

**The Cunning of Imperialist Reason:
Using a Bourdieu Inspired Constructivism in
IPE**

by

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Draft: Comments most welcome!

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The Cunning of Imperialist Reason: Using a Bourdieu Inspired Constructivism in IPE

Introduction

In the 50th anniversary issue of *International Organization*, the editors wrote that International Political Economy (IPE) has been little touched by the constructivist turn in International Relations.¹ Five years on, this no longer seems to hold. The key IPE journals (viz. *International Organization*, *Review of International Political Economy*, *Economy and Society*, or *New Political Economy*) reveal a considerable interest in “constructivist” topics and methodologies. The “Washington Consensus”, the nature of conditionality, the role of epistemic communities of experts (such as central bankers, rating agencies or aid workers), the EMU, or economic sanctions as part of the “shaming” or “othering” of South Africa are only some of the many topics that have been subjected to constructivist analysis (broadly defined). We are witnessing a reversal of the situation of a decade ago when the import and contribution of constructivism to IPE was rarely explicitly discussed and on average grossly undervalued.² Today, it has carved out a central place for itself in IPE. I am not saying that everyone has suddenly turned constructivist, simply that most scholars in the discipline now recognise constructivism as a part of the meta-theoretical approaches people work with in IPE.

This change means that the contentious issue at present is no longer whether or not one can use constructivism in IPE. Obviously one can and it is being done. Rather, it seems to me that the issue which is up for grabs now, is what one can do to make the best possible use of constructivism in IPE. And it is this issue I want to deal with in this paper. I want to make an argument in favour of a sociological version of constructivism (drawing heavily on the work of Pierre Bourdieu) which I think is particularly well suited to develop questions and answers for empirical studies in IPE. Constructivism as used in this paper, refers to the approaches which have

¹ Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner (1998: 675).

² I have written on this at greater length in Leander (2000).

in common that they focus on the social construction of meaning (including knowledge) and of the construction of social reality with the emphasis on the inter-subjective aspect of this construction. That is, constructivism is not “a theory”. It is a collection of approaches united by their meta-theoretical assumptions.³ And arguably, their focus on the social construction of reality and knowledge has both an epistemological (or linguistic) and a sociological aspect to them. And hence constructivism is always relatively close to sociology. One can even see it as reflecting the “sociological turn” in the social sciences more widely. And it seems to me that one should use this closeness as an advantage and look sideways at how some central problems have been dealt with in sociology to do a better job in IPE.

This is what I propose to do here. I will argue that looking to a Bourdieu-inspired sociology is particularly promising. The reason is that, although this approach cannot overcome and resolve the central dichotomies in social theory, it suggests ways which make it possible to argue in parallel and to keep both sides of the dichotomies in the analysis.⁴ And this seems very important because many of the problems that are faced by constructivism are linked to the fact that one side is *de facto* marginalised in the analysis. Not that constructivists would deny their importance. Rather they find it hard to keep the focus on both. More specifically, I want to give illustrations of this, or three reasons for relying more heavily on a Bourdieu-inspired sociological constructivism in IPE. The first is that it keeps explicit attention to the power entailed not only in the way the social construction of meaning at the level of the policy maker and/or observer constructs social reality, but also on the level of the material social reality. The second is that it suggests a way of keeping an explicit link within agency of the instrumental use of ideas and the taken for granted dimension of social reality. And the third is that it stresses the

³ This definition does exclude work based on methodological individualism and hence some work which goes under the heading constructivism. However, it is the only definition which does not make constructivism a catch all category covering anyone who mentions ideas and norms (e.g. Krasner’s work on regimes). For the argument behind this definition, see Guzzini (2000).

⁴ For a more general argument about how Bourdieu tries to deal with (and overcome) central dichotomies in sociological theory, see Brubaker (1985).

significance of reflexivity. Clearly, my focus on power, embedded agency and reflexivity is not fortuitous. It is around these issues that the critique of constructivists, from outsiders and insiders alike, tends to focus and therefore it seems to me that when discussing how to make the best possible use of constructivism, it is from these issues that one has to depart.

A Constructivism Focused on Power Structures

It is a common place critique of constructivism that it lacks a clear understanding of power and in particular of material power.⁵ This critique probably derives from taking the focus on the “power of ideas”⁶ of much constructivism-inspired analysis for all there can be. For much constructivism-inspired research is applied to actual decision-making. The bulk of the constructivist interest in the “power of ideas” has been directed to the effect of the ambitions and reality constructions by policy-makers, academics, experts and journalists and their effect on actual policies. As a result, there has been a considerable emphasis on the ideational aspect, rather than on what is usually considered “matter” and on the public level of politics.

I will argue that this does not have to be the case. The point I want to make in this section is therefore not that a more sociologically oriented constructivism adds a focus on power which was hitherto absent from constructivism-inspired IPE. Rather, I want to stress that it adds a shift in emphasis away from the sole concern with ideas in public decision-making. It more openly addresses the results of reality constructions which have become materially sedimented and institutionalised, “objectified” as it were, in the eyes of the actors.

The Power of Construction of Knowledge: Policy Making

In an article with the provocative title “the cunning of imperialist

⁵ Formulated e.g. by Halliday (2000) and responded to in e.g. Neumann (2001: chap. 7).

⁶ Adler (1987).

reason”⁷ Bourdieu and Waquant look at the establishment of US-American social science categories, concepts and debates (and they pick⁸ on a variety of things including race, underclass, globalisation and the communitarian–liberal debate) as Aristotelian common places, that is things *with* which one discusses, but *about* which one does not discuss. They argue the spread is imperialist in that it reflects US domination in the intellectual field and cunning in that it distracts attention from the power structures and struggles which are not structured along lines that can be captured by categories derived from the American context. The latter part of this claim is closely related to the kind of argument that has been most prominent in the constructivist IPE debate and, as I will point out in this section, it has been along these lines that constructivists in IPE have their efforts.

