative analytical input of persuasion and arguing has generated a considerable influence on scrutinising a substantially behaviourist compliance approach, the arguing approach still remains restricted to structuralist shortcomings. It is therefore proposed to address these with reference to reflexive sociology within the framework of the societal approach (FOURTH SECTION). In sum, by scrutinis-

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ing the constructivist turn according to its substantive and conceptual contribution in the area of norm research, the article finds that while constructivist theorising has facilitated debates which were crucial for methodological innovations and extended empirical research programmes in IR, the project of bridging the gap between so-called rationalist and reflectivist standpoints, respectively (Keohane 1988), has advanced the debate to a higher level (FIFTH SECTION).

### CONSTRUCTIVIST SITES OF CONSTRUCTION

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST TURN TOWARDS BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CONFLICTIVE RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS DREW ON EXTENSIVE DEBATES AMONG RATIONALISTS AND CONSTRUCTIVISTS ABOUT THE PARADOX OF CO-OPERATION UNDER ANARCHY. This discussion was closely linked with compliance research and unfolded to a large extent within the conceptual framework set by this debate.<sup>9</sup> This discussion gained particular leverage by focusing on the issues of legitimacy and norm implementation in international politics (Franck 1990; March and Olsen 1998; Zürn and Wolf 1999; Ratner 2000; Joerges 2002; Tully 2002). It was further developed by studies in the field of international law and/or interdisciplinary research on evolving legal and social practices, routinisation and institution-building within the environment of international organisations such as, *e.g.* the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the European Union (EU).<sup>10</sup> The insight into an increasing “power of norms” (Risse *et al.* 1999) and the role of norms in the process of consolidating the evolving structures of political order beyond the state (March and Olsen 1998; Weiler

1999; Olsen 2002) pushed the central challenges of norms research to the fore, *e.g.* the assessment of intersubjectivity and the mutual constitution of structure and agency, on one hand, and the diversification and multiplication of political arenas in world politics, on the other. In sum, the ensuing often transdisciplinary access to research on the ‘nature, functioning and origin of norms’ (Ruggie 1998a:13) facilitated a considerable and important push for constructivist research in particular and IR theory-building in general. The following draws on the discussion about norms in order to first critically explicate the distinctness of different constructivist approaches and, second, to scrutinise the theoretical underpinnings and outcomes regarding the future role of norms in world politics.

### THE CONSTRUCTIVIST TURN

In addition to a shared interest in the role and function of the social in world politics (Risse and Wiener 1999), the constructivist turn has generated a particular style of communication that facilitated a more encompassing discussion among researchers of different schools or theoretical leaning, compared with the exclusive and rather hostile debating style that has been prominent during previous decades. After decades of debates about binary oppositions, this shift in debating style allowed for the gradual emergence of friendly conceptual debates despite different epistemological standpoints.<sup>11</sup> For a discipline which had been characterised by a sequence of debates — particularly in the North American academic context<sup>12</sup> — about core theoretical concepts among representatives of accepted mainstream views on the one hand, and the critical input of “young Turks” on the other, and which

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had been characterised by a binary logic and a style of communication that was all but indirect,<sup>13</sup> this shift marked a significant change. A new focus on ontology opened the terrain for exchanging views about research objects and methodologies. Nonetheless, the value-added of this emergent conversation remains to be assessed more in detail, *e.g.* which are the shared conceptual insights? In addition, it is important to raise the question as to whether or not a discipline that is increasingly coined by clustering in the middle ground and hence increasingly losing touch with critical young Turks on the margins can still summons the critical potential that is necessary to scrutinise theoretical assumptions and grasp changes in world politics? Has the constructivist turn contributed to identify new analytical insights which offer important contributions to theory-building in IR? And, last not least, what is the value added of a culture of bridge-building for IR as a discipline?

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Upon first glance, a roughly summarised chronological reconstruction of the constructivist debate brings two insights to the fore. First, metaphorically speaking, the empirical implementation of constructivist approaches remains a methodological construction site of enormous proportions with plenty of architects and little agreement on shared conceptual common ground.<sup>14</sup> Research questions and theoretical views abound amongst a plethora of analytical innovations (see *e.g.* Fierke and Jørgensen 2001). It is therefore helpful to ask an additional second question, *i.e.* which — if any — constructivist research strand might be considered as THE constructivist approach? In other words, is the methodological diversity which evolved from the turn theoretically compatible; should it be? While Adler (1997:320) notes that ‘the debates

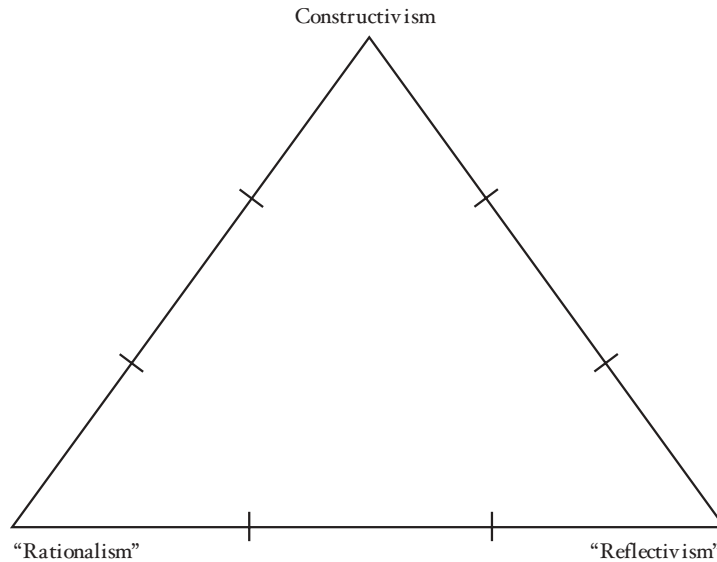
within constructivism itself as to what constructivism is really about ... have tended to obscure constructivism’s scientific basis,’ this article argues it was possible to identify research questions with relevance even beyond the boundaries of IR precisely because of the preceding debates about the substance of constructivist research. Indeed, it is emphasised that the innovative dimension of this substance was considerably supported by the style of the debate which was characterised by methodological openness and direct communication about contested issues. In the following, the debates over such contested issues are reconstructed as conversations which established constructivist “stations on a bridge” (see Figures 1, 2, 3). The focus is on ontology, leading the bridge across the epistemological abyss between the two rationalist and reflectivist poles on the base line. As the reconstruction of the emerging middle-ground in IR theorising seeks to demonstrate, however, the bridge-building process does lead to considerable friction in the middle, leaving the question of whether or not a successful rapprochement is possible to be answered. The theoretical debate about the role, function and origin of norms in IR will demonstrate the point.

