

# Chapter 1

## Societal “Development” and the Ontological Assumptions for Exploration of Normative Meaning: An Alternative Approach

### ABSTRACT

*Within the theory of political asymmetry, this chapter provides an alternative approach to the dilemma between constructivism and realism, so that further research on the idea of a norm on modern development can be coherently addressed. The chapter depicts features and common weaknesses of fundamental contributions on both schools on IR and political science theory, to further provide an alternative approach, able to contextualize along the ontological dilemma, the development of norms on late modern social systems.*

### INTRODUCTION

The present chapter drafts an alternative approach to the ontological dilemma between realism and constructivism by bounding them as composites of stages of social systems. The content is based on the fact that a common place on IR is to dispute about the ontological assumptions from which the study of normative meaning should be grasped theoretically. Such disagreements often define the ideological and political conventions from which social science research customarily draws conclusions and interpretations, stressing the fundamental opposition between the notion that norms are defined by the material environment -and therefore are natural or given-, or entirely social constructions. In this dilemma, if norms are entirely social constructions there should be a narrow scope for defending political positions that claim moral, intellectual, or political objectivity. Conversely, if the environment and the material

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world are the substantive composite from which norms are constituted, the possibility of societies accepting “political perspectives” is out of the table, transforming politics into a zero-sum game.

International relations literature has made fundamental contributions to the study of this ontological dilemma -labeled as the “fourth debate”- and enhanced the antagonism between rationalist and constructivists<sup>1</sup> scholars (United Nations, 1983). Since rationalists lean toward positivism, they tend to stress the relevance of empirical methods directed at *explaining* political phenomena, boosting up theoretical doctrines such as realism and neorealism. Constructivists, in contrast, have argued that political interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001) “employing ontologies that invoke mutual constitution and transformation” and founded through historical processes of construction and reconstruction of shared beliefs (Farrel & Finnemore, 2009, p. 59). For the sake of this book, this ontological dilemma remains as a fundamental problem when speaking about the idea of the “development” of social systems or norms production; in any case, the question about the origin from which norms meaning arises remains.

When speaking about normative meaning, the chapter explains that while previous stages of social organization are characterized by a sense of formal systemic demands, later stages are characterized by increasing cognition about the social sphere and the inclusion of the *subjective experience* into the cognitive horizon of individuals. This explains why, in the first case, norms are prone to be raised within teleological representations about the contingencies of the material environment, making a materialist ontology decisive in defining boundaries to the *ecosistemic* nature of individuals. With the overcoming of systemic contingencies and the increasing overlap of processes of discursive negation concerning human nature, societies generate norms that overcome material boundaries, building up the “social” as a symbolic subjective expression and bringing into social systems a sense of historicity acquired through sophistication, which is nurtured by interaction in later stages of social organization. For this section of the chapter, meaning is the composite from which social relations and political interaction nurture, allowing actors to act together, based on common mutual assumptions and cognitive horizons<sup>2</sup> (Mendelson, 1979) As such, in the absence of a set of shared expectations, communication between actors is fruitless or broken, becoming a practice unable to maintain or retain what social systems built upon cognitive structures or values.

## **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, CONSTRUCTIVISM AND REALISM**

### **Norms and IR Constructivism**

Constructivist approaches to international relations and international politics have consistently shared a set of principles that bond their multifold perspectives in a well-defined theoretical school (Campbell, 1998) (Finnemore & Sykkink, 2001) (Finnemore, 1996) (Wiener, 2007) (Kratochwil, 2000) (Checkel, 1998). This approach is largely organized by the relevance that scholars give to the ideational factors in the process of production of a *norm*, as well as the roles that identity, socialization, contestation, and structure play in the life cycle of it. Martha Finnemore argues that what makes constructivism effective as a method of social analysis lays in the outstanding relevance of culture, identities and ideas,<sup>3</sup> yet, when it comes with the definition of methods of empirical scrutiny to clarify clear cut differentiations between actors, or to suggest measurable tendencies or normative outcomes in regard with their behavior, she personally stresses the boundaries of her own analysis (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 898). In her view,

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