Indeed, the basic constructivist insight (and hence the labelling) is that both meaning and reality are socially “constructed”.⁹ We access reality by selecting and interpreting. The observer who is talking about an (IPE) reality is *not* simply recording what goes on out there. To start off reality is a complex thing which it is impossible to simply record in full. Therefore, what the observer does is to make a selection regarding what to mention about this reality. For this s/he uses language and traditions of thoughts. This does not mean that nothing exists outside language or thought. Stones are there even if they are not named or thought of or known. It just means that we cannot know about them, access reality, unless we integrate them into our thinking and language, that is into our inter-subjectively constituted system of meaning.

Moreover, since the IPE scholar is dealing with a social reality, s/he is dealing with a reality where “meaning” is of essence. Social facts such as money, contracts, trade regimes, markets or states (the stuff of IPE) exist because of the “meaning” attached to pieces of paper, institutions or social

⁷ Bourdieu (1998). The article is the object of a special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* (vol. 17, no.1, 2000).

⁸ Often unjustly as argued by e.g. Lemert (2000) and French (2000).

⁹ This is a “banal” and “widely shared” insight. In fact, it is so widespread that tying constructivism to it risks exploding that category to encompass just about everyone including Karl Popper. But since this is the point of departure which is still contested in the IPE literature, I cannot get around making it.

constructs such as borders. That is, the IPE scholar is not telling a story about a natural reality. Rather, it is a story about the story which makes up the social facts. Or if one prefers, more elegantly and Giddens like, the IPE scholar (as other observers of the social world) is engaged in a double hermeneutic, an interpretation of an interpretation.

“Constructivism” problematises and draws the implications of this basic insight that meaning and reality are socially constructed. And clearly one can do this in a number of different ways: one can problematise the social construction of reality at the level of action (the first story), or the story about the story (the level of the observer) or the relationship between the two the (the way the story about the story influences the original story and/or vice versa). In IPE, the bulk of attention has been directed to the level of the observer and the power implications of the way that observers construct their stories about the social reality and the taken for granted notions, the common places with which they operate. Indeed, much like in Bourdieu and Waquant’s article, a key aim has been to unveil the “cunning” (deceitful cleverness) of the kind of reason that is dominating, i.e. to explain what that reason excludes and includes by definition and what the implications of this are.

Since IPE is by essence an applied subject this has been done mainly through the criticism of the practical impact of the categories with which observers construct the world. This is done by emphasising the importance of that construction in giving rise to new institutions and policies.¹⁰ But it can also be done by underscoring the way that “paradigms are a hindrance for understanding”¹¹ and (consequently) that the policies based on them are bound to fail.

A classical illustration of the latter category is Hirschman’s analysis of inflation in Chile where he argues that the reliance on the theoretical models which graduate students had learned in PhD programmes abroad was a main reason for the lack of understanding of the nature of the Chilean inflation and the related political incapacity to deal with it.¹² A very similar argument was made recently with reference to the understanding of the

¹⁰ See for instance Adler (1987) and McNamara (1998).

¹¹ Hirschman (1970).

¹² Hirschman (1967).

Korean crisis by Wade and Veneroso. The authors argued that the incapacity of understanding a development which was not conforming to the financially orthodox economic model (and the pressure from groups with an interest in the adherence to such a model), led the IMF to impose misdirected policies which probably made the situation much worse than it would have had to be and certainly ended the most (only) recent example of economic development. And finally, Duffield's work¹³ on the evolving understanding of the link between development and security in the international aid community shows both how this understanding has made aid increasingly "radical" (that is aimed at transforming entire societies) and at the same time has worked to reinforce the violence of the "new wars" that their policies are actually intended to counter.

These examples have in common that they analyse the way the (evolving) taken for granted notions with which observers look at the economy and construct economic reality actually misconstrues that reality (and obscures the power relations) in the economy with the consequence that their policies were bound to "fail". What the studies do is to problematise these taken for granted notions to show that they are either not applicable to a specific context (often leaving open whether or not they are applicable elsewhere), or more generally, that their application obscures and hides things which are important if one is to get a grasp of what is going on and that this has profound consequences for social reality. They problematize the way that taken for granted knowledge has effects on the way that observers construe the world and try to act upon it.

Moreover, as already pointed out, it is possible to do the same thing from the perspective not of how policies fail as reality is (mis)construed, but of how the construction shifts social reality itself by, for example, prompting the construction of new institutions (such as the EMU or the NEPAD) or the introduction of new policy initiatives. Either way the reshaping of social reality has power effects, in the sense of shifting who can do what on what terms. And it seems to me that this kind of very real power implications of socially constructed knowledge studied at the level of policy making (or the observation informing it) has received most of the

¹³ Duffield (2001).

attention of constructivist IPE scholars.

The Power of Construction of Knowledge: Private and Material

Taken for granted knowledge and the construction of understanding of the social world does however not only matter when it transits via policy-making and/or an observer construction of the social world. It also matters for those who are acting in other ways than making policies, for sellers and buyers in markets, for firm managers, for bankers and for lenders, for aid agencies and for aid recipients. And even if this is certainly not something that most IPE constructivists would deny or have a problem with acknowledging, it seems to me that it is something which has received far less explicit attention in their empirical studies and it is hence a point where it seems to me that a sociological constructivism inspired by Bourdieu might add a shift in the kind of questions predominantly asked and the way that they are studied.