### THE MIDDLE GROUND

Metatheoretically speaking, constructivist approaches mark a point above the base line of a triangle which connects the incommensurable theoretical ‘rationalist’ and ‘reflectivist’ standpoints — using Keohane’s (1988) terminology — which mark the other two corner points of the triangle (see Figure 1).

In other words, the constructivism point of the triangle bundles approaches which are explicitly distinguished from the two corner positions on the base line

FIGURE 1: CORE THEORETICAL POSITIONS



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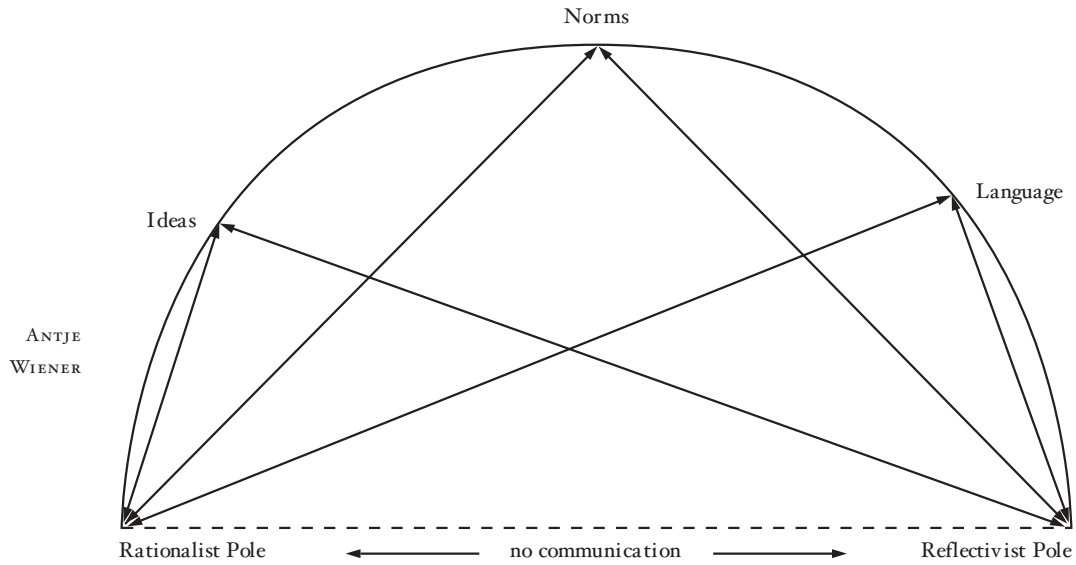
SOURCE: CHRISTIANSEN ET AL. (1999: 532).

of the triangle. At the same time, a more detailed analysis of the actual development of the constructivist turn demonstrates that constructivists are — at least in principle — interested and capable of communication with either pole position. This distinction established a relationship between all constructivist positions, on one hand, and, in addition with each of the two base line pole positions, on the other. The constructivism point can thus be characterised as a theoretical position which expresses a shared “claim to the middle ground.” However, it is important to note that the rationale underlying this movement towards that middle ground at times differed considerably among constructivists. For example while some constructivists claimed to be ‘seizing the middle ground’ (Adler 1997), others preferred “establishing the middle-ground” (Christiansen *et al.* 1999). The strategic movement of the former was distinguishable from the process of arguing about different theoretical positions as a process

during which the participants in the debate remained open to persuasion by the better argument of the others. A shared basic assumption of both movements was, however, to focus on ontological issues, thus leaving contested epistemological positions aside (Risse and Wiener 1999; Klotz 2001). Accordingly, constructivist approaches did not share one particular epistemological position which would, for example, emerge above the base line of the third debate (Figure 1). Instead the constructivist debate formed a semi-circle linking a range of distinct stations that are distinguishable according to ontological preferences and epistemological distinction from the pole positions (see Figure 2 on the bridge scheme, Figure 3 on the application of that scheme).

Constructivists’ theoretical interest has always, in principle, been guided by shared research issues and methods. The key common assumption of constructivists has been to bring in the social to an undersocialised discipline. Taking this

FIGURE 2: ESTABLISHING THE MIDDLE GROUND



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EXPLANATIONS TO FIGURE 2: ALL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES ARE DISTINGUISHED FROM EACH OF THE TWO POLE POSITIONS; ESTABLISHING VARIATION AMONG THE CONSTRUCTIVIST STATIONS. THE SEMI-CIRCLE THUS EVOLVES ACCORDING TO THE FOUR FOLLOWING CRITERIA: (1) PREFERENCE FOR ONTOLOGY OVER EPISTEMOLOGY; (2) ONTOLOGICAL PREFERENCES SUCH AS E.G. IDEAS, NORMS, LANGUAGE; (3) DISTINCTION FROM THE POLE POSITIONS; AND (4) VARIATION OF METHODOLOGICAL PREFERENCES.

