

Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #70

NICHOLAS ONUF ON THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM, TURNS IN IR, AND A DISCIPLINE OF OUR MAKING

Theory Talks

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NICHOLAS ONUF ON THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM, TURNS IN IR, AND A DISCIPLINE OF OUR MAKING



Can we really go on speaking about International Relations as a ‘discipline’? Even if social constructivism is often presented as a robust theoretical cornerstone of the discipline, one of the thinkers that established this theoretical position challenges the existence of IR. Surely, Nicholas Onuf argues, we have a disciplinary machinery—institutions, journals, conferences and so forth—but these form an apparatus built around a substantive void—in his words, ‘a discipline without an ‘about’’. In this *Talk*, Nicholas Onuf—among others—weaves an appraisal of disciplinary boundaries through a discussion of social constructivism’s birth and growth, tells the material turn

to get serious and provides a bleak assessment of IR’s subservient relation to political order.

What is (or should be), according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current International Relations? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

In my view, the biggest challenge for IR is making good on claims (I’d say pretensions) that IR is a discipline in its own right. Such claims presume that IR has a reasonably well-bounded subject matter and a body of theory uniquely suited to that subject matter. For 25 years I have been saying that IR fails miserably in meeting this challenge. Much less do we acknowledge the challenge—there is no debate. As it is, we have institutionalized a so-called discipline (journals, conferences, workshops, PhD programs) that reaches far beyond (lower case) international relations. In short: a discipline without an ‘about.’ Were we to acknowledge the challenge, we might be content to say: Forget disciplines, it’s all about ‘the social’ and social theory belongs to us—too. Or we might say, it’s all about ‘the political,’ and legal, political *and* social theory also belong to us. I’m not sure there’s much difference. I am sure that it’s not enough to say our ‘about’ is ‘the international.’ And I have said as much publicly, though intemperate terms that I instantly regretted.

Given such a negative assessment of IR, you might wonder why I stuck with it all these years. Why didn’t I just call myself a social theorist and (try to) publish in the few journals in which theorists gets a hearing? Actually, I did try a few times, to no avail (just as I put ‘social theory’ in the subtitle of *World of Our Making* (1989) to no discernible effect). I think there’s a status issue lurking here. Once identified with IR, it’s hard to get acknowledged outside IR. Nobody reads or cites us; we ‘don’t get no respect’; status ordering condemns us to be consumers rather than producers of big ideas. If (just perhaps) the era of big ideas is over, then the next generation in IR may feel a little braver than I was about jumping ship. Not that I’m

betting on it, especially since publishing in a host relatively new, expressly interdisciplinary journals, such as *Global Constitutionalism*, *International Political Sociology* and *International Political Theory*, offer a safer alternative.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about International Relations?

I have to say that events have never inspired me. In my callow youth, Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* (1948) inspired me to think about spending a lifetime doing IR, as did my teachers [Robert Tucker](#) and George Liska—both realists with a taste respectively for international law and international institutions. Working as Tucker's assistant in revising [Hans Kelsen's](#) *Principles of International Law* (1952) prompted a longstanding interest in legal theory. As a doctoral student, I got hooked on systems theory à la [Hoffmann](#), [Kaplan](#), [Rosecrance](#); the special issue of *World Politics* (vol. 14, no. 1) on the international system left an indelible mark, as did Waltz's *Man, the State and War* (1959). Working with [Richard Falk](#) a few years later affected me a great deal—he remains one of my very few heroes. So did [Fritz Kratochwil](#), briefly a student of mine and friend ever since.

