

IEOs Week 4  
Liberalism & Constructivism

### Constructivism

- concern with identity and interests and how these can change; ideas, values, norms matter; how individuals talk about the world shapes practices; humans can change the world by changing ideas... (Karns&Mingst, 50)
- 1) the environment in which agents/states take action is social as well as material and 2) this setting can provide agents/states with understandings of their interests, can “constitute them” (Checkel, 325-326)
- material structures are given meaning (e.g. nuclear weapons)

Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It” (1992)

**-What in anarchy is given and immutable, and what is amenable to change?**

Kenneth Waltz *Man, The State and War* (1959)

Understanding state behavior and IR through:

first-image: individuals

second-image: causal developments at nation-state/societal level

third-image: international structures

- Interests and identities are endogenous to interaction (part of the system of interaction), rather than, as rationalists would have it, exogenous or previously fixed.

- “self-help” is process, not structure

Fundamental Principle of Constructivist Theory: People act toward “others” (objects/actors) on the basis of the meanings these “others” have for them.

- Collective meanings establish structures that organize our actions
  - Identities are relational
  - Identities form the basis of interests (interests are defined as situations are defined)
- States do not have to identify negatively with each other’s security (“competitive” security system) or even be indifferent to each other (“individualistic”, neo-liberal, gains-seeking)
- Claims of self-help “presuppose a history of interaction in which actors have acquired “selfish” identities and interests; before interaction...they would have no experience upon which to base such definitions of self and other.” (24)

Decisions are made based on probabilities produced by interaction, what actors *do* (gestures, etc. rather than worst case) (25).

## Liberalism

- All classical liberal theories of IR rest on the core assumption that domestic actors or structures strongly influence the foreign policy identities and interests of states. In this sense, liberal theories focus on the ‘second image’ – explanations for outcomes that are located at the level of the state.
- Perhaps the oldest and most famous second image argument put forward by classical liberals is the idea of the democratic peace (DP). Resisting the view that war is caused by defective human nature or the absence of a central authority, the eighteenth century writer Immanuel Kant argued that regime-type was the crucial variable.

**Table: The Variety of Liberal Approaches (*International Relations Theories*: page 93)**

	<b>Rationalism</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>
<b>Actor-centered (‘domestic politics matters’)</b>	Liberal Intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1993b, 1998) Utilitarian liberalism (Freud and Rittberger 2001) ‘Two-level games’ (Putnam 1988; Evans, Jacobson, and Putnam 1993)	Actor-centered constructivism (Checkel 1998; Sikkink 1993) Ideational liberalism (Moravcsik 1997) <sup>i</sup>
<b>Structure-centered (‘domestic polity matters’)</b>	Rationalist democratic peace and interdependence theories (e.g. Rummel 1983, Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992; Russett 1993;	Constructivist democratic peace theories (Czempiel 1986a; Doyle 1983; Russett 1993; Risse-Kappen 1995b)

(Oxford UP, Dunne, Kurki & Smith *International Relations Theories*)

• **Upper-left box: Actor-Centred Rationalist Liberalism.** The core claim of this version of liberalism is that domestic actors influence how states define their foreign policy interests. Societal actors compete with each other for access to and influence upon decision-makers. Such aggregation processes require that national decision-makers are responsive to interest group lobbying. Once preferences have been formulated domestically, rationalist and actor-centred liberalism brings constraints at the international level back in.

• **Upper-right box: Actor-Centred Constructivist Liberalism.** In rationalist liberal accounts, domestic actors shape state interests via bargaining dynamics. Domestic groups can highlight potential electoral sanctions if national decision-makers are not responsive to their demands. In constructivist accounts, domestic actors and state actors participate in processes of mutual persuasion and arguing.

• **Lower-left box: Rationalist Democratic Peace and Interdependence Theories.** DP theory starts from a dual empirical puzzle: first, democracies rarely go to war against each other; second, democracies are not per se more peaceful than any other regime type. To explain this outcome, rationalist DP theories (following Kant) highlight how citizens in general will oppose wars not least because they bear the costs of wars. Governments, being rational actors, avoid starting wars in order to maximize their chances of success on election day. Recent DP theories have deployed rationalist arguments to point out the high costs of putting together an institutional coalition which would support war.

• **Lower-right box: Constructivist DP Theories.** The basic argument of constructivist DP theory is that liberal states do not fight each other because they perceive each other as friendly rather than hostile. An important dimension to this causal argument is that states learn over time that fellow liberal states are peaceful. Democratic norms matter enormously as they emphasise public debate, rational argument, and processes by which conflicts of interest can be resolved without recourse to the threat or use of force.

(Oxford UP, Dunne, Kurki & Smith *International Relations Theories*, <http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199298334/01student/guide/ch05/>)