SOURCE: CHRISTIANSEN ET AL. (1999: 536).

perspective seriously and bringing it to bear in empirical research poses the challenge of developing a robust analytical approach to the “intersubjective dimension of human action” in politics as a key element in (world) politics.<sup>15</sup> While the majority of constructivists would find themselves in agreement about stressing an interest in discussing issues of ontology (what things are made of) over epistemological debates (how do we know) as a logical consequence of the notion of socially constituted facts (Wendt 1998:103), the operationalisation of the social in applied research differs widely and significantly among constructivists (Ruggie 1998a:856).<sup>16</sup> In other words, the common concern with the notion of ‘constituted social facts’ and a shared interest in the ‘constitutive role of ideational factors’ (Ruggie 1998b:858; Risse 2000:5, respec-

tively) has not prevented the participants in the debate to pursue different avenues in theory and research. To offer an all-encompassing insight into the complexity of different constructivist research strands would be inappropriate given the space limitations of a single article. I therefore focus on a presentation of those emerging middle ground positions which allow for a critical appreciation of key steps towards theory-building. Even though they may not have been recognisable *e.g.* as consistent and acknowledged research programmes, it is argued that they are of critical theoretical importance none the less. As a shared theoretical issue among constructivists of all strands, the intersubjectivity premise offers an excellent criterion according to which it is possible to scrutinise the constructivist me-

thodology. It represents an 'ontological middle ground between individualism and structuralism by claiming that there are properties of structures and agents that cannot be reduced to or collapsed into each other' (Risse 2000:5). As the following discussion elaborates in more detail, while often raised, the claim of the mutual constitution of structure and agency has been substantiated and applied with considerable variation as to the analytical rigor applied in this regard by the various constructivist strands.<sup>17</sup>

### STATIONS ON THE BRIDGE

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST TURN PRESENTS A FRAMEWORK WHICH HAS ENABLED THE DISCUSSION ABOUT THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL FACTS AND THEIR ROLE IN WORLD POLITICS. The concept of framing allows for an assessment of the constructivist turn and can be characterised as a framework within which bits and pieces of previous debates can be reassembled innovatively so that they become theoretically meaningful to representatives of different theoretical strands. A frame helps 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label events'<sup>18</sup> such as the emergence of constructivist research positions. This approach follows the logic of collective action frames which receive their attraction to a variety of addressees less from any innovative elements but from the novelty in which the particular elements have been brought together. As Snow and Benford (1992:138) summarise, 'what gives a collective action frame its novelty is not so much its innovative ideational elements as the manner in which activists articulate or tie them together.' Subsequently, a continuous debate about substance allowed for a rapprochement among positions which had previously been situated in opposing epis-

temological camps in IR. An important contribution of the constructivist turn therefore consisted of creating an institutional and cultural environment that facilitated the context in which a relatively tolerant and open-minded debating culture could gain ground, unfold and maintain the flow of discussion among different theoretical positions. A note of caution is, however, in order since at this stage of the argument the article concentrates exclusively on a reconstruction of central constructivist positions on the bridge, thus leaving the more encompassing research questions aside for the moment. It is argued that it is helpful, precisely with a view to assessing the potential for developing leading research questions, to begin by identifying positions that constitute a communicative bridge between the two non-communicating rationalist and reflectivist poles which had been hardened during the period known as the third debate in IR. The stations will be named and situated on the bridge according to their respective readiness to communicate about ontological issues, on one hand, as well as according to their respective distance from the epistemological corner positions, on the other.<sup>19</sup> The stations on the bridge represent the respective ontological *foci* of the various constructivist approaches while situating them according to their analytical preferences at the same time. Thus, it is possible to demonstrate that, while all constructivist stations on the bridge share an interest in assessing the role of social facts in world politics, the specific evaluation of these facts and the relationship among different types of social facts vary significantly.

While it has often been suggested to distinguish between modern and other constructivist approaches (Katzenstein *et al.* 1998; Hopf 1998; *cf.* critically Fierke 2001), this article proposes a perspective

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that considers variation in constructivist positions based on identifying particular research objects rather than by beginning with the (self-) ascribed affiliation with particular research programmes. Research interest is taken as the distinctive issue. One result of this approach is that both neoliberal institutionalists (e.g. Goldstein and Keohane 1993) and post-modern approaches (e.g. Biersteker and Weber 1996; Diez 1999a) find their way onto the bridge. All stations on the bridge are characterised by a shared research interest in studying the influence and role of soft institutions such as ideas, norms and rules, on one hand, and/or sociocultural factors such as identity, discourse, and language, on the other, in world politics. The stations on the bridge are not intended to represent constructivist positions in a more or less encompassing way. Instead, they represent discussions which have emanated from an interest in individual and social ideas, norms, language and social practices (see Figure 3).

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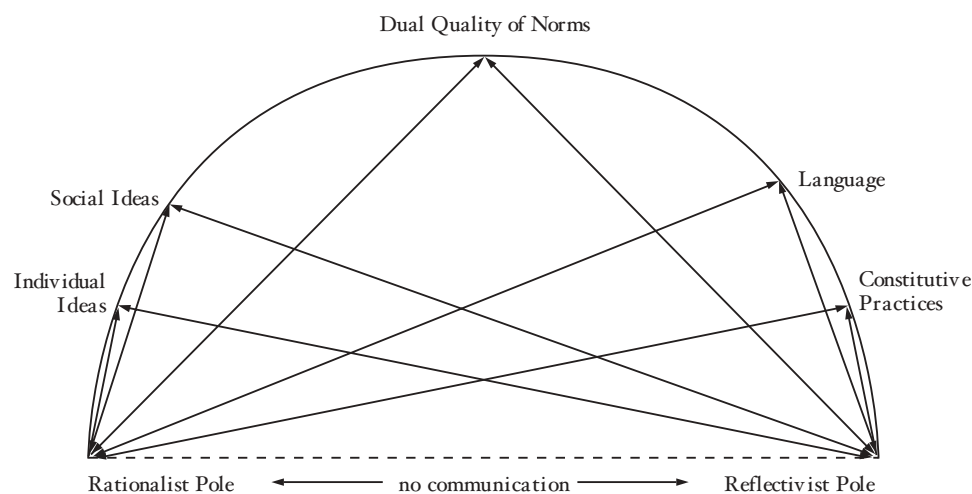
The stations on the bridge will be defined, explained and positioned within a process of an ongoing constructivist

debate. Since this positioning proceeds according to the research object rather than affiliation with a particular constructivist strand, some authors appear on multiple stations. Further, it is interesting to note that most stations tend to support either a more structure-oriented or a more agency-oriented argument. This observation will be discussed in more detail in the following section which scrutinises the assumptions of the DUAL QUALITY OF NORMS STATION.