In the 1980s I got to know a number of mavericks: Hayward Alker, Rick Ashley, Dick Mansbach, John Ruggie and Rob Walker are by no means the only ones on this list. More important, I think, were my feminist doctoral students, who changed my life in a great many ways and were largely responsible for my turn to social theory. It was in that context that I took the so-called linguistic turn to Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin *et al.* *World of Our Making* is pretty clear about its many sources of inspiration. The big trick was fitting everything together. Since then (and to keep the story manageable), working with my brother Peter is responsible for my interest in Aristotle *and* in the making of the modern world; republican theory links these two concerns. I cannot blame Peter for my ongoing fascination with Foucault.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

For me at least, this is a tricky question. As I said earlier, I am not very much interested in events—either as theoretical fodder or as a matter of what's happening in the world at any given moment. Most of my friends and colleagues are fascinated by current events—how often I find them glued to one news source or another. Students are too, and it seems pretty obvious they should be. Most people in the field engage in the skillful assembly of events, whether in 'cases' or as statistically manipulated patterns. Learning the appropriate skills takes a great deal of time and training. At the same time, students also need an exposure to theory—big picture thinking—and, in my view, the philosophical issues that lurk behind any big picture.

Theory is a seductive. I was seduced at the age of 19 and never gotten over it. Shifting metaphors, I always told my doctoral students not to succumb to the theory bug, at least to the exclusion of what I just called 'the skillful assembly of events.' In other words, don't do it my way—I was lucky to get away with it. Disposition is a different matter. Students must love to work hard for extended intervals with little immediate gratification. Machiavelli said that warriors must be disciplined and ardent. I used to tell my doctoral students, you have to be 'warrior nerds.' If you don't fit this profile, find another vocation.

You were immensely influential in constructing the theoretical pillar of social constructivism in IR, starting over 25 years ago. Looking back, has social constructivism delivered on the promise you etched out in *World of Our Making*?

No way, and for all kinds of reasons. This was all too clear within a decade, as I intimated in a review of [Peter Katzenstein](#)'s *The Culture of National Security* (1996, read introduction [here](#)) and spelled out in Don Puchala's *Visions of International Relations* (2003). To simplify unduly and perhaps unjustly, the constructivists who came to prominence in the 1990s made three mistakes. First, they took for granted that a norm (as in 'the norm') is normative without asking whether, to what degree, or how this might be so. I'm pretty sure this mistake came from a mindless appropriation of functional sociology and utter indifference to legal and political theory. Second, they substituted identity ('who am I?' questions) for agency ('who acts for what or whom?' questions) in guessing at the implications of the end of the Cold War. In doing so, they compounded the felony by leaping from personal identity to collective identity and unreflectively imputing agency to imagined collectivities. Third, they treated culture as an aggregate residual and then assigned it enormous causal significance. Had any of them taken the linguistic turn seriously, they might have extricated those elements of 'culture' that (one might guess) are most consequential for social construction.

More generally, I came to see the constructivist surge of the 90s as a liberal-institutionalist renaissance. Standing in for legal rules, formal institutions and corporate personality, norms and identity look like a conceptual breakthrough to a generation of scholars who had been taught to dismiss old-time liberal IR. In the 2000s, a shifting panorama of events (genocide etc.) prompted a straight-on liberal institutionalist revival with lots of help from lawyers. Meanwhile, a much more diverse range of scholarship has come to be styled constructivist for lack a better label. Finally, there has emerged a gang of 'third generation' constructivists who now actively repudiate their predecessors from the 90s. They speak my language, but I'll let them speak for themselves.

How, do you think, do 'turns' in IR relate to the broader context of real-world historical events? If the origins of social constructivism have been located in the end of the Cold War, is there some kind of dialectic whereby social constructivism then impacts on the course of history? For instance, social constructivism is by now so established that a big part of newer generations of practitioners in IR are probably social constructivists. How does that influence international politics? In other words, does social constructivism as an illocutionary theoretical approach hold perlocutionary effect on its object of study?

I have some reservations about the metaphor 'turn.' Do we imagine IR as a colossal ship that turns, however slowly, all of a piece? I've already used the ship metaphor, but in this context it's not appropriate—we're not that put together, and, besides, no one is steering (not even those legendary gate-keepers). Or a herd of wildebeests, in which all the members of the herd turn together by keying off each other once one senses danger and turns? I don't think so, even if we do sometimes see signs of a herd mentality.

