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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN A CONSTRUCTED WORLD

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Editors

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Constructivism: A User's Manual

Nicholas Onuf

Constructivism is a way of studying social relations—any kind of social relations. While it draws from a variety of other ways of studying such a broad and complex subject, it stands on its own as a system of concepts and propositions. Constructivism is not a theory as such. It does not offer general explanations for what people do, why societies differ, how the world changes. Instead, constructivism makes it feasible to theorize about matters that seem to be unrelated because the concepts and propositions normally used to talk about such matters are also unrelated.

As presented here, constructivism applies to all fields of social inquiry. In recent years, dissident scholars in many fields have selectively used the language of social construction to criticize existing social arrangements and scholarly practices. A great deal of discord has ensued. (Also see Part I, Introduction.) When constructivism is used systematically, it has the opposite effect. It finds value in diverse materials and forges links where none seemed possible.

Full of discordant voices, International Relations is the field to which this particular system of concepts and propositions was first applied. While this manual is intended for the use of anyone with methodical habits of mind, its users are most likely to have an interest in the subject of international relations. They may have also had some exposure to the field's scholarly controversies. If this is indeed the case, they will soon discover that the subject is less distinctive, but more complex, than they have been led to believe.

Overview

Fundamental to constructivism is the proposition that human beings are social beings, and we would not be human but for our social relations. In other words, social relations *make* or *construct* people—*ourselves*—into the kind of beings that we are. Conversely, we *make* the world what it is, from the raw materials that nature provides, by doing what we do with each other and saying what we say to each other. Indeed, saying is doing: talking is undoubtedly the most important way that we go about making the world what it is.

Countries such as France, the United States, and Zimbabwe are among the social constructions, or societies, that people make through what we do. Countries are self-contained worlds because people talk about them that way and try to keep them that way. Yet they are only relatively self-contained. Relations among countries—international relations—constitutes a world in its own right. This is a self-contained world for the simple reason that it covers the earth, but it is still nothing more than a world of our making—a society of relatively self-contained societies.

Constructivism holds that people make society, and society makes people. This is a continuous, two-way process. In order to study it, we must start in the middle, so to speak, because people and society, always having made each other, are already there and just about to change. To make a virtue of necessity, we will start in the middle, between people and society, by introducing a third element, *rules*, that always links the other two elements together. Social rules (the term *rules* includes, but is not restricted to, legal rules) make the process by which people and society constitute each other continuous and reciprocal.

A rule is a statement that tells people *what* we *should* do. The "what" in question is a standard for people's conduct in situations that we can identify as being alike, and can expect to encounter. The "should" tells us to match our conduct to that standard. If we fail to do what the rule tells us to, then we can expect consequences that some other rule will bring into effect when other people follow the rule calling for such consequences. All the ways in which people deal with rules—whether we follow the rules or break them, whether we make the rules, change them, or get rid of them—may be called *practices*. Even when we do not know what a rule says, we can often guess what it is about by looking at people's practices.

Among much else, rules tell us who the active participants in a society are. Constructivists call these participants *agents*. People are agents, but only to the extent that society, through its rules, makes it possible for us to participate in the many situations for which there are rules. No one is an agent for all such situations.

Ordinarily, we think of agents as people who act on behalf of other people. Considering the matter more abstractly, we see that rules make it possible for us to act on behalf of social constructions, which may be ourselves, other human beings, or even collections of people, along with the rules, the practices, and the actual things that we make and use. Conversely, agents need not be individual human beings to be able to act on behalf of others (here I refer to agents in the third person to emphasize that the terms *people* and *agents* are not completely interchangeable). Agency is a social condition. Thus the government of a country is a collection of people and a social construction. According to the relevant rules, these people act, together and in various combinations, on behalf of that country as a much larger collection of people.

Rules give agents choices. As we have already seen, the most basic choice is to follow the rule—to do what the rule says the agent should do—or not. Only human beings can actually make choices, because we alone (and not all of us) have the mental equipment to consider the probable consequences of making the choices that are available to us. Nevertheless, we always make such choices on behalf of, and in the name of, social constructions, whether ourselves, other people or collections of other people, or practices and artifacts.

Agents act in society to achieve goals. These goals reflect people's needs and wishes in light of their material circumstances. Every society has rules telling agents which goals are the appropriate ones for them to pursue. Of course, there are situations in which people are perfectly aimless. For example, when we freeze up in fear or fall asleep from exhaustion, we are no longer agents or, for that matter, social beings.

When we, as human beings, act as agents, we have goals in mind, even if we are not fully aware of them when we act. If someone asks us to think about the matter, we can usually formulate these goals more or less in the order of their importance to whomever we are acting as agents for, starting with ourselves. Most of the time, agents have limited, inaccurate, or inconsistent information about the material and social conditions that affect the likelihood of reaching given goals. Nevertheless, agents do the best they can to achieve their goals with the means that nature and society (together—always together) make available to them. Acting to achieve goals is *rational* conduct, and agents faced with choices will act rationally. Viewed from outside, these choices may appear to be less than rational, but this is due to the complexities of agency and human fallibility.