### INDIVIDUAL IDEAS

The first cautious step away from the rationalist pole was taken by neoliberal approaches. Thus, Goldstein and Keohane (1993:3) defined ideas as 'beliefs held by individuals' which contributed to explain 'political outcomes.' This approach works with the assumption that individual ideas or 'principled or causal beliefs' work as 'road maps,' hence encompassing an important element in foreign policy analysis (1993:3). While this approach still works with the positivist assumption of exogenous interest formation on the basis of material resources, its novel reference to ideal

FIGURE 3: STATIONS ON THE BRIDGE



factors is distinct from the research practice of the rationalist pole. This step is particularly pointed out by Goldstein and Keohane (1993:6, original emphasis) who characterise the contributions to an edited volume as 'a challenge to both rationalist and reflectivist approaches' specifying:

*Although we concede that the rationalist approach is often a valuable starting point for analysis, we challenge its explanatory power by suggesting the existence of empirical anomalies that can be resolved only when ideas are taken into account. We demonstrate this need to go beyond pure rationalist analysis by using its own premise to generate our null hypothesis: that variation in policy across countries, or over time, is entirely accounted for by changes in factors OTHER THAN IDEAS. Like reflectivists, we explore the impact of ideas, or beliefs, on policy. But this volume also poses an explicit challenge to the antiempiricist bias of much work in the reflectivist tradition, for we believe that the role played by ideas can and should be examined empirically with the tools of social science.*

This step can therefore be taken as a movement that created a platform for the "neo-neo debate" (Wæver 1997) prior to the constructivist turn. It is interesting to note, however, that — as contributors to the same edited volume — Sikkink (1993:161) and Katzenstein (1993:267) simultaneously raised other aspects of ideas, such as institutionalised and guiding causal ideas and norms. Thus, Katzenstein (1993:268) stresses the social dimension of norms when he notes that 'norms reflect unspoken premises. Their importance lies not in being true or false but in being shared.' However, the concept of intersubjectivity, especially its implications for changes of supranational and transnational norms

remain under-explored by programmes which were mainly interested in the assessment of formal institutional change (e.g. Katzenstein 1993:268; Sikkink 1993:166). It can therefore be summarised that individual ideas and the influence of the social do represent an important and innovative research interest of this station. Yet, ideas remain theorised as being appropriated individually rather than being understood as socially constructed reference points with a social impact. The following section on the SOCIAL IDEAS STATION will elaborate on this social dimension of ideas in more detail.

### SOCIAL IDEAS

The analytical rapprochement to the role of ideas, norms and rules which have been forged within a social environment can be taken as a much more definitive step towards the constructivist turn (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986; Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; Finnemore 1996; and, for a summary, Checkel 1998). Ideas are understood as socially embedded (Flynn and Farrell 1999:510). They represent shared reference points which send the same message to different actors causing the same behaviour among these actors. March and Olsen (1989:26) have characterised this shared reaction to norms the logic of appropriateness. That is, ideas are not exclusively situated in or generated by the brains of individual actors, in addition, they entail a social structuring element. Thus, it becomes possible, for example, for empirical research to analyse how different actors behave in different contexts.<sup>20</sup> This analytical access of ideas within a social environment has cast a new emphasis on the constitutive and regulative dimensions of social facts (ideas, rules and norms). Different from the individual perception of ideas on the previous station on the bridge, this station socialises ideas while

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not losing the relation between actors and social structures. As Risse (2000:5-6) notes 'this means for the study of ideas that one can continue to study "beliefs" in terms of what is inside people's minds and simultaneously insist that these beliefs are representations and enactments of social and intersubjective culture.'

The analytical focus is hence set on norms and social knowledge as constitutive for actors' identities. Yet, while the principle of mutual constitution has had an impact on the perception of identities, interests and ideas at this station, the methodological and empirical focus is less on the emergence than on the constitutive and regulative impact of norms (Finnemore 1996).<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on the structural aspect of norms leaves the constructed dimension of norms to be assessed more precisely. 'Socially shared ideas — be it norms (collective expectations about proper behavior of a given identity) or social knowledge about cause-and-effect relationships — not only regulate behavior but also constitute the identity of actors' (Risse 2000:5). Empirically, the conceptualisation of the relationship between norms and identities as causal implies that social facts cause empirically testable changes of actors' identities and accordingly behaviour. In turn, the causal impact of behaviour on the construction and change of identities has been assigned a role of minor empirical relevance by this research. Thus, the basic assumption about stable norms has contributed to the consolidation of an impressive research programme on actors' behaviour in world politics, in particular focusing on the problem of norm implementation in the area of human rights, equal rights policy, education and the diffusion of administrative culture. Yet, the change of ideas has received less attention by this station.