It might pave the way for more constructivist work focused on the power effects of socially constructed understandings which have effects by constituting the identities and interests of the actors in that world. These are “structural effects” in the sense that they are produced by the regularities and rules of the game, the practical knowledge of the actors in different fields. Looking at these effects is the sine qua non for understanding what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence, i.e. the suffering which comes with the simple fact of occupying a specific position in a field and which works only because of the complicity of the victim who reacts and acts in a way that reproduces this violence.

The starting point for getting at these effects is to analyse and conceive of the economy as a historically created and contextually situated social system, which has its own rules of the game. And to do this requires abandoning the disrespect for empirical reality of the economy and the “anti-genetic” prejudice¹⁴ on which much economic analysis rests. One needs to move beyond the assumption that both the economic field and the actors within it (and for Gary Becker all fields and all actors) have always and everywhere functioned in a more or less unchanged fashion. Instead,

¹⁴ I.e. the assumption that the economy has no inherited history which varies from economic field to economic field (Bourdieu 2000b: 16).

the object of study are the interests and identities on which the (indeed usually strategic interaction) in the field of the economy are based and which reproduce a much wider power structure. Power is not only in the decision.

If one follows a Bourdieu inspired path for doing this¹⁵, one has to walk a rather long and laborious way.¹⁶ The point of departure is to look at the economy (or a specific subfield of it) as a field (*champs*) historically and socially constituted. The field has a certain structure which is shaped by the actors within it and reflects a set of (normal, habitual, routine) practices. The “structure of the field” produced by this interaction provides the rules of the game so to speak and set the limits for what is and what is not thinkable, and consequently for the range of options within which choices are made. The field is however not only structure but also “struggle”. The rules of the game produce power hierarchies and poles of power which are actors’ struggle to change (very often by striving to alter the boundaries of the field). This structure and the ongoing “struggle” in the field is reflected in and reproduced by the socially and historically informed and shared dispositions (which Bourdieu refers to as the *habitus*). Focusing on the couple of the field (as structure and struggle) and the habitus makes it possible to look at the economy as a social structure and to look at what is “reasonable” (in view of the logic of the field) as opposed to rational and to focus on the “disposition” (which defines the interests and identities of agents) as opposed to a decision they make.¹⁷ This is a sociological understanding of the economy.

This road is indeed long and labourious. It is long because it means that one actually has to look in great empirical detail at what is going on in different spheres of the economy. And it is labourious in the sense that the sociological approach on which it is based, gives general guidance for what to look at (the field and the habitus). But it can not give a precise idea of

¹⁵ And there is actually quite some work by Bourdieu himself on which one can draw to make this kind of analysis. See in particular Bourdieu (1993; 1997; 1998; 2000b).

¹⁶ The best short presentation that I know is contained in the summary table of Guzzini (1994). It is reproduced (less clearly) in Guzzini (2000). But any of Bourdieu’s own works, and for those interested in economics particularly those referred to in the previous note, are excellent introductions.

¹⁷ Bourdieu (2000b: 13).

what this means in each field, since part and parcel of the idea is that the rules of the game in each field are historically produced, socially constructed and specific. Indeed, the very idea of a field is there to capture the fact that social hierarchies are constructed in different ways in different fields because various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) weigh differently and the habitus of the actors is expected to reflect and reproduce this. To complicate things further, the habitus is a concept which is only in part linked to the field. It is also reflecting the personal past experience of each actor as well as their experience in other fields and therefore is in no way deterministic. That is, it has the virtue of being both a social and individual concept, which relates both levels. But the drawback is that it is hard to capture, let alone to generalise about.¹⁸

Bourdieu's own study of the French housing market¹⁹ is a good illustration of both points. In this study which is a 300 page study of the French housing market based on extensive interviewing, observation of the interactions in the market and all kinds of available secondary information Bourdieu construes a "frontal attack on economics" arguing that economics cannot account for what goes on (or for outcomes) in the housing market. To do this one has to get at how the "champ" and the habitus of the actors within it are socially and historically constituted.

For the firm side, this approach translates as a detailed analysis of the firms who are involved (constructors as well as real estate agents) in the market, their relative size, and their strategies in the market. In so doing, Bourdieu can say something about what the value of different kinds of advantages are in the market and what their taken for granted understanding of the firms is.

It also entails understanding the behaviour (based on the dispositions) of the buyers in the market. And since the "house" takes up an almost mythical importance in social imagery and is a very important indicator of status and values this entails looking at the buyers as part of that broader social reality.²⁰ According to Bourdieu, only with reference to the social imagery, the dispositions in the field, can we comprehend why

¹⁸ Lahire (2002 forthcoming).

¹⁹ For a more complete discussion, see Leander (2001).

²⁰ Bourdieu (2000b: 34-40).

the petit bourgeois fails to behave as the *homo oeconomicus* of economic theory (whom Bourdieu refers to as a social and political monster) and instead “gets into projects which are too big for him, because suited to his ambitions more than to his means”²¹

Lastly, he argues that markets are the consequence of a *dual social construction* (and the housing market more so than most other markets)²² where also state national and local housing policies play a crucial role in shaping the disposition of buyers and the rules of the game in the housing production. Hence he is also pushed to have two chapters on the evolution of national housing policies and their local implementation.

Only after walking this long way does Bourdieu get to the discussion of the interaction and strategies of the actors in the market which he discusses under the heading “un contrat sous contrainte”. And it is only on the basis of the preceding analysis of dispositions and rules of the game that he can actually make the key point (on the basis of an analysis of the actual interaction) that far from neutrally adjusting supply and demand, the housing market is a social process whereby the disadvantaged tend to become even more disadvantaged:

The adjustment of supply and demand is not the result of the miraculous aggregation of innumerable miracles operated by rational calculators capable of choosing according to their interests. Contrary to appearances, there is nothing natural or self-evident in the fact that the most deprived buyers find themselves confronting the firms offering outmoded products, especially aesthetically, whereas others ‘spontaneously’ turn to firms which occupy positions homologous to their own in the social space [...] We are hence brought to substitute the myth of the ‘invisible hand’, key to liberal mythology, with the logic of spontaneous orchestration of practices, grounded on a wide network of homologies.²³

The point of this is obviously not to underline that it is a long and labourious process to think of the economy as a social field or that

²¹ Bourdieu (2000b: 332).