Agents make choices in a variety of situations. Rules help to define every such situation from any agent's point of view. In many situations, rules are directly responsible for presenting agents with choices. Agents have made or acknowledged these rules in the belief that following rules generally helps them reach their intended goals.

In these situations, rules are related to agents' practices, and to each other, through the consequences that agents intend their acts to have. Whether by accident or by design, rules and related practices frequently form a stable (but never fixed) pattern suiting agents' intentions. These patterns are *institutions*. As recognizable patterns of rules and related practices, institutions make people into agents *and* constitute an environment within which agents conduct themselves rationally. While it is always possible, and often useful, to think of agents—all agents—as institutions in their own right, we more commonly think of agents as operating in an institutional context that gives them at least some opportunities for choice.

Exercising choices, agents act on, and not just in, the context within which they operate, collectively changing its institutional features, and themselves, in the process. Nevertheless, from any agent's point of view, society consists of diverse institutions that seem, for the most part, to be held in place by rules linking them to other institutions. Any stable pattern of institutions (including agents of all sorts) is also an institution. Agents are aware of the institutions populating their environments, and not simply because the rules forming these institutions directly bear on their conduct. To the extent that some agents make choices, and other agents are affected by these choices, institutions produce consequences for other agents that they cannot help but be aware of and respond to.

In a complex world, agents often make choices that have consequences, for themselves and others, that they had not anticipated or do not care very much about. Unintended consequences frequently form stable patterns with respect to their effect on agents. A perfect market provides a compelling illustration of this phenomenon. One by one, a large number of sellers and buyers are incapable of affecting the supply of, and demand for, a good. Collectively, their rational choices have the unintended consequence of setting a price for that good which they must individually accept as fixed.

Anyone may notice such stable patterns of unintended consequences. In the case of a market, no one could fail to notice it in the form of a good's price, over which no agent seems to have any control. Sometimes agents will choose to prevent changes in such patterns by adopting rules that are intended to have this effect. A rule fixing the price of a good under certain conditions is only the most obvious example.

Any stable pattern of rules, institutions, and unintended consequences gives society a *structure*, recognizable as such to any observer. Agents are always observers. Insofar as they observe consequences that they had not intended, and accept them, such consequences are no longer unintended in

the usual sense of the word. If agents decide that these consequences are bad for them, they will act to change them, perhaps with other unforeseen consequences resulting.

Outside observers (agents from a different society) may recognize a more complex structure than agents do as observers. Outsiders can stand back, so to speak, and see patterns that insiders cannot see because they are too close to them. As agents on the inside become aware of what observers have to say, observers become agents, whatever their intentions. When agents in general take this new information into account in making their choices, an even greater complexity of structure results.

Scholars who think of themselves as constructivists have given a good deal of attention to the "agent-structure problem." (See Harry Gould's contribution to this volume in Chapter 4 for a thorough review of these discussions.) The term *structure* is the source of much confusion (an *ontological* confusion), because scholars cannot agree on whether structures exist in reality or only in their minds. The important point to remember is that structure is what observers see, while institutions are what agents act within. Nevertheless, structure can affect agents. We are often affected by phenomena, natural and social, that we do not or cannot see, but we then respond as agents by putting what has happened to us in an institutional context. When agents do this, they *institutionalize* structure by bringing rules to bear on their situations.

Generally speaking, scholars today tend to think that the structure of international relations is not institutionalized to any great degree. This is so even for some scholars who think of themselves as constructivists. They believe that countries are highly institutionalized as *states*, but that states, through their agents, conduct their relations in an anarchic world. The term *anarchy* points to a condition of *rule* among states in which no one state or group of states rules over the rest. It also implies that there is no institution above states ruling them. When we say that states are *sovereign*, we are saying the very same thing.

By calling international relations anarchic, scholars are not saying that there is an absence of rule. This would be chaos, not anarchy. Instead, they seem to be saying that structure—and especially a stable pattern of unintended consequences—rules the day. In the same sense, we might say that the market rules the behavior of sellers and buyers.

Starting with rules, as constructivists often do, leads quickly enough to patterns of relations that we can only describe as a condition of rule. Usually this condition is sufficiently institutionalized that we can recognize specific agents as rulers. Sometimes there is very little evidence of institutionalization, as in mob rule, but there is also little reason to think that this

condition will persist as a stable pattern without institutions emerging. In other words, where there are rules (and thus institutions), there is rule—a condition in which some agents use rules to exercise control and obtain advantages over other agents. Rule is a stable pattern of relations, but not a symmetrical one.

Anarchy is a condition of rule in which rules are not directly responsible for the way agents conduct their relations. To be sure, there are rules in the background. They make sure that the unintended consequences of agents' many choices, and not rulers, do the job of ruling. If unintended consequences *seem* to rule, it is because some agents intend for them to do so.

Some agents want to be ruled in this indirect sort of way because it suits their goals more than any other arrangement would. Other agents have little or no choice in the matter. Perhaps patterns just happen, but agents make arrangements. Arranging for anarchy is just one possibility.

Constructivists should seriously consider dropping the word *structure* from their vocabularies. *Social arrangement* is a better choice. Appearances aside, international anarchy is a social arrangement—an institution—on a grand scale. Within its scope, many other institutions are recognizably connected. In every society, rules create conditions of rule. The society that states constitute through their relations is no exception.