In sum, the constitutive role of social practices for the emergence of soft insti-

tutions is stressed by the social ideas station which is incidentally the home of the majority of compliance researchers. It remains, however, theoretically of minor relevance compared with the interest in the constitution of identities and ideas based on different logics of action (consequentialism, appropriateness and arguing) which has been demonstrated by debates among rationalist and constructivist scholars thereby producing considerable leverage.<sup>22</sup> For example, the German ZIB-debate brought the innovative logic of arguing to the fore.<sup>23</sup> This focus on arguing and bargaining did however have a considerable impact on consolidating a shift of analytical perspective on the social from the Giddensian reflexive concept of interaction towards a focus on the functional connection between system and life-world. Above all, the logic of arguing opens an analytical perspective on the issue of agreement on the role of particular norms in international negotiating situations (Risse and Ulbert 2001). This extension of the compliance approach has thus identified the problem of the often occurring mismatch of facticity and validity of norms (Habermas 1992). It has demonstrated that the contested validity of norms in negotiating situations and the implementation of norms in social contexts require mediating processes of socialisation (Risse and Ropp 1999; Schimmelfennig 2001), learning (Checkel 2001) and/or shaming by advocacy groups (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:898; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Liese 2001; Locher 2002).

#### CONSTITUTIVE PRACTICES

In comparison, a much more distinctly pronounced distance to the rationalist pole has been established by constructivist perspectives that engage with a transdisciplinary access to reflexive sociology on social interaction.<sup>24</sup> The core

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theoretical basis of this perspective is provided by Giddens' (1979) structurationist approach. While this approach is hardly news for critical approaches to IR (see *e.g.* Cox 1981; 1983; Whitworth 1989), it offered less common ground with the "positivist" camp during the paradigmatic battle of the third debate. In turn, Wendt's suggestion to refer to 'second order theories' (Wendt 1991)<sup>25</sup> such as the access on the interdependence of structure and agency based on the concept of structuration offered an alternative issue for discussion which made it possible to avoid unfruitful conflict between the two 'positivist' and 'post-positivist' camps at that time. Wendt (1987:337) accused the predominant IR theories such as structural realism (Waltz 1979) of working with the state as a primitive ontological entity. His suggestion to reverse this ontologisation by way of referring to second order theories has been taken up and developed further especially by reflexive approaches which work with the assumption of core IR concepts as generally "contested" concepts.<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, core IR concepts such as state sovereignty have been challenged by the combination of de- and reconstructive analyses. This methodology defines sovereignty, for example, as "a set of constitutive practices" which allows for an assessment of the interactive constitution of core concepts within their particular context of emergence (Biersteker and Weber 1996). Thus, Biersteker and Weber argued that 'the modern state system is not based on some timeless principle of sovereignty, but on the production of a normative recognition in a unique way and in a particular place (the state)' (1996:3). Research on the construction of the social relates the ontologies of identity and social practices (Biersteker and Weber 1996:278) and therefore offers a more systematic analytical assessment of varying processes of state-building and

identity formation in international systems. According to the premise of intersubjectivity the CONSTITUTIVE PRACTICES STATION places the ontology of interaction above the ontologies of agency and/or structure. This stress on interaction highlights the possibility of change for social facts which are largely considered as structural categories by the compliance approach. It follows that 'actors reproduce and alter systems through their actions. Any given international system does not exist because of immutable structures; rather, its structures are dependent for their reproduction on the practices of actors' (Koslowski and Kratochwil 1995:128).

#### LANGUAGE

The LANGUAGE STATION shares the focus on speech acts with the SOCIAL IDEAS STATION.<sup>27</sup> Its focus is, however, entirely different. While Risse and others are in principle interested in persuasion by way of arguing, the work of Kratochwil, Fierke and others does not exclusively refer to language as a descriptive but as a social action as well (Kratochwil 1989; Fierke 1998; Diez 1999a; Zehfuss 2001). For example, Kratochwil notes (1989:5-6, original emphasis):

*that our conventional understanding of social action and of the norms governing them is defective because of a fundamental misunderstanding of the function of language in social interaction, and because of a positivist epistemology that treats norms as "causes." Communication is therefore reduced to issues of describing "facts" properly, i.e. to the "match" of concepts and objects, and to the ascertainment of nomological regularities. Important aspects of SOCIAL action such as advising, demanding, apologizing, promising etc., cannot be adequately understood thereby. Although the philosophy of ordinary language has*

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*abandoned the "mirror" image of language since the later Wittgenstein, the research programs developed within the confines of logical positivism are, nevertheless, still indebted to the old conception.*

While this station does acknowledge the guiding role of norms and rules, its focus on the constitutive impact of interaction is almost diametrically opposed to that of the SOCIAL IDEAS STATION. While the latter works with the assumption that ideas are constitutive of identities, the LANGUAGE STATION argues with *e.g.* Wittgenstein and Foucault that speech acts or discourses are constitutive of rules and norms in particular contexts.<sup>28</sup> The securitisation literature presents a good example for the constitutive role of speech acts. It assumes that security problems are constructed on the basis of speech acts (Huysmans 1998). This research strand explores the specific character and dynamics of security as constructed by and constructive of language. It argues that:

*security is a particular type of politics applicable to a wide range of issues. And it offers a constructivist operational method for distinguishing the process of securitization from that of politicization — for understanding who can securitize what and under what conditions (Buzan et al. 1998:vii).*

This approach argues that successful speech acts are based on the interaction between the speaker and the specific context conditions. These are defined as:

*a combination of language and society, of both intrinsic features of speech and the group that authorizes and recognizes that speech. Among internal conditions of a speech act, the most important is to follow the security form, the grammar of securi-*

*ty, and construct a plot that includes existential threat, point of no return, and a possible way out — the general grammar of security as such plus the particular dialects of the different sectors, such as talk identity in the societal sector, recognition and sovereignty in the political sector, sustainability in the environmental sector, and so on (Buzan et al. 1998:32-3).*

This concept of language as social action and therefore constitutive of the emergence of soft institutions such as rules and norms (Kratochwil 1989) contributes to draw a much clearer picture of the sharp contradiction between the opposing perceptions of the regulative and constitutive role of ideas as social facts according to the SOCIAL IDEAS STATION, on one hand, and the perception of the constructive role of norms on the CONSTITUTIVE PRACTICES and LANGUAGE STATIONS, on the other. It casts a fresh view on the structure-agency debate in IR. The following section recalls that view and proceeds to elaborate on the substance of — and ensuing controversial debates generated by — the DUAL QUALITY OF NORMS STATION which works with the Giddensian assumption of a dual quality of structure while keeping the Habermasian tension between the facticity and validity of norms.