²² Bourdieu (2000b: 119).

²³ Bourdieu (2000b: 97-8 my translation).

Bourdieu was very hard working and diligent since he did so (although both of these are no doubt true). Rather what I am arguing is that this long and labourious road is worth walking. This is not because what one sees when one looks at immediate interactions and their effects is wrong. Rather it is because focusing on this interaction excludes important parts, perhaps the most important part, of power relations: those which are taken for granted by the agents; those where power is exercised without interaction, via the operation of structures; those relations whereby identities and dispositions are shaped. And hence often “the most important of what is seen and lived in the field, that is the most striking evidence and the most dramatic experience have their principle elsewhere”.²⁴

More generally, and with more explicit reference to the argument that I am trying to make in this section, this certainly is also the case for topics of interest to constructivists in IPE. And this kind of work is clearly not totally absent from the wide panorama of IPE studies. For example, Patomäki analyses the “global financial market” as a *social system*.²⁵ He shows why this social system makes financial market actors behave according to short term horizons and leads them to push for the deregulation of finance following a closed logic of financial orthodoxy. And he traces the influence these actors have to the rapidly growing direct and structural power (chapters 2 and 3 respectively) globalisation confers upon them. Moreover, the “Neo-Gramscians” at least since the early 1980s (starting with Cox’ argument that theory is always for someone and reinforced by Gill’s stress on the new constitutionalism²⁶) have tried to shift the focus of IPE from policy making to the more direct effects of social construction on the material reality, including its effects on the losers of various processes.²⁷ And finally, IPE is increasingly touched by studies that were originally of a local or regional focus, but precisely because they work on local power structures, identity formations and shaping of interests which are incomprehensible from a national or regional level, they have

²⁴ Bourdieu (1993: 249).

²⁵ Patomäki (2001).

²⁶ Cox (1981); Gill (1995; 1997).

²⁷ Bohle(2000; 2002).

been brought to discuss with (and inform) IPE theories and writings.²⁸

The point is consequently that I think that following a Bourdieu inspired constructivism in IPE would firstly make it easier to push further this shift in the focus from the problematisation mainly of the social construction of the knowledge informing observers and policy-makers (the importance of which I am not contesting) to a problematisation of the socially constructed practices and dispositions of actors in various fields (a topdog to underdog, public to private, ideational to material, shift in focus). And secondly, that it might provide ways of advancing methodologically by suggesting a relatively coherent framework centred on the study of fields and of the habitus. Although this framework is neither problem free nor easy to operationalise, it does suggest a way of thinking in parallel about the power effects of a socially constituted knowledge and about the social construction of reality.

A Constructivist Incorporating Instrumental Strategy

There is a second reason which seems to me to make it useful for IPE constructivists to link up with a more sociologically inspired version of constructivism: it should make it easier to analyse the role of agency and in particular of instrumental strategies. As I will argue in this section, this link is inherently problematic for constructivist scholars. Clearly, no constructivist denies the importance of instrumental strategies. But it is inherently difficult to keep the focus both on the instrumental strategies of actors and on their constitution through the “structural effects of discourses” and practices. In particular, since constructivists are what one might term holist, they see the risk of reifying discourses and creating an artificial unity/homogeneity of discourses. Hence, it is essential to find a way to avoid doing this, not least because it helps to getting to the essential question of why dominant discourses change and what role the instrumental and reflexive use of ideas by given groups of actors play in prompting such change.

²⁸ See, for instance, Reno (1998); Cilliers (2000); Dunn (2001).

The Problematic Link to Strategy

The link between instrumental strategies and taken for granted understandings is inherently problematic and reflects the general difficulty of thinking about agency and structure. The classical way out of this dilemma is to follow Giddens' suggestion to "bracket" first the one and then the other. And of course, in view of their metatheoretical position, for constructivists this usually means bracketing first agency (that is instrumental strategies and use of ideas) and then structure (that is the level of the discourse as inter-subjectively constituted meaning). There are several problems with this kind of strategy.

The first and most obvious is that some might never manage to move from the first bracketing to the second.²⁹ The argument is that "bracketing agency" is necessary to grant discourses an independence from any particular agent and the position from which that agent speaks. They are inter-subjective and hence partly autonomous from any one specific agent. Moreover, part and parcel of the effort is to think about discourses, not as reflecting inner thoughts, but as creating and constituting meaning in a way that is not fully controlled by the actors. They concentrate their efforts on analysing what kind of meaning the discourse itself produces, independently of the position from which any one specific individual is actually referring to it or using it. Now, clearly the two levels are intimately linked and if one wants to analyse the questions of how discourses matter to actual policy practice, why specific discourses become dominant and by what processes, one has to move to the actor level and the strategies of those who promote specific ideas and world views as well as the processes by which they manage to impose themselves.