Whether we, as constructivists, start with agents or with social arrangements, we come quickly enough to particular institutions and thus to rules. If we start with rules, we can move in either direction—toward agents and the choices that rules give them an opportunity to make, or toward the social arrangements that emerge from the choices that agents are making all the time. Whichever way we go, we ought to keep in mind that rules yield rule as a condition that agents (as institutions) can never escape.

The practical problem is that, as constructivists, we want to move in both directions at the same time. Yet if we try to do so, we come up against the staggering complexity of the social reality that we want to know about. It is impossible to do everything. The practical solution is to start with rules and show how rules make agents and institutions what they are in relation to each other. Then we can show how rules make rule, and being ruled, a universal social experience.

The remainder of this user's manual is dedicated to these two tasks. To make points as clear and understandable as possible, it repeats most of what the reader has now had a taste of. In the process, it introduces many additional concepts and propositions, expressed in the simplest terms that its author can think of. Used consistently and systematically related, these concepts and propositions constitute a comprehensive framework for understanding the world in constructivist terms.

Rules Make Agents, Agents Make Rules

Rules make agents out of individual human beings by giving them opportunities to act upon the world. These acts have material and social consequences, some of them intended and some not. Through these acts, agents *make* the material world a social reality for themselves as human beings. Because agents are human beings, acting singly or together on behalf of themselves or others, they act as they do for human purposes—they have goals reflecting human needs and wishes. The tangled connections between agency (who is acting on whose behalf?), goals (whose goals are affected by what acts?), and circumstances (which features of the world actually matter?) make it difficult for agents to explain fully and convincingly why they act as they do. Even if they seem confused, observers can often figure the reasons for their conduct from the evidence at hand.

Agents use whatever means are available to them to achieve their goals. These means include material features of the world. Because the world is a social place, at least for human beings, rules make the world's material features into *resources* available for agents' use. Some resources are not directly material—rules also constitute agents and institutions as resources. Whether agents are able to spell out their reasons for using the resources available to them, or observers figure them out from the evidence, recognizable patterns in the results constitute agents' *interests*.

Agents need not know what their interests are to act on them. Once they learn more from other agents (as observers) about their own interests, they may act differently. Indeed, human beings do not need to think about themselves as agents to be agents. While being an agent does not require the degree of self-consciousness that we associate with having an *identity*, agents are usually aware enough of their identities, singular and collective, to have an interest in fostering those identities.

As agents, people can make other people into agents by giving the latter the opportunity to act on the former's behalf for particular purposes. The former may do so individually or collectively, and the latter may be one or more individuals acting on the former's behalf. Agents acting collectively become a singular agent. By using resources, they acquire a material existence, and, as the previous paragraph suggests, they become objects of identification.

Agency is always limited. Agents are never free to act upon the world in all the ways that they might wish to. Many limits have a material component. We need air to breathe; we do not have wings to fly. No rule can readily make things otherwise, even though rules allow us, agents, to use resources to alter these limits, for example, by fashioning scuba gear and airplanes. Rules that give any agent an opportunity to act create limits for other agents. Rules in general limit the range of acts that other agents are free to take.

It follows from this proposition that no individual human being, as an agent, has full *autonomy*. By the same token, agents acting together never have full *independence*. As noted, agents are always limited by rules that give other agents opportunities to act. Agents acting together are additionally limited by the very rules that give them the opportunity to act collectively. Rules allowing other agents, individual and collective, to act on their behalf limit them even further.

When a very large number of people collectively operate as an agent, when they have agents acting for them, when they have some considerable measure of identity (including some place identified as theirs), and when they are free to act within very wide limits, these people constitute a country. For several centuries, agents have had a consistent interest in talking about countries as if they are independent of each other and any other social construction. This is made clearest by defining sovereignty as absolute independence and describing countries as sovereign states. As constructivists, however, we should always bear in mind that full independence is a useful fiction, and sovereignty is a matter of degree.

The freedom that agents do have depends on their ability to recognize the material and social limits that apply to them. They must also be able to evaluate the consequences of exceeding those limits. To be an agent requires the mental equipment that individual human beings normally develop over the course of their social lives. Agents exercise their freedom by choosing to act one way or another, in an unending series of situations that make choosing unavoidable. It hardly needs saying that *not* choosing is a choice, presumably taken, as all choices are, to advance agents' goals. Agents make choices in light of the skills that they possess and the resources that they have access to, for reasons that they are more or less able to articulate. In short, they make choices in pursuit of their interests.

Rules offer agents the simplest kind of choices. Agents may choose to follow a given rule, or to break it. Compared to most situations in which agents make choices, the choice of following a rule or not following it involves consequences that are easy to calculate. While unintended consequences are always possible, rules give agents the opportunity to make rational choices—choices dictated by reference to goals—with some assurance that they are making the best choices available to them.

