

Social constructivists try to explain the world by analyzing the ways individuals and groups create their perceived reality, based on the assumption that ideas matter most. Accordingly so, no reality exists outside what is produced and reproduced in social action. An obvious and clear example is religion, a socially constructed concept rooted in our psyche, the need to see some purpose in life or to worship a higher presence. Religious freedom, a basic human right, allows willing believers to choose whichever religion attracts them most, even though it is blatantly obvious that different beliefs contradict each other and it is likely that either most or all religions must have been constructed. Nevertheless, they play a role in the life of billions of people. In general, by habit, realities get gradually crystallised into institutions, are legitimized by ongoing mythology, religion or philosophy, maintained by socialisation and therapies and subjectively internalised by education and upbringing of the individual, of whose identity as a social citizen the constructed realities form a part.

As world affairs are conducted by humans, the findings of the first paragraph can be used to support the claim that ideas matter most in the making of world affairs. Everything is constructed and therefore free of inherent qualities that force certain realities. Consequently, constructivists collide head-on with neo-realists, whose exclusive, scientific focus on structures tries to imply that certain structures result in certain outcomes. Their aim is to operationalize world affairs, but constructivists would counter that this is only suitable as long as individuals decide to behave according to the underlying structure, which is constantly made and remade by those individualists and therefore anything but stable. Of course, even a realist might concede that world systems have been originally constructed, but are relatively fixed after the corresponding identities and interests have become institutionalized. Constant choice might therefore not be experienced with a meaningful degree of freedom, realists would counter, and it might be argued that only in a system leaving room for actions deviating from the prescribed script change is indeed possible. In reality, structures of world affairs appear relatively flexible, as, for example, the European states of 1990 might, due to an evolution of cooperation, no longer be the states of 1950, or international aid in the era of structural adjustment programs or poverty reduction policies is no longer what it once was.

In this context, Alexander Wendt introduces the possibility of “altercasting” on the level of nation-states; the ability of “ego” to shape “alter” by the vehicle of one's own practice. Self-presentation and state-management can help to induce identity change, non-compatible to prevailing structures. Wendt argues that this is just what Gorbachev did near the end of the Cold War, which came along different than neo-realists would have predicted. In this case, the mirror theory of identity formation comes into play, as “alter's” identity is a reflection of “ego's” practices. Critics might claim that Alexander Wendt remains too state-stuck in his analysis of world affairs. On the one hand, he claims that all relationships and identities are constructed, and on the other hand, that such constructed and artificial sovereign states are the necessary units participating in world affairs. However, in order to analyse and justify contemporary reality without drifting too far off and publishing a theory so out of touch and applicability that it becomes meaningless, Wendt's conditional state-centrism seems justifiable, even though it certainly contradicts constructivist ideologies.

Wendt also argues quite convincingly that Kenneth Waltz's, among others, conclusion that wars regularly occur because there is nothing to prevent them in an anarchic, power-balancing world is itself the result of constructed and reinforced identities. Anarchy is what states make of it. The “self-help” world realists tend to describe is a result of process, not structure, as self-help and power politics are institutions, but not essential features of anarchy. In short, constant practice, thus process, shapes the characters in an anarchic surrounding. As everything is constructed, the moment nation A for example decides that it is no longer nation B's enemy or archrival, despite centuries of differing bloody practice, the game of balances of power is over and new realities with corresponding identities come into play. Just because the past was “something”, the future can hardly be extrapolated from it. If prevailing identities break down or new ideas take over, new realities emerge. Conceptions of self and interest tend to “mirror” the practice of significant others over time, as the self is a reflection of an actor's socialization. For realists, always basing actions on worst-case assumptions regarding their own survival, an anarchic world therefore quite necessarily results in balances of power politics, but if social acts such as signalling, interpreting and responding reinforce non-threatening behaviours, balances of power are quite useless. History could have turned out different, and might differ in the future.

Old habits might be hard to break, but in the end ideas matter most in the making of world affairs. One day, balances of power-politics might indeed be useless. If new social movements, a new, global, civil society's ideologies manage to transcend the concept of the nation-state, there might just be no state-made world left to balance. A contemporary example of masterful construction of realities is the concept of “terror”, especially since the world's last remaining superpower declares to be involved in a fuzzy war against terror. In this case, terror is very clearly defined and evokes images of Quran-waving suicide-bombers. It does not evoke the image of a multitude of killed US citizens dying in the hands of “Operation Enduring Freedom”, as these deaths appear to be deaths worth dying for. Or thousands of children dying daily of preventable diseases in a world of affluence. There is no inherent quality of terror that confines it to actions carried out by non-hegemon. Noam Chomsky captured this with his concept of the “gruesome” “Terror of the Pirate” versus the “necessary” “Terror of the Emperor”. Other examples of new ideas changing accepted practice in world affairs are the end of slavery, female discrimination or child labour, even though the latter two are still widely accepted in non-First-World-nations, where such conceptions are not yet incompatible with society's beliefs about rights and wrongs.

In conclusion, there is indeed very little besides ideas that matters most in the making of world affairs. It often seems as if structure dictate process, but as there are no such structures without processes, it seems justifiable to turn the initial assessment on its head: structure follows process, not the other way around. Old habits, thus established structures, are hard to break, but they constantly are. If masses stop believing in structures, institutions or identities, structures and institutions disappear and new identities are created. Everything is in constant flux, and a change of practice will result in a change of intersubjective knowledge, which constitutes the system. No system is as it is, but as it is constantly made and remade. Or changed and abandoned. Counter-hegemonic practices and identities are often met with resistance, but resistance transforms the hegemon, as no identity can free itself from the influence of other ideas. The world is what we make of it – little else and with barely any restrictions.