Back in the late 60s, Karl Deutsch suggested that the field had even then experienced a succession of waves. I like this metaphor better because it captures both the messiness of what's going on and a sense that perhaps not much is changing in deeper water. You yourself switch metaphors on me when you mention a new generation of constructivists. As it happens, I like

this metaphor a lot (and have a piece entitled ‘Five Generations of International Relations Theory’ forthcoming in a new edition of *International Relations Theory Today*, which Ken Booth and Toni Erskine are editing). It suggests a dynamic internal to any field of study rather than one prompted by external events. Inasmuch as constructivism got its start before the Cold War ended but afterwards changed its profile significantly tells us the story is actually rather complicated.

The more interesting question is whether constructivism will, as you say, impact the course of history. The quick and dirty answer is, yes, but in ways too subtle to document. We already know how difficult it is to establish any impact from IR as a scholarly pursuit on world affairs. That is, any impact beyond realism and *raison d'état*. As we become more specialized in what we do and so does everyone else, it seems ever less likely that we'll be able to pin down extended causal chains. But I suspect that you have something more like ‘mood’ in mind. Once liberal institutionalists adopted a slick kind of constructivism, they were pretty much in sync with the *Zeitgeist*, at least for a decade or so. So, yes, as a not very helpful generalization, we can surmise that some degree of co-constitution was then at work. Always is.

One last point. I don't have even the slightest sense that my own scholarly work has had anything have much to do with large-scale world-making, or that it will in any near-term. I don't have to be told that my work is too austere and forbidding to reach very many people—though I am told this often enough. Years from now, who knows? Yet my teaching career convinces me that there's more co-constitution going on in the classroom than anywhere else we're likely to find ourselves. Interacting with hundreds of MA and PhD students in Washington DC over 28 years—during which I noodled through what would become *World of Our Making*—affected me and them in ways beyond measure. Some of those students became scholars, but many more have spent their lives in public service.

What has been, to you, the biggest surprise or exciting move in IR since social constructivism saw the light?

The biggest and most surprising ‘move’ has been the move offshore. I speak of course as someone raised, trained and employed in the US when IR was ‘[An American Social Science](#).’ For the last twenty years, IR has not so much left the US as gained strength everywhere else. Better to say, its center of gravity has moved. In the process, IR has transformed, both as a claimant discipline and as a theory-driven enterprise. As a participant-observer, I see IR as an institutional beneficiary of globalization and, to a lesser degree, those of us in IR as agents in this hugely complicated process.

Globalization has meant, among much else, the extraordinary growth of higher education and its institutional apparatus. The proliferation of universities is an acknowledgment of cosmopolitan imperatives *and* an accommodation of national needs, exemplified in programs for the grooming of managerial elites. For IR, this large process has been colored by an ostensible rejection of American hegemony. One expression of this anti-hegemonial sentiment is the fashion for post-positivist scholarship and the sort of constructivism that is now conventionally ascribed to Fritz Kratochwil and me. For me personally, it's just wonderful to be taken seriously everywhere but my own country.

You recently have turned attention towards cognitive and evolutionary psychology. This is a pretty underrepresented field, in terms of its being mined in IR. What challenge has this literature to pose, in your view, to dominant IR?

Long ago, I ventured into cognitive studies as a consequence of casting a broad net in social theory. Since then, several disciplines have converged in making cognitive studies just about the most exciting game in town. I cannot imagine anyone not being fascinated (but then I am also fascinated by advances in cosmology, however little I understand the technical stuff). In recent years, I have developed a more specific interest in what cognitive and evolutionary psychology might tell about my mind, any mind, in relation to a world that my mind cannot access directly, the world of appearances. As you can see, I'm a philosophical idealist—with many qualifications, a Kantian idealist. Most people in IR are philosophical realists, for whom such issues are less compelling.