A rule makes rational choice relatively easy by telling the agents to whom it refers what they should do in some sort of situation that they might find themselves in. These agents may act on the contents of the rule without

realizing that the contents form a rule. In principle, however, any agent (including any observer with enough information) can formulate contents of a rule in the form of a rule. There is nothing tricky about this. Saying what a rule is—putting its contents in the right form—is exactly the same as speaking in a form that gets anyone who is listening to respond to whatever we are saying. The point of speaking in this way is to have something take place—to accomplish something with the assistance of someone else.

The act of speaking in a form that gets someone else to act is commonly called a speech act. The form that a speech act must have will be clear from the following examples: (1) You assert that duck season has begun (you might actually say, "Duck season has begun!"). (2) She demands that we all go duck hunting (she might actually say, "Let's go duck hunting!"). (3) I promise to roast duck for dinner (I might actually say, "I'll cook!"). The generic form for a speech act is: I (you, etc.) hereby assert (demand, promise) to anyone hearing me that some state of affairs exists or can be achieved. The three examples suggest that speech acts fall into three categories, here called assertive speech acts, directive speech acts, and commissive speech acts.

Whether speech acts accomplish anything depends on whether others respond to what they hear. The response to your assertion about duck season was obviously positive. I, at least, accepted her inclusive but imperative demand to go hunting when I promised to cook. We may surmise that both of you accepted my offer, and we all three went duck hunting, perhaps after we checked the newspaper to be sure that duck season had indeed begun.

Whatever category a particular speech act falls within, particular speech acts imply nothing about future situations. We start all over again when deer season begins. A speaker may assert the existence of some state of affairs and others may agree, or may request something and others may comply, or may make a commitment that others accept, without any necessary consequences in the long run.

If, however, speakers frequently repeat a particular speech act with the same general effect, everyone involved begins to think that the repetition becomes significant. We end up hunting with each other all the time because we go through the same cycle of speech acts whenever hunting season begins. Constantly repeated, the same old speech acts turn into *convention* as everyone comes to believe that the words themselves, and not the speakers mouthing them, are responsible for what happens. Hunting together is what we do at certain times, whether any of us even have to say anything much about it anymore.

Conventions come close to being rules. Recall that rules tell agents what they should do. A convention reminds agents what they have always done.

The borderline between knowing that we have always done something and probably will continue to do it, and believing that we should do it because we have always done it, is exceedingly fuzzy. If a convention prompts agents to think that they should do something that they have always done, then the convention is indeed a rule. We should consider the rule in question a weak rule because it is *normative*, which means that agents accept the "should" element, only to the extent that the regular pattern of conduct (such as hunting together) continues.

As agents begin to realize that they should act as they always have, and not just because they always have acted that way, the convention gains strength as a rule. Rules keep the form of a speech act by generalizing the relation between speaker and hearer. Within the general form of a speech act, given rules make hearers into agents to whom those rules apply. Finally, agents recognize that they should follow the rules in question because they are rules and for no other reason.

Rules can take the general form of speech acts in each of the three categories presented above: assertive speech acts, directive speech acts, and commissive speech acts. Rules in the form of assertive speech acts inform agents about the world—the way things are, the way it works—and inform them what consequences are likely to follow if they disregard this information. The information contained in such rules may be stated in very general terms, in which case we might call it a *principle*. The principle of sovereignty is a conspicuous example.

At the other end of the spectrum of possibilities, rules in the form of assertive speech acts may be stated in very specific terms. Instructions for operating appliances, filling committee seats, or presenting diplomatic credentials are useful examples. Wherever rules in this form fall on the spectrum, they are *instruction-rules*. Providing information is not normative, but telling agents what they should do with that information is. Agents always know what they should do because the rule tells them something useful about their relation to the world.

Directive speech acts are recognizable as imperatives. If the speaker says that you must do something, the speaker wants you to believe that you should do it. Rules in the form of directive speech acts, *directive-rules*, are emphatically normative. By telling agents what they must do (no hunting!), these rules leave no doubt as to what they should do. Directive-rules often provide information about the consequences for disregarding them. Having this information (sixty days in jail!) helps rational agents to make the right choice in deciding whether to follow these rules or not.

Commissive speech acts involve promises. Speakers make promises that hearers accept. Commissive speech acts give form to rules when hearers, as

speakers, respond with promises of their own. Once these webs of promises become sufficiently generalized and normative in their own terms, they become *commitment-rules*. Agents are most likely to recognize these rules in their effects. These effects are the *rights* and *duties* that agents know they possess with respect to other agents. Any given agent's rights constitute duties for other agents (private property—no hunting!).

Rights may entitle the agents possessing them to specific benefits. Rights may also empower agents to act toward other agents in specific ways. Obviously, powers and limits on powers turn people into agents. More generally, right and duties turn people into agents by defining opportunities for them to act upon the world. Instruction-rules and directive-rules also turn people into agents for exactly the same reason.

Speech acts fall into three categories because they perform different *functions*—they get things done for speakers and hearers together in three, and only three, ways. The same three categories hold for rules because they work in the same three ways that speech acts do—they get things done by instructing, directing, and committing agents. As observers, we see rules in each category performing different functions for society. Quite a few scholars in such fields as law and sociology have worked out variations on this functional scheme, but they have never used all three of these categories, and just these categories, at the same time.