But moving to the agency levels creates delicate problems for a holistic macro-micro link, in particular if one allows for the reflexive use of discourses by actors trying to (re)shape their own field as well as for the multiplicity of discourses that exist. Indeed, people are obviously neither stupid nor passive. Although their interests and world views are shaped by their dispositions, they do not slavishly reproduce the taken-for-granted meanings reproduced through language and through the social institutions

²⁹ Although this is a minority, they attract much of the critique directed at constructivist approaches and therefore deserve mentioning.

which it produces. Human beings can become reflexively aware of the import of discourses and react on them. There is what Ian Hacking refers to as a “looping effect”. In fact, in my understanding a large part of the constructivist effort is precisely to facilitate that kind of reflexive awareness and hence possibilities of “de-naturalising” the taking for granted. A driving motivation for that effort is precisely the fact that it paves the way for acting (consciously and strategically) upon dominant discourses, if possible to shift their dominance. And there is no reason to assume that this kind of reflexive awareness (and related transformative strategic behaviour) is characteristic only of constructivist scholars. On the contrary, one can follow Bauman in arguing that such reflexive questioning is part of the erosion of taken for granted, divinely sanctioned, world views in just about every sphere of social life produced by the enlightenment.³⁰ And if one follows Giddens and Co. one can see it as *the* marking feature of our time.³¹

This matter is further complicated by the fact that the taken for granted notions of people are neither simple nor uniform. The things one takes for granted, the way one reads social interaction and reality, the things one does because it is simply the right thing to do vary by context. People come to contact with different taken for granted notions of behaviour. They can be both peasant women in Anatolia and workers in the Deutsche Bank in Berlin, of humble Mexican origin and working in the World Bank. People have varying personal histories, they are in contact with different kinds of taken for granted notions of behaviour in different ways and these do not necessarily translate from one context to the next. And certainly the experience of misreading the reasonable behaviour in an unfamiliar social context, but also of learning what is accepted behaviour, is something most people have in common. The interests accorded to the “stranger” in hermeneutics is linked precisely to the fact s/he epitomises this. What this translates as concretely is that not only does the observer in some way have to account for the fact that discourses can be reflexively acted upon but also for the fact that the way they are acted upon (the interests and strategies of the actors) is linked to dispositions which can by no means be mechanically read off a structure but are multiple and varying.

³⁰ Bauman (1988-9; 1992b; 1992a).

³¹ Beck (1994).

However, to me there seems to be no way around looking for ways to deal with this admittedly complicated link between the social construction of meaning and instrumental strategies of actors. In fact, doing so is particularly important for constructivists to get back at the key criticisms raised against them from the outside. The first is that they do not have enough to say about why specific taken for granted understandings, identities, norms and values come to dominate. Thus for example in a recent review of Keck and Sikkink, Dani Rodrik and Nuhuoglu Soysal³² (the first and the last being “constructivists”), Deborah Yashar advances as the key critique that

none of these authors provides the tools to explain when and why these ideas are important and/or why a particular identity becomes more politically salient than another. In other words, why do groups of people choose to organize around one set of axes rather than another? This question is central to any explanation of movement emergence.³³

And the second (closely related) critique is that constructivists have to assume the political and practical import of their ideas. A critique which is mostly directed to scholars who deal with the link between a (shifting) set of global norms (Washington consensus, neo-liberalism) and local contexts and which is expressed to a large extent by comparativists interested in analysing national contexts. In a typical wording:

Most of these analyses of the political implications of globalisation assume an *immediate* effect on nation state policies. Doing so, the empirical illustration of the connection between the globalisation processes and their consequences remain however macro-correlations (...) The causal paths between globalisation and social policies are hardly traced, and possible changes at the level of the political process (*politics*), which bring about these “policies” in the first place, remain unaccounted for.³⁴

³² Sikkink (1991); Rodrik (1997); Nuhuoglu Soysal (1994).

³³ Yashar (2002: 372).

³⁴ Zürn (2000: 298, my translation, original emphasis, the distinction between “policies” and “politics” used in English in the original text). But a very similar argument has been made by e.g. Huber (1998).

The easy way of responding to this critique is that constructivists might not have very adequate answers to these questions, but at least they are capable of asking them. They do not simply have to assume them away and either pretend that discourses (and related taken for granted understandings of the world and or interests) are eternal, or somehow content themselves with registering their variation and change. However, this answer, although fair enough, is eventually not very helpful. Rather as a constructivist, one is clearly more interested in knowing how to give a more concrete and substantial answer and it is here that I think a Bourdieu inspired approach might be helpful.

The Social Constitution of Instrumental Strategies

If constructivists are not to ignore this “bracket agency” generally and/or argue that it is of no relevance to them, they have to find ways to avoid reifying discourses and to allow for a multiplicity of strategies and choices by agents. Some scholars think that the way to go about this is to link inwards to cognitive psychology.³⁵ This might be an interesting move which makes it possible to get a deeper and more developed understanding at the individual level of the psychological processes by which actors integrate (and are shaped) by general frames of understanding and adjust their way of acting accordingly. However, it seems to me that a more logical move is to subject the analysis of strategic action itself to a sociologically inspired constructivist analysis, that is to subject instrumental strategies (and their effects) to an analysis with the same kinds of tools and same kinds of assumptions used for looking at other social phenomena.³⁶ Indeed, it seems to me that the logical consequence of taking a sociological constructivist position is to think that also instrumental strategies are socially constituted and that they can be analysed as such.³⁷ That is, I very much agree with Ruggie that it ought to be logical for the constructivist to argue that certainly there are instrumental strategies and these have effects, but in order to understand what they are and why they have the effects they have we need to look at the social context (and that

³⁵ Checkel (1998).

³⁶ This is part of Wendt’s (1999) version of constructivism.