## THE DUAL QUALITY OF NORMS

THE COMPLIANCE LITERATURE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL LAW CONCEPTUALISES NORMS LARGELY AS RULES; IT HENCE DOES NOT CLEARLY DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE IMPACT OF LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS (Finnemore 2000). In the end, this research is less interested in understanding the impact of norm flexibility than identifying the influence of norm stability

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on political processes. Accordingly, social norms are defined as 'single standards of behavior' (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:891). Only as stable social facts they entail prescriptions which influence behaviour.<sup>29</sup> Analytically norms are thus considered as rules. Subsequently, empirical questions are mainly directed towards the assessment of rule consistent behaviour as an expression of norm-following (Börzel and Risse 2001:3). At the same time, these rules are conceptualised as constitutive of actor identities. Rule-following is conducive towards reducing transaction costs (Chayes and Handler Chayes 1995). In addition, rule-following behaviour creates advantages such as the qualification for membership in new transnational communities such as the community of civilised states or the European community (Adler 1997; Risse 2000; Müller 2001; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2002). This functional perspective on rule-following is based on socio-cultural as well as strategic motivations.

#### THE ONTOLOGISATION OF NORMS

As the last station on the bridge the DUAL QUALITY OF NORMS STATION presented in this final section entails theoretical assumptions that have received comparatively less attention than the issues of individual ideas, social ideas, constitutive practices and language which have been identified as the leading issues dealt with at the previous stations on the bridge. The DUAL QUALITY OF NORMS STATION builds on the constructivist premise of the mutual constitution of structure and agency. In doing so, it demonstrates — not surprisingly perhaps — that the controversy that was part and parcel of previous IR debates has not been solved yet. After all, the theoretical assessment of the dual quality of norms as constructed,

on one hand, AND as regulative and constitutive, on the other, continues to represent a conceptual challenge for IR scholars. The elaboration on the last station on the bridge in this section addresses this challenge and elaborates on the theoretical implications for IR.

Based on the reconstruction of the constructivist debate in the previous section, it is possible to summarise that the core constructivist insight — *i.e.* that the guiding perception of norms and principles is only possible once actors are related to them (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986:764-5) — has generated entirely different theoretical and methodological findings. Thus, a considerable majority of studies still reduces the process of mutual constitution to assessing the relation between the emergence of stable norms on one hand and actors' behaviour and identities on the other. According to this perspective, norms are considered as an intervening variable that influences behaviour. They are hence ontologised as stable factors in world politics. Instead of following Wendt's proposal to unpack primitive ontological entities, this stability assumption generates the counter effect of producing and maintaining precisely such primitive ontological entities. Metaphorically speaking, this conceptualisation of norms then adds another billiard ball to the realist concept of the state. This analytical bracketing leads to an analytical lack of appreciating the emergence of norms as a contextualised process which is potentially conflictive. Subsequently, variation in different meanings of norms remains bracketed as well. In other words, the full exploration of Ruggie's (1998b) triad of origin, role and function of norms is limited to the latter two aspects of role and function. In addition, the argumentative dimension of norm research demonstrates that apart from the problematic and complex issue

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of theorising and applying the concept of intersubjectivity, the issue of contextual variation *e.g.* multiple sociocultural contexts of norms emergence and implementation presents a conceptual challenge for work on norm resonance. Here, the question about the validity of norms across the boundaries of political arenas and the related question about the role and assessment of life-worlds<sup>30</sup> in the process of norm legitimation, as well as the contestation of norms, pose a particular theoretical challenge.

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#### NORM RESONANCE AND TRANSNATIONAL ORDER

The bracketing of norm emergence as a PROCESS has contributed to a lack of analytical insights into the constructed quality of norms, the potential change of the meaning of norms and subsequently any conflicts resulting from different norm interpretations in varying socio-cultural environments. Empirically this oversight considers the issue of long-term norm resonance in compliance processes. In this area, the necessity for further research is particularly pressing as discussions about the constitutionalisation in transnational politics (Bogdandy 2001a; 2001b; Cass 2001; Wiener and Shaw 2003; Weiler and Wind 2003) as well as the legalisation of international politics (Goldstein *et al.* 2000; *cf.* Finnemore and Toope 2001) demonstrate. The assumption of norm stability is problematic for research on norm resonance since norm change requires an understanding about the mutual constitution of practice and norms. In addition, it is necessary to mediate between international and/or transnational contexts on one hand and domestic contexts on the other. While current research on norm validity focuses on argumentation and bargaining during international negotiation processes (Risse and Ulbert

2001; Müller 2001), the analysis of the arguing process is not pursued any further, *e.g.* into contested domestic contexts. It follows that norms which entail little prescriptive standards such as so-called thin norms will cause a broad range of possible norm interpretations. This enhanced range of norm interpretation may be conducive to creating a large range of identification with the norm. In turn, it may also imply conflicts between norm expectation and norm substance.<sup>31</sup> Norm research therefore needs to address the validity assumption of norms as well. In a given political context the potential for norm legitimacy rises in proportion to the norm addressees' possibility to contest the meaning of the norms (Habermas 1992; Tully 1995; 2002; Joerges 2002). In other words, for a robust assessment of politics beyond the state the stability assumption of norms as social facts which entail standardised rules of behaviour cuts too short (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Checkel 2001). After all, norms entail stable and flexible qualities. That is, they are constructed through social interaction on the one hand, and have a constitutive impact on behaviour, on the other. This dual quality of norms is documented by interdisciplinary work bringing together political science, law, sociology and cultural studies which address the interrelation between social practices, discourse, norm emergence and change.