Philosophers have devised a different scheme for categorizing rules, and a number of constructivist scholars have adopted it. On functional grounds, there are two categories of rules: constitutive rules and regulative rules. Constitutive rules are the medium of social construction. Regulative rules are the medium of social control.

While this scheme might seem to be constructivist, it is actually a source of confusion. From a constructivist point of view, all rules are always constitutive *and* regulative at the same time. By definition, rules regulate the conduct of agents because rules are normative—they tell agents what they should do. Furthermore, the regulation of conduct constitutes the world within which such conduct takes place, whether agents intend this consequence or not. Acting in the world means acting on the world, often as an unintended consequence. Intentions might be a useful way to categorize acts, but they are never a decisive basis for categorizing rules.

Even when agents intend that a particular rule serve only to regulate conduct (an intention that other agents may thwart by choosing, for example, to disregard the rule), the conduct in question will have the effect of strengthening or (if agents choose to disregard it) weakening the rule. In the same way, a rule that agents intend to be constitutive will have to affect conduct if it is to succeed. Often agents intend rules to be simultaneously

constitutive and regulative. To give an obvious example, when agents called players take turns in playing a game, the rule instructing them to do so constitutes the game as one in which players regularly take turns.

As we have seen, rules serve three possible functions. Agents make rules and use them for instruction, direction, and commitment. Within each of these three functional categories, rules differ in the extent to which they have been formalized. Rules are formal if agents encounter them as fixed and unavoidable features of their world. Rules also differ in the extent which they are linked to other rules. Agents often discover that particular rules are linked to other rules telling other agents what to do in the event that the relevant agents disregard the particular rules in question. Formal rules that are effectively backed up by other rules are *legal*.

Formality strengthens a rule by making its normative character clearer, in the process separating it from rules that are normatively more ambiguous (conventions, for example). A rule supporting another rule strengthens the latter by increasing the chances that agents will choose to follow the latter rule. The more frequently agents follow a rule, the stronger the rule will be, normatively (and the easier it will be to make it formal). For example, the principle of sovereignty is a highly formal instruction-rule constituting the society of states. It is supported by commitment-rules empowering states, as agents, to bring new members into this society. These supporting rules, which we know as rules of recognition, are supported by instruction-rules that spell out a number of social and the material conditions that must be satisfied before statehood is possible.

Agents are inclined to make rules legal and to follow them if they are legal because they know what the rules are, how much they matter to other agents, and what consequences they can expect from not following them. When agents find themselves in a legal environment, it is rational for them to follow rules as a general proposition. It costs them less than careless conduct will. International relations is a peculiar environment in this respect, but still a legal environment. While there are very few formal directive-rules to be found, there are large numbers of other, quite formal rules intricately linked in support of each other. Relevant agents are perfectly aware of the situation and proceed accordingly.

Rules Form Institutions, Institutions Form Societies

Rules are linked to each other in content as well as function—both by what they say and by what they do. Standing back, agents can easily identify the ways that rules reinforce each other in what they say and do. Speaking figuratively, we might say that rules come in families, and that some fami-

lies of rules come with rules documenting the family pedigree. Other families of rules depend on observers to document family resemblances. These and many other practices help to give families of rules their distinguishing features. Rules and related practices are almost impossible to separate in practice, because every time agents respond to rules, whether by making choices or by observing the choices that other agents make, they have an effect on those rules and on their places in families of rules.

By recent convention, scholarly observers of international relations call these families of rules and related practices "regimes." At an earlier time, they called them "institutions," and this remains the usual term for most scholars who devote their attentions to social relations. In practice, the two terms are indistinguishable. International regimes are said to consist of principles, rules, norms, and procedures. By whatever name, these are all categories of rules. Principles and procedures anchor the two ends of a spectrum of possibilities distinguishable by how general they are in content. Rules and norms are distinguishable by how formal they are, norms being sufficiently informal that observers are not always sure that they are rules until they see how other agents respond to them.

International regimes differ in size. They have rules that work in different ways (assertive-, directive-, and commitment-rules) in different proportions. Additionally, regimes differ in the extent to which they have rules backing up other rules. Institutions differ in exactly the same ways. They are made up of rules that vary, not just in generality and formality but also in number and arrangement.

Some simple institutions consist of a small number of rules whose content makes them a family, even if the rules seem to give little support to each other, and to get little support from other institutions to which they are connected. In the world of international relations, the balance of power is an example of such an institution. Instruction-rules constitute, and regulate, the balance of power. These rules tell the great powers what to expect when they choose allies and go to war. Yet even the balance of power, as an institution, is not as simple as it seems. Treaties give allies rights and duties. Rules limiting the conduct of war help to keep the balance from being permanently upset.

In the context of international relations, spheres of influence are also simple institutions made up of informal directive-rules. These rules direct weak states within the sphere to carry out a much stronger state's wishes. When these rules are backed up by principles justifying such arrangements, the sphere of influence is no longer quite so simple an institution. As formal equals, states may also adopt treaties distributing rights and duties that have unequal consequences within the sphere. Treaties are themselves simple

institutions minimally consisting of formal commitment-rules that apply only to the states adopting such treaties. The principle that treaties are binding, and therefore legal, automatically provides them with support from other, highly formal rules.