³⁷ Bourdieu (1994).

includes the inter-subjectively shared systems of meaning). The constructivist analysis “kicks in first”.³⁸

What is then needed are suggestions for how to have the analysis of the socially constructed systems of meaning and the instrumentality of agents (and individuals) run in parallel. That is how to analyse instrumental strategies as socially constructed. And I will suggest here that the concept of the habitus offers a way of doing that. Indeed, it is a concept which Bourdieu intends to use to explain “the common sense” behaviour and social practices by integrating both the field specific dispositions it produces and the individual variations on these. It is a concept tied to the structural level in that it is intended to allow for the analysis of the dispositions produced in a given field. But at the same time it is tied to the individual. The habitus of the individual reflects the variation of common sense and taken for granted notions stemming from the position of the actor in the field, the variation of dispositions coming from the fact that actors are part of a (individually specific) variety of social fields and that they have personal histories.

Bourdieu analyses his own “split” habitus³⁹ in terms of his background in the rural French South East and his position in the French education system and the kind of dispositions this has created to explain the academic and political positions that he has taken. And this kind of analysis can clearly be transposed to analyse the ways that actors relate to ideas about the world, including dominant ones more generally and hence also why and how they try to influence these.

In a similar vein, Lebaron construes an analysis of the field in order to get a grasp of (explain) the political and scholarly positions taken by French economists, and in particular the paradoxical situation that while their work is more politicised and political than ever they insist on denying any links to politics and insistently affirm the neutrality of their work.⁴⁰ He emphasises the position of the field in the general French social hierarchy, its internal logic in terms of the overall value that different forms of capital (social, institutional and cultural) have, as well as the role they play in

³⁸ Ruggie (1998).

³⁹ Bourdieu (2001).

⁴⁰ Lebaron (1997a).

different subfields. On this basis, he explains the positions taken by different economists both regarding theoretical questions in economics and more broadly the form and content of their (non)participation in the discussions about economic policies and their common denial of their links to politics. That is, he does not simply assume that it is in their interest to say that their science is politically neutral and that they consequently do this (in a unified voice). He shows why it is that different groups do so in very different ways and for very different reasons. He does not have to deny that the economists themselves see it as a rational strategy to do this. He “just” has to explain why it is the case that they do so.⁴¹

This kind of analysis it seems to me paves the way for thinking more clearly about the “spread of ideas” which is close to the concerns of many IPE scholars. It makes it possible to go beyond the simple observation of the fact that agents in a specific field (say central banking or the ministry of finance) come to see it as in their interest to advocate specific explanations and/or policies. By anchoring this observation in a study of the field and their position in that field one can explain why this is the case and by thinking of the field not only as a structure but as a field of struggle (*champs de luttes*⁴²) where agents actually try to influence the logic and definition of their own field, one can analyse why their strategies are effective (or not). An example of a study doing precisely this is Lourier’s analysis of the internationalization of Brazilian elites.⁴³

One can of course also think of doing the reverse, that is explaining why a changing common understanding does not actually alter social practices. That is why there is an “inertia” by which preexisting discourses are perpetuated in the social practices that make up institutions. An example of such an analysis is Neumann’s study of the failure of those promoting an understanding of the world as increasingly “globalized” to have an indent on the speech writing, diplomacy and understanding of the state system in the Norwegian foreign ministry.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Lebaron has also analysed other aspects of the French economic field. See Lebaron (1997b; 2000).

⁴² Bourdieu (1997: 56).

⁴³ Loureiro (1998).

⁴⁴ Neumann (2001: chap 6).

Following this path of analysis is of course not without problems. It is far from self-evident how dominant the dispositions produced by the field are in relation to those that come from the individual histories. Nor is it easy, as a consequence, to generalise about dispositions or to predict their actual impact on the strategies of agents in any given field. However, it seems to me that it is at least a way of starting to deal with the questions that constructivists have to face if they are to get better at answering the charge that they have little to say about why dominant ideas (do not) change and what the processes behind these changes are. It is, moreover, a way of doing so which seems to me to be consistent with the overall framework. And finally it is a way which makes it possible to think in parallel about the role of social construction and instrumental strategies.

A Reflexive Constructivism

The final point why it seems to me useful to link up with sociological approaches is that it paves the way for a more reflexive constructivism in IPE. For, as far as I am aware, there is little in terms of reflexive thinking (at least in public) in IPE. Yet, as already made clear above, reflexivity is a central (necessary?) part of constructivism. But should IPE scholars really have to bother with something widely perceived at best as the turf of PoMos or philosophers and at worst as a useless nuisance? In what follows I will argue that they should. I will use Bourdieu's sociological understanding of reflexivity to point to two reasons for (much more) reflexivity in IPE: First, reflexivity is important for doing a good job in IPE and second it is key to a critical evaluation of the role IPE plays in shaping social reality and hierarchies.

Reflexivity and Good Research in IPE

The first point I want to make, is that reflexivity is important for good and rigorous research in general, and that IPE is no exception to this. The basic constructivist tenet that the world is socially constructed and that the observer (including the IPE scholar) is hence engaged in writing a story about a story is the basis for this first argument. And the point is that the

story is not written from nowhere, but by an observer who is situated in a context and who is looking at the world with a specific point of view. That is the observer is looking at the world from somewhere. What Bourdieu adds, is an insistence that we can and should take care to say where from.

We can do this, he argues, by moving from “narcissist” to “reformist” reflexivity⁴⁵, that is to a reflexivity which takes trouble to sociologically analyse the position of the observer. As Bourdieu sees it, this analysis can be done with the same sociological tools that are used for looking at the positions and strategies of any other social actors in any other social field. By studying the “field” of science and the “habitus” of the scientist, we can “objectify the objectifying subject”⁴⁶ (including reflexively, when that subject is us) and hence understand from where, with what kind of dispositions and with what kind of “strategies” (we as) observers are selecting from and interpreting the world. Indeed, a major part of Bourdieu’s own work can be read as a reflexive analysis of his own field, the French education and university system.⁴⁷

Answering the where from question paves the way for an “epistemological prudence”; that is a conscious and critical effort to avoid the most obvious pitfalls tied to the own dispositions, the own position and the own strategies in the own field.⁴⁸ There are two things on which Bourdieu repeatedly insists, and which seem no less central to IPE than they are to sociology.