#### THREE PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOCIAL

Three questions are central for the analysis of inter- or transnational political processes. They entail, first, the question about conflictive potential between different nationally constructed norms; second, the question about the adaptation of norms as part of transnational interaction; and third, the question of domestic

norm resonance. The following discusses these three questions in their turn with reference to the stations on the bridge and the basic assumptions entailed in each as they have been elaborated earlier. To that end, a distinction between two basically different approaches, namely the compliance approach and the societal approach to norms is helpful. Both approaches have been put into perspective by a third approach which adds the logic of arguing to norm research. The compliance approach works largely with the assumptions of the SOCIAL IDEAS STATION which is interested in the behavioural impact of norms and rules as influential social facts in international politics. The arguing approach extends the SOCIAL IDEAS STATION towards the perspective of legitimating norm choice through persuasion on the basis of argumentation, deliberation and participation. To that end, it draws on political theory, legal theory and political philosophy. Finally, the societal approach works with elements of the CONSTITUTIVE PRACTICES and the LANGUAGE STATION, respectively. In addition it takes up challenges which have been highlighted by the arguing approach such as the interrelation between processes of legitimation on different levels, the question about the existence and construction of life worlds above constitutional communities as well as safe-guarding the principle of contestedness of rules and norms. It offers the theoretical basis for working with the dual quality of norms as constructed and flexible on one hand, and as structuring and stable on the other. This dual quality of norms assumption thus offers a way out of bracketing the process of norm emergence and contestation by keeping the facticity-validity tension which is a challenge for research on norms.

With reference to the dual quality of norms the difference between these three approaches is summarised as follows.

FIRST, the compliance approach is based on the assumption of stability of norms. That is, as social facts norms structure behaviour. Actors follow the logic of appropriateness. SECOND, the arguing approach works with an extended concept of compliance. That is, while norms are perceived as stable, they acquire validity through the process of arguing. Norm facticity follows the logic of arguing while norm implementation follows the logic of appropriateness. THIRD, the societal approach begins with the assumption of the dual quality of norms. That is, the stability of norms depends on the contestation of norm validity as well as the meaning of norms. While the validity of norms is always in principle perceived as contested, norms are conceptualised as both guiding as well as constituted through social practices. Norm validity and meaning are only accessible on the basis of the principle of contestedness. The dual quality of norms hence works less with the three core logics of action, *i.e.* consequentialism, appropriateness and arguing, than with reference to the principles of mutual recognition and contestedness (Tully 1995; 2002; Wiener 2003b).

## CONCLUSION

BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF DIFFERENT CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF NORMS THIS ARTICLE HAS DISCUSSED THE EXTENSION OF CONSTRUCTIVIST RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES IN IR AND THEIR RESPECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE SOCIAL AND ITS IMPACT ON POLITICS BEYOND THE STATE. The mutual constitution of behaviour and norm emergence which had achieved particular analytical clout with regime analysis provided an important incentive for the revision of rationalist research approaches in IR. The discussion and situation of value-added of constructivist

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research and theoretical debates in IR follows from this revision. In addition, it has been demonstrated that, while there is an overlap among different constructivist strands about a shared interest in the impact of the social in world politics, the reconstruction of the substantive input generated by the constructivist turn has shed light on two largely exclusive approaches. On one hand, (social) norms are considered as constitutive and regulative of behaviour. On the other hand, they are conceptualised as evolving through social interaction and interrelated with a particular context.

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The reconstruction of the constructivist turn and its consequences has demonstrated that, since the path-breaking emphasis on the incompatibility of norms with a positivist research logic by Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986) and a constructive development of this observation by Wendt's (1992) work on the emergence of state identities, the reflexive understanding of the central role of interaction (Giddens 1979; Wendt 1987) has increasingly been bracketed by some constructivist work. In the process, different constructivist strands have been forged. In the end, this development brings back the question about the research interest and thus the research logic on which any analysis is based (Cox 1983; Habermas 1985; Hollis and Smith 1990). While the third debate in IR worked with the assumption that the differences among the various debaters were due to mutually exclusive epistemological preferences, the constructivist debate has — despite all its theoretical shortcomings — contributed to challenging this assumption. The question remaining to be addressed following this debate is, however, whether or not it is acceptable to resort to analytical bracketing that conceptualises norms as stable social facts, and whether indeed this analytical move is conducive to fur-

ther development of research on norms and their role in world politics. Certainly, this bracketing remains an issue of contention among constructivists. As the DUAL QUALITY OF NORMS STATION demonstrates, this place on the semi-circle represents the terrain where the two distinct transdisciplinary efforts of developing an assessment of the social based on sociological theories meet. They include a functional neo-Durkheimian perspective on the structural impact of norms, on one hand, and the reflexive Giddensian assumption about the dual quality of structure, on the other. As a result, two principally opposed positions are up for discussion. The first works with norms as structural variables with a constitutive impact on identity, the second works with the mutual constitution of norms and social practices. Both positions face each other above the abyss of epistemological ignorance that was to be crossed by the bridge.

First version received: June 2003.

Final version accepted: August 2003.

## NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> This article's core argument has been discussed in a number of multi-national settings starting out as a roundtable contribution on the subject of *Constructivism and Its Critics* with Michael Barnett and Mark Pollack, Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin at Madison; the paper has subsequently been presented at the colloquium *European*

*Integration/European Studies*, Institute of Political Science, University of Hannover, Germany; the Colloquium *Institutions and Social Change*, Department of Governance, University of Erfurt; the *European Integration/International Relations Colloquium*, Institute of European Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, the Department of Political Science and International Studies *Spring Seminar Series*, University of Birmingham; and the International Studies Association, Chicago 2001. I would like to thank all participants for their discussion of the paper. Special thanks for detailed comments go to Emmanuel Adler, Karin Fierke, Birgit Locher, Uwe Puetter, Guido Schweltnus, Stefano Guzzini, James Davis, Thomas Risse, Jim Tully, Klaus Dieter Wolf and three anonymous referees. The responsibility for this version is the author's.