Institutions such as the balance of power, spheres of influence, and treaties are simple only because observers can easily pick them out of an institutional environment characterized by a large number of linked rules and related practices. Agents act as observers when they recognize any institution as such, no matter how complex it is. Scholars often think of international regimes as something that they alone can see, while agents can see only the simpler institutions making up the regime. Yet observers become agents, and regimes become institutions, when other agents learn what observers have to say.

International regimes are hard to see because the rules connecting the institutions that make them up tend to be informal. Agents take them for granted. Formal rules make things clearer, and agents need not stand back. For a long time in the context of international relations, agents have had access to a legal institution, conventionally known as the sources of international law, through which they can make legal rules and thus institutions whose existence no one can doubt. Treaties are one such institution, thanks to the legal principle that treaties are binding on the states adopting them.

Agents respond to rules with goals in mind; institutions serve their interests. As a general matter, simple institutions have a more straightforward relation to agents' interests than do more complex and more difficult to recognize institutions. We think of relatively simple institutions as performing distinct functions for agents and for other institutions. Depending on what these relatively simple institutions do, they give priority to rules in one of the functional categories that we have already identified.

When instruction-rules are most in evidence, agents are situated in *networks* of rules and related practices. The balance of power is an example. Its rules assign an elevated *status* to a few great powers (ideally five states) that must act as if they are roughly equal in the resources available to them. If states' agents act as instructed, the consequences are supposed to be an ever-shifting and relatively peaceful balance of alliances among the great powers, whatever the immediate intentions of their agents might be. Recognizing the balance of power as an institution whose function suits their interests, agents intentionally foster those same consequences in the name of the balance.

When directive-rules are most in evidence, agents are situated in a chain of command, a firm, or an *organization*. A sphere of influence is a rudimentary institution of this sort. Its very informal rules assign each agent to an

office, as we would call it in a more formal organization. Officers report up the chain of command and carry out orders that come down the chain. By this logic, the top officer decides what the organization's function is. In practice, most organizations are more complex than this. Nevertheless, a sphere of influence is so rudimentary in organization that its function is nothing more than to fulfill the wishes of a leading power, as top officer, over the weaker states within the sphere.

Finally, when commitment-rules are most in evidence, agents end up in partnerships, or *associations*, with other agents. In the institutional context of international relations, the principle of sovereignty and the supporting rules of recognition make states into formal equals. When two or more states adopt a treaty, they act as members of an association giving them at least some rights in common, including the right to commit themselves to each other. Under the terms of the treaty, all parties take on additional rights and duties with respect to the others. In this situation, states are formally equal because they all have the same *role*. The function of any association is to distribute roles to agents through its commitment-rules.

Only states (and the associations that they have created by treaty) can adopt treaties, because there is a commitment-rule assigning this role to them exclusively. To return to an earlier example, markets function by assigning agents either of two roles—they are either sellers or buyers. Every seller is formally equal in possessing the right to buy, and so is every buyer. Note, however, that neither sellers nor buyers have a right to a fixed price. Formally speaking, agents in these roles are free to compete with each other, presumably for the good of every agent in the association. The function of this, or any, association is implied by the commitments that agents have made to a given distribution of roles.

It is important to note, however, that an association's roles are not generally equal in the rights and duties that they create. Think, for example, of the roles that members of most households have. For that matter, agents holding the same status (for example, white males) are equal to each other within the terms of that status, even if different statuses are unequal in relation to each other. This is no less true for agents holding the same or similar offices (for example, foreign ministers). Nevertheless, commitment-rules are especially useful for making large numbers of agents formally equal for limited purposes.

Agency consists of statuses, offices, and roles. Depending on the institutional context, every agent must have a status, an office, or a role. Most, perhaps all, agents have all three in some combination. This is because most people are agents in a variety of institutions, and many institutions combine features of networks, organizations, and associations.

Institutions such as these are complex in function and structure. Instruction-, directive-, and commitment-rules are all present, even if the proportions differ from institution to institution. Observers usually have no difficulty in picking out the pattern of rules, because institutions are social arrangements that always reflect agents' interests. From an observer's point of view, institutions have purposes. It seems this way even if the observer is an interested agent.

A complex institution will have general instruction-rules, or principles, telling agents what the purposes of that institution are. Detailed instruction-rules may provide support for these principles by spelling out all relevant statuses. Directive-rules may also repeat and elaborate on what these principles have to say and then support them by demanding that officers do what these rules say that they should. In situations where there are no conspicuous instruction-rules or directive-rules supporting principles, commitment-rules create roles for agents that have, from any one agent's point of view, the unintended effect of supporting the institution's principles.

Rules in all three categories often work together to support an institution's principles. Sometimes, however, institutions develop in such a way that rules from one or even two categories are scarce or not to be found at all. If we consider international relations as taking place within a single, overarching institution, its rules constitute a conspicuously lopsided arrangement. Thanks to the principle of sovereignty, there are few if any formal directive-rules. Observers will discover informal directive-rules in practice, even if some agents routinely deny that such rules exist.