Let me comment briefly on any challenge the cognitive revolution might pose for IR in the philosophical realist mode. IR's substantive concerns are so far removed from the stuff of cognitive *science* (neurons and such) that I doubt scholars in IR will ever feel obliged take the latter into account. Nor should they. Positivist science is reductive—it always pushes down levels of analysis to explain what's going on at higher levels. But anyone pushing down risks losing touch with what seems to be substantively distinctive about one's starting point, and IR and its event-manifold are a long way up from the synchronized firing of neurons. I would qualify this bald statement somewhat to account for the recent interest of emotions in IR. At least some of the psychological literature on emotions taps into a deep pool of research where the age-old cognition-emotion binary has finally been put to rest.

You have a broad experience in IR. How do you see the evolution of the field? Is it a tragedy of unfolding rationalization and increasing division of labor, or is something else going on?

As I intimated earlier, IR has failed as a disciplinary project. I'm almost inclined to say, there's no hope for IR 'as we know it.' Better to say, IR has lost its self-told coherence. A hundred flowers bloom, but just barely, and there are a lot of weeds. I don't see this as a bad thing (your weeds may well be my flowers), although other disciplines, such as sociology and a resuscitated geography, cast shadows on our scraggly garden. I do think larger societal processes—modern rationalization and modernist functional differentiation—have conjoined to impose a coherence we don't see. Crudely, we are servants to other servants, all of us ultimately minions to run-away capital and victims of its techno-material seductions. I guess you could call this phenomenon a tragedy, though its very impersonality undercuts the sense of the term. I have no doubt, however, that it will eventuate in a catastrophe from we moderns will never recover. I have been saying this ever since the 1970s, when the debate over [The Limits to Growth](#) persuaded me that we would never turn the ship around.

A new 'turn' seems to be developing in the social sciences, possibly a swing of the ontological pendulum back to materialism—this time with a more postpositivist undertone. How do you relate to such a turn?

I am skeptical. It looks like a fad to me—people casting about for something new and interesting to say. Moreover, the vitalist, [Bergsonian](#) tenor of so much of the new materialism turns me

off—I cannot see the case for ascribing agency (and thus purpose) to things when the language of cause suffices. (And I am not among those constructivists who will not speak of cause for fear of positivist contamination.) But there’s another issue that troubles me: the continued power of the materialist-idealist binary. In IR, we call realists materialists and liberal institutionalists/soft constructivists idealists when it should be obvious that whatever separates them (in my view, not as much as they think) has nothing to do with idealism and materialism as philosophical stances. Security dilemmas, arms races and terrorist plots are not ideationally informed? Norm diffusion, identity crises and human rights are not materially expressed? Get serious.

I argued in *World of Our Making* that the material and the social are bound inextricably bound together. Rules do the job. They turn the stuff of the world into resources that we, as social beings, put to use. I think I got it right then. Needless to say, I also think students afflicted with mindlessly linked binaries can only benefit from reading that book.

Nicholas Greenwood Onuf is renowned as one of the founders of constructivism in International Relations. He is also known for his important contributions to International Legal Theory, International History, and Social Theory. Onuf’s most famous work is arguably *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (published in 1989), which should be on every IR student’s must-read list. His recent publications include *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (2006, co-authored with his brother Peter Onuf) and *International Legal Theory: Essays and Engagements, 1966-2006* (2008). Onuf is currently Professor Emeritus of International Relations at Florida International University and is on the editorial boards of *International Political Sociology*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, and *Contexto Internacional*. Professor Onuf received his PhD in International Studies at John Hopkins University, and has also taught at Georgetown University, American University, Princeton, Columbia, University of Southern California, Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, and Kyung Hee University in Korea.

Related links

- [FacultyProfile at the Florida International University](#)
- Read Onuf’s *Rule and Rules in International Relations* (2014 conference paper) [here](#)(pdf)
- Read Onuf’s *Fitting Metaphors: the Case of the European Union* (New Perspectives, 2010) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Onuf’s *Institutions, intentions and international relations* (Review of International Studies, 2002) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Onuf’s *Levels* (European Journal of International Relations 1995) [here](#) (pdf)