2 For more detail of the debate over this triangle, also see Wæver (1997).

3 See Wendt's observation that 'perhaps the most common interpretation of the dispute between rationalists and constructivists is that it is about ontology, about what kind of "stuff" the international system is made of' (Wendt 1999:35).

4 For the semi-circle as the theoretical bridge, see first Christiansen *et al.* (1999).

5 Also see Onuf's (1989) early contribution to constructivism in IR.

6 For more detail on this distinction see (Wiener 2003a).

7 This argument has been further developed elsewhere with reference to Habermas' argument about the facticity and validity of norms (Wiener 2003a). While this article is not the place to elaborate on this argument, it will be briefly summarised in the fourth section.

8 Here cases in which the meaning of norms remains unspecified hence offering little guidance and considerable room for contestation, such as the case of minority rights norms in the process of European enlargement (Schweltnus 2001), are likely to present invisible security risks.

9 It was strongly influenced by the discussion about bargaining and arguing which was led in the 1990s in German IR (Müller 1994; Risse 2000; Müller 2001).

10 See *e.g.* Curtin and Dekker (1999), Bogdandy (2001a; 2001b), Cass (2001), Alston (2002), Petersmann (2002), and Weiler (2002).

11 See, for example, the debate led within the German IR journal of international relations *Zeitschrift für internationale Beziehungen* (ZIB) in 1994-1995 which was dubbed the "ZIB-Debate" and which is well summarised by Risse (2000); also see Christiansen *et al.* (1999), Diez (1999b), Moravcsik (1999a; 1999b), Risse and Wiener (1999), Smith (1999), Checkel and Moravcsik (2001), and Checkel (2002); for a summary, see also Pollack (2000), Guzzini and Leander (2001), and Adler (2002).

12 The reference here is to both the United States AND Canada.

13 For good summaries of the previous two debates (1) between realists and idealists and (2) between traditionalists and behaviourists, respectively, see *e.g.* Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1996). On the third debate, in particular see the summaries offered by Whitworth (1989), Lapid (1989), and Wæver (1996; 1997).

14 On the difference among constructivist positions see *e.g.* Katzenstein *et al.* (1998:680) who note that 'constructivist research is not cut from one cloth.' Adler (1997:320) also comments that 'there is very little clarity and even less consensus as to its [constructivism's] nature and substance.'

15 Also see Jepperson *et al.* (1996), Katzenstein *et al.* (1998:679), and Wendt (1999).

16 For a different approach which keeps stressing the question of epistemology, see Fierke and Jørgensen (2001).

17 See on this observation, for example, the critical appreciation of the structure-agency problem offered by Börsche *et al.* (2003).

18 See Goffman (1974:21). *Cf.* Snow and Benford (1992:137).

19 Note that the figure particularly simplifies the pole positions for analytical reasons. On the Third Debate, see among others Wendt (1999:38) who finds that 'the two sides are barely on speaking terms today,' as well as Wæver's (1997:22) finding about a 'situation of war' between the participants in this debate.

20 On this type of empirical research, see in particular work produced by scholars of the so-called Stanford School around John Meyer including, among others, Martha Finnemore, David Jacobson, George Thomas, Yasemin Soysal, and Francisco Ramirez. For the

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“world polity approach” of the Stanford School, see in particular Thomas *et al.* (1987) as well as a brief summary by Boli and Thomas (1999) and an excellent German summary by Wobbe (2000).

21 See, however, the CONSTITUTIVE PRACTICES STATION for such a focus.

22 For the German debate among constructivists and rationalists, see *e.g.* the rationalist contributions by Zangl and Zürn (1995) as well as Keck (1997) and the constructivist contributions by Müller (1994) and Risse-Kappen (1995).

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WIENER 23 For summaries of the ZIB debate, see Müller (1994), Risse-Kappen (1995), Schimmelfennig (1997), and Risse (2000).

24 On the impact of reflexive sociology in IR, see in particular Guzzini (2000).

25 See Wendt's (1991:383) explanation of how to apply 'second order' theories as follows: 'The objective of this [second order] type of theorizing is also to increase our understanding of world politics, but it does so indirectly by focusing on the ontological and epistemological issues of what constitute important or legitimate questions and answers for IR scholarship, rather than on the structure and dynamics of the international system *per se*.'

26 Kratochwil (1989:4) defines contested quality of IR concepts thus, 'it is our present reality which is, through the drifts of fundamental changes, out of tune with our models and understandings. In this context, material factors such as the changes in the

technology of destruction have to be noted, as have changes in our ideas concerning issues of legitimacy, sovereignty, governmental powers etc. Recovering the original is, therefore, not an idle undertaking. But understanding the "original" is only a first, although indispensable, step. The second step entails going beyond the conventional conceptual divisions and their constitutive assumptions, and casting a fresh and unobstructed look of how — in the case of my research — norms and rules "work," i.e., what role they play in molding decisions.'

27 Thus, Risse's (2000:7-9) summary of the ZIB debate refers explicitly to Habermas' reference to Austin's and Searle's speech act theory as well as on Kratochwil's and Onuf's crucial contributions to the conception of language and its role in IR.

28 For the application of Wittgenstein's speech act theory in the security analysis, see *e.g.* Fierke (1998); for the application of Foucault's discourse theory, see among others Doty (1997), Diez (1999a, 1999b), and Milliken (1999).

29 Thus, Checkel (2001:583) maintains that 'for a norm to exist, it thus must embody clear prescriptions, which provide guidance to agents as they develop preferences and interests on an issue.'

30 On the analytical role and appreciation of life-worlds in world politics, see Müller (2001).

31 On such a conflict about the validity of norms, see, *e.g.* the example of Union citizenship in the European Union (Wiener 2001).

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