Considered as a complex institution, international relations takes place in a context where agents and observers find a large number of formal commitment-rules (rules of international law), behind which there is an even larger number of instruction-rules. These latter rules differ enormously in formality (quite a few are legal rules), detail, and the degree to which they are linked to each other. They support the principle of sovereignty and a few other principles more or less directly and effectively. Thanks again to the principle of sovereignty, states are complex institutions within which formal directive-rules allow agents to act on behalf of states in their relations.

The context within which any institution functions as an agent is itself an institution. Society is a complex institution within which many other related institutions are to be found. Agents are likely to act as if their society's boundaries are clear and accepted, even if observers, including agents, have a hard time specifying those boundaries to anyone's satisfaction. States are societies that have exceptionally clear boundaries as well as highly developed institutions for conducting relations with other states.

The complex institution within which states function as relatively self-contained societies is itself a society. Within *international society*, states function as primary agents simply by conducting relations with each other. International society includes many other, more or less self-contained institutions. Some of them add secondary agents, such as officers of international organizations, to that society. The sum total of institutions and their relations add up to a society of staggering complexity and constant change, even though its large patterns seem at least to some observers to call for generalization.

Rules Yield Rule

We have seen that institutions consist of related rules and practices. It is possible to think of a single rule as an institution. As a practical matter, we never find a single rule standing by itself. Every rule gives the agents to whom it applies the choice of following the rule, or not, with more or less predictable consequences.

Most of the time, agents choose to follow the rule. The pattern of agents' choices has a general consequence, whether or not it is intended by particular agents—it has the effect of distributing material and social benefits among agents. An extremely important category of such benefits is control over resources and control over other agents and their activities. Some agents benefit more than other agents. Over time, institutions work to the advantage of some agents at the expense of other agents.

As rational beings, those agents who benefit the most from the rules that apply to them are the most inclined to follow those rules. Agents who benefit less are still inclined to follow the rules because doing so still benefits them more than not doing so. Nevertheless, agents may proceed to break any given rule after weighing the consequences of either choice for themselves. As a general consequence, rule breaking is likely to involve a loss of benefits to other agents.

Agents who are negatively affected by the breaking of a rule also have a choice. They may accept the consequences (including a weakened faith in the broken rule and a greater chance of its being broken again). Alternatively, they may choose to follow a rule that has the consequence of presenting the rule breaker with a loss of benefits, which the rule breaker is either prepared to accept or had thought would not be likely to occur. The second choice, which we think of as enforcing the rule, involves using resources that might otherwise have been put to beneficial use. This loss of benefits is still less than the loss that comes from not enforcing the rule.

Instead of breaking a given rule, agents who do not benefit from following it may choose to use whatever resources are needed to change that rule, and thus to change the distribution of benefits that results from the rule's existence. If some agents try to change the rule, other agents who would benefit less from the changes may choose to use the necessary resources to keep the rule from changing. Furthermore, those agents who benefit the most from a given rule will probably have to use fewer of the resources available to them to keep the rule from changing than will agents who want to change the rule. Clearly, rules say what they say, and institutions are slow to change, because agents make rational choices in circumstances that always give the advantage to some agents over others.

The general consequence of agents' responding to rules with the resources available to them is that some agents exercise greater control over the content of those rules, and over their success in being followed, than other agents do. In other words, rules yield rule. By making agents and society what they are, rules make rule inevitable. Rule is something that agents do to, and for, other agents, and they do it by following rules. Rule is something that happens to agents when they follow rules or when they suffer the consequences of not following rules.

Specific institutions may formalize rule by seeming to limit its exercise to a particular agent or set of agents—to rulers. Just because we can identify rulers, we should not conclude that they alone do the ruling. Wherever there are informal rules (which is everywhere), there is informal rule, either supporting or undercutting formal institutions of rule, or both (probably in a complex and hard to observe pattern). Even if the formalities of rule are nowhere to be found, rule remains a pervasive condition for that society. Loaded with rules but lacking rulers, international society is a case in point.

Rules in different functional categories yield different forms of rule. Where instruction-rules are paramount and status is a defining feature of society, ideas and beliefs seem to do the ruling. Despite appearances, agents actually do the ruling by getting other agents to accept their ideas and beliefs. They do so by example and by indoctrination. Rule in this form is *hegemony*.

Any society where principles get most of their support from detailed instruction-rules is hegemonically ruled. Caste societies are examples. Each hegemonically ruled caste has clear boundaries and a fixed position in the network of castes constituting the society. Membership in a caste gives agents so much of their identity, defined as a set of ideas about self and position in society, that caste identity seems to rule the society as a whole. Hegemonically ruled institutions exist in societies where other sorts of institutions and a mixed form of rule can be identified. The professions offer an example. Detailed instruction-rules, ordinarily learned through a long ap-

prenticeship, support professional standards and rule agents to their advantage in their relations with clients needing their professional services.

In institutions where directive-rules are paramount and office is a defining feature of society, offices are vertically organized in a chain of command. Officers at each position in the chain use resources that their offices make available to them to carry out the rules that their offices require them to carry out. From top to bottom, such an arrangement of offices is called a *hierarchy*, and so might we call the form of rule that results when officers carry out directive-rules. The state as a legal order exemplifies hierarchical rule.