The first pertains to the choice of subjects and issues to study. Thinking about scientists as acting in a “field”, and following “strategies” to strengthen their own position within it, allows critical thinking about why some subjects are dealt with and others are not, and about how to redress the balance. This is no less important in IPE than it is in other subjects. On the contrary, the high political stakes in the core questions dealt with – e.g. “globalisation”, the new financial architecture or foreign investment regimes – makes it even more so. Moreover, the current pressure in most countries for researchers to rely on “external” funding and

⁴⁵ Bourdieu (2001: 178).

⁴⁶ Bourdieu (1992: title of chap. 6).

⁴⁷ Bourdieu (1984).

⁴⁸ Bourdieu (2001: 179).

to publish in “international” (mainly US and UK) journals increases the urgency of reflexivity further.⁴⁹ It concretely means that researchers have to subject their research agendas to the academic interests and conceptual grids of an “international” academic community and/or to the priorities of policy-establishments, fund managers or market actors. These considerations might fit nicely with the “scientific” research agenda. The point though, is that it is imperative to resist the temptation of “collective hypocrisy” and “self-delusion” which comes with simply assuming or pretending that this is the case. Uncritically accepting that there is a fit amounts to running the risk of obscuring and obfuscating power relations and in particular the location of the power to set agendas.

The second reason for advocating reflexivity is that it matters for how the selected problems are treated and hence what kind of results can be obtained. At the most immediate level it is important to be aware (to the extent possible) of the bias entailed in looking at the world from ones own perspective. It matters both because it is a way of limiting the imposition of priorities and schemes of analysis which originate in and reflect that bias. It also matters because it makes it more likely that one can actually interpret the meaning that those from other backgrounds attach to things. And finally, it matters because it is important to realise that where one looks from matters not only for the own schemes of explanation and interpretation but also for the actors that are being observed. Hence in the discussions of the interview method that was used for a collective study on “social suffering in contemporary society”, Bourdieu exposes the enormous difficulty, the team of researchers faced in dealing with the fact that their physical appearance, reactions, gestures and way of speaking influenced what the interviewees said or did not say and at times did “symbolic violence” to them.⁵⁰ Clearly, the problems in this respect are no different in IPE. There are, indeed, people working both at the macro level where the former concern with bias inherent in schemes of interpretation is of greater relevance and there are others basing their work on micro level research in which case the latter concern is clearly more significant.

⁴⁹ For a general analysis of the spread of knowledge and its effects, see Bourdieu (1998; 2000a).

⁵⁰ Bourdieu (1993: 1389-1446).

In a nutshell, there are good reasons for IPE scholars to take Bourdieu's arguments about the need for reflexivity for rigorous work seriously. This remains true even if there are obvious problems related to it. The concepts Bourdieu advocates are slippery and difficult to use. The practice "epistemological prudence" runs into a number of perennial and intractable problems it cannot resolve. And when explaining how it works in practice Bourdieu ends up referring to obviously unsatisfactory things such as "the profession" or "the eye" of the sociologist and terms the process a "spiritual exercise".⁵¹ This is however no good reason for not engaging with the problem. On the contrary, the arguments to the effect that sociological reflexivity is important for rigorous research are very strong. Consequently, if there are problems linked to its practice, it should be taken as a reason to explore the issue further. Not for rejecting sociological reflexivity off-hand. And indeed, part of the strength and persuasiveness of Bourdieu's own work, is that unlike many (or most) other scholars he made the effort to be reflexive about his work. And I think, this is something IPE scholars could draw inspiration from.

Reflexivity and Critical Thinking about the Impact of IPE

Besides the importance of reflexivity for rigorous research, I want to argue that it is also important for a second reason, namely that it paves the way for critical and emancipatory thinking about the impact of research in IPE (as elsewhere) on social hierarchies.

At first sight this point is a very simple and conventional one. It refers to the familiar idea that scholarly research can always be (mis)used and hence does not exist in isolation from the rest of society. This is clearly not news to the IPE scholar. The standard reference is Robert Cox' statement that "knowledge is always for someone". And there is a considerable amount of reflexiveness going on at this level in IPE. For example, in the globalisation debate the political implications of writing about globalisation as a deterministic and mystical process, has figured prominently in the critique.⁵² And the heat of the debate surrounding the subject is incomprehensible without reference to this interest in the effects

⁵¹ Bourdieu (1993: 1399).

⁵² See for instance Hay (2000).

of academic writing on politics and society.

But Bourdieu takes the conventional argument that science has a “feedback effect” on social reality a step further. In his work he insists heavily on the role played by academia in the (re)production of social hierarchies. He argues that it plays this role in three ways:

(i) The university system itself is a system in which social hierarchies are (re)produced, as Bourdieu shows in his poignant analysis of the French university system.⁵³ In this reproduction, the extent to which the actors accept the rules of the game, and censor their own critique of it, or inversely try to change the field and the rules of the game by e.g. introducing new topics as legitimate or by reorganizing the hierarchy of institutions or perhaps even creating new ones, is of fundamental significance. And this is certainly no less true for IPE than it is for sociology in France.

(ii) This hierarchy is in turn linked to and interacting with the more general social hierarchy in society, as he shows in his analysis of social hierarchy in French society.⁵⁴ Here any serious analysis of IPE would of course have to be contextualised, but it seems to me that the general point still holds.