When directive-rules are legal, hierarchy is formal. Despite the minimal description of the state as a legal order, formal hierarchies rarely stand alone. Hegemonical ideas typically reinforce formal hierarchy. The result is *authority*, conventionally defined as legitimate control. Military officers possess authority according to their rank, which is their status and office formally joined together in mutual reinforcement. Finally, informal hierarchy may reinforce hegemony that has achieved a relatively high level of formality. After World War II, the so-called *pax Americana* may be thought of as a condition of rule in which the United States ruled, in the name of freedom and prosperity, by intervening whenever and wherever it chose. Proclaiming principles had the effect (perhaps initially unintended) of formalizing the status of the United States as leader of "the free world," while acting on those principles gave it an informal office.

Where commitment-rules are paramount and role is a defining feature of society, agents hold a variety of roles that are defined by reference to the roles that other agents hold. No one role, or institution, even comes close to making particular agents into rulers. On the contrary, formal commitment-rules mostly seem to reinforce formal hierarchy. They do so by granting officers well-defined powers to help them issue orders and carry them out, and by granting agents well-defined rights to help protect them from officers abusing their powers. The result is a constitutional state, in which the constitution formalizes commitment-rules that limit the government of the state and make it responsible.

Taken as a whole, roles may yield rule on their own, and not just because they reinforce other forms of rule. Agents in association are the rulers—all of them together—even if none of them have the status or office to make them rulers. Ruled by association, agents do not see rule in their roles. As agents, they are mostly concerned with their roles and what they are free to do within them. To return once more to the example of a market, agents participating in it generally have the sense that this is an institution free of rule. As sellers and buyers, they are nevertheless ruled as an unintended consequence of the exercise of their right to buy and sell. Adam Smith's

invisible hand is a hand that rules, and it rules to the advantage of some agents over others.

As we saw, quite a few scholars describe international relations as anarchical. An anarchy is rule by no one in particular, and therefore by everyone in association, as an unintended consequence of their many, uncoordinated acts. Recall that agents who observe a general pattern of unintended consequences can no longer be said to act without intending consequences, even if they continue to act as they had been acting. They intend to be ruled for good reasons, and if they did not have good reasons, they would make other choices.

If anarchy is a condition of rule unrelated to any agent's intentions, then international relations is no anarchy. We need another term to indicate the form of rule in which agents intend that they be ruled by what seem to be unintended consequences of exercising their rights. *Heteronomy* is a better term. Autonomous agents act freely, while heteronomous agents cannot act freely. Both terms refer to agents, not society. From a constructivist perspective, however, agents are always autonomous, but their autonomy is always limited by the (limited) autonomy of other agents. The exercise of autonomy makes heteronomy a social condition, which agents accept as an apparently unintended consequence of their individual, autonomous choices.

International society is heteronomously ruled because states exercise their independence under the principle of sovereignty and under a number of commitment-rules granting them rights and duties with respect to each other. One state's independence is a limit on every other's, and all states' agents accept the unintended consequences that result from their many individual choices. Within this general condition of rule are to be found a large number of institutions contributing to rule in a variety of ways. Agents (and not just states' agents) constantly work on these institutions and work within them. Despite their number and variety, and the complexity of their relations, they are arranged as they are on purpose, by agents' intentions, to serve their interests—including their shared interest in being ruled.

Note

Kurt Burch, Harry Gould, and Vendulka Kubálková persuaded me to write a concise exposition of constructivism as I had developed it in *World of Our Making* (1989). The result is "A Constructivist Manifesto" (Onuf 1997), which I wrote in a telegraphic style for a scholarly audience, introducing some new material and leaving a great deal out. While I had planned my essay for this book as a sentence-by-sentence reconstruction of the "Manifesto" for a larger audience, I ended up making quite a few substantive additions and changes, and I deleted all of its relatively few citations. I am grateful to

members of the Miami International Relations Group for their questions and suggestions.

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4

What *Is* at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?

Harry D. Gould

Introduction

As noted in the introductory chapter to this volume, the division of international relations (IR) into a series of debates has become a conventional device for making sense of the field. Beyond the "great debates," at least three and possibly five in number (Wæver 1997, 12–25), two debates are of interest here: the "levels of analysis" debate touched off by David Singer in 1961 and especially the "agent-structure" debate initiated by Alexander Wendt in 1987.

Simply put, the conceptual problem at the heart of the agent-structure debate is: How are agents and structures related? Over the course of the debate, this problem has disappeared from view, or, more to the point, the debate itself has become problematic. There are several problems: the positions held by some of the participants have changed over time, the terms of debate have changed, and the serial subdebates have become further removed both from the core issue and from IR's substantive concerns.

The purpose of this paper is to put Onuf's constructivism into the context of the agent-structure debate, expanding on his contribution to this book, his book *World of Our Making* (1989), and several articles which have also served to refine his position (Onuf 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997). This will entail a brief review of constructivism, as well as a detailed analysis in which I shall put constructivism into dialogue with the various positions staked out during the debate. The concluding discussion will look at the levels of