(iii) And finally the university system plays a role in (re)producing social hierarchies by its legitimation of specific forms and kinds of knowledge, problems and issues and delegitimizing other kinds. As Gellner eloquently puts it:

At the base of the modern social order stands not the executioner but the professor. Not the guillotine, but the (aptly named) *doctorat d'état* is the main tool and symbol of state power. The monopoly of legitimate education is now more important, more central than is the monopoly of legitimate violence.⁵⁵

The way Bourdieu proposes to deal with these effects is through the practice of “sociological reflexivity”. By analysing the academic field sociologically he believes that it is possible to become more critically

⁵³ Bourdieu (1984).

⁵⁴ Bourdieu (1979).

⁵⁵ Gellner (1983: 34).

aware of the way it shapes social hierarchies. In particular, it enables the observer to see through the conservative (that is status and hierarchy preserving) nature of many reforms and inventions that are masqueraded as progressive. For example, on his own account, the key reasons for his longstanding (and much publicized) disagreement with – and lack of sympathy for – the French “post-structuralists” is that he sees them as playing an essentially conservative role in the French university world.⁵⁶ Their appearance, he contends, coincides neatly with the progressive reforms following May 1968. Their style and arguments had a triple conservative effect. They increased the importance of “postures” which are the most difficult for outsiders to the intellectual elite to credibly imitate and learn. The “genetic fallacy” (delinking of theoretical and empirical work) of their work further led to a devalorisation of work based on rigorous and clear standards and hence of the work easiest for outsiders to engage in.⁵⁷ And indirectly, according to Bourdieu, post-structuralism has undermined sociological research and particularly research that takes interest in social hierarchies and structures.

The role and impact of schools of thinking in IPE in non-French contexts are obviously bound to be at variance with the debates in sociology in France. It is a different academic discipline practised in different contexts. However, the point of spelling out Bourdieu’s argument with regard to the French post-structuralists is to illustrate Bourdieu’s understanding of science as a field of power relations and struggle. And this is something most IPE scholars probably recognise from their own contexts and which would require much more thorough attention and treatment than it has received so far or can receive here. But reflexivity is not only or even mainly about “denouncing and processing”. Instead Bourdieu thinks that it is most important because it “opens possibilities for rational action, aiming at undoing or redoing what history has done”⁵⁸, that is to create space for emancipatory thinking and action.

⁵⁶ Bourdieu (2001: 201-5).

⁵⁷ Bourdieu often repeats the (in my view unfair) idea that they do sociology while they pretend not to do it and refuse to get bugged down with tedious empirical detail and rigorous discussions of method.

⁵⁸ Bourdieu (1993: 348).

An aspect of Bourdieu's work which is often raised and which is of fundamental importance for his arguments about reflexivity is that his writing is in many ways very French and very contextual. The French educational system with all its egalitarian and meritocratic pretenses which Bourdieu has spent so much time analysing, clearly plays a far more central role in the production of social hierarchies than do the educational systems in other contexts. So, the question goes, can we really fruitfully draw on Bourdieu's work to analyse other contexts? And is reflexivity really as important for academic work elsewhere (say for IPE scholars in the UK or Denmark) as it is in France?

The above discussion should already have made clear that I am convinced that the answer to this question is a definite yes. For the first argument, the difference in context is not really terribly important. Reflexivity matters for good science everywhere. And, as Bourdieu repeatedly insists, the ambitions of his sociological theory is "global"⁵⁹ in the sense that the concepts are applicable to any variety of issues and contexts. As for the second argument (reflexivity is important for thinking critically about the feed back of academic work on social reality) it is obviously the case that fields of social science including IPE, as well as their impact on reality are bound to vary with the context. And it is consequently not possible simply to transfer Bourdieu's conclusions about sociology and academia in France to other academic fields in other contexts. This however, I think, is an indication that we need to take the time and make the effort to inquire critically about our own activities in order to arrive at our own conclusions. That is to argue in parallel about the way that our own activities as observers writing stories about stories influences the stories we are trying to get a hold of and render.

Conclusion

One of the key difficulties involved doing constructivist work, in IPE as elsewhere, is that it is a demanding task to keep the pieces of the

⁵⁹ For instance: Bourdieu (2001: 210).

puzzle together so that the overall picture does not fall apart. All constructivists agree that both the social construction of knowledge about reality and the construction of social reality itself has important power implications. But it is far from self evident to keep both in the picture. Similarly, everyone will agree that social construction should be thought of partly at the structural level but also that it matters for instrumental strategies at the agent level. But the question is of course how to keep both in the analysis. And finally, there is a widespread agreement on the fact that taking a constructivist perspective actually also entails taking reflexivity into account but not necessarily that this insight entails keeping reflexivity about the own work in the picture.

What I have suggested in this paper is that linking up with a sociological constructivism inspired by Bourdieu might be a help on the way in terms of suggesting how these things can be kept integrated in a parallel way. I have suggested that through the focus on the field, it keeps a final focus on social hierarchy and power (without reducing it to material factors) whether it is in the study of the social construction of knowledge or in the study of the construction of social reality. I have further argued that through the concept of the habitus, it makes the sociological construction of instrumental strategies part of the analysis. And finally, I have pointed out that because of the understanding of structures as historically and socially constituted he is brought to keep the reflexivity of the observer in his story.

This ambition is well reflected in the title of the article “the cunning of imperialist reason”. The idea is to keep a focus on the (imperialist) effects of cunning reason and on the power relations which made the strategies to spread it successful. But also to make clear why the imperialist reason is cunning. Why it is deceiving and what it obscures. However, as the many problems of that article also makes clear, the approach is far from flawless. Bourdieu has (obviously) not somehow found a solution to all the intractable difficulties that constructivists engaged in empirical analysis face. Hence the intention here has not been to suggest that his “global approach” in itself is a panacea. Rather it has been to give an indication of why I think it provides road signs indicating where to go and how to build better answers and that it is therefore worth linking up with.

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