How long do constructivists have to struggle for their recognition?: Comments on Kondo and Schmidt

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First of all, I am grateful for both professors for their insightful papers. It is my honour to be a commentator here, for which I am also grateful for Professor Ono. I am Ryosuke Amiya-Nakada from Meijigakuin University in Yokohama, and my research is focussed on European politics, especially postwar German social democracy and European social policy.

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Both papers are trying to illuminate specific merits of the “constructivist” approaches in the broadest sense, and making valuable efforts to refine the analytical framework for the constructivist political science. I am not among those theoreticians who have spend their valuable energy into naming, comparing, and classifying various so-called “theories”. Rather, as an empirically oriented scholar, what interests me is how to implement a research programme on the ground and not in theory in itself. In this regard, Prof. Schmidt's attempt delicately to differentiate and refine analytical categories and structures of what she named “Discursive Institutionalism”, and Prof. Kondo's proposal on how to combine different strategies of “constructivist” analysis, each directed at a specific level, are worth appraising.

Still, it seems to me that what is most needy in conducting an empirical research is not only to make efforts within constructivism but also to clarify its relationship with other approaches, which is done by the paper of Prof. Schmidt, and to show concrete steps and tips for combining various strategies fruitfully. Therefore, my comment focusses on the last aspect.

I have already dealt with this problematique earlier, from the opposite direction, namely concerning the rational choice approaches, in my review article on Professor Ono's
book in 2001, entitled “Comparative Politics”. In that book, Prof. Ono emphasised the potential of the “rational choice theory”, he used the term “theory” but I prefer “approach”, and argued, if my reading is correct, as if it can be a platform for the grand, unified political science framework. I personally wonder when and why he converted to the constructivist “theory”, but this is not the topic to be dealt in this session. In that article, I reviewed several attempts to establish methodological guidelines for the combination of various research methods in an empirical research project.

Five years have passed since then, but my impression is same. It seems as if the non-rationalists' have been busy in waging rear-guard struggle for the recognition of their academic enclave and advocating negotiated peace in political science. As many of you know, one of recent articles by Professor Schmidt is entitled “Give peace a chance”. Both papers can be read in this context. They are valuable as an effort inside the world of the constructivists, and will surely contribute to establish an academic identity of the school.

As an empirical scholar, however, I actually wonder how long constructivists have to struggle for their recognition? I'm sorry, but I am not interested in the fate of Constructivism in itself, but just want to explore better what I want to know. So, what about the relationship with other approaches? By “relationship”, I mean not just the overlaps and the differences among “theories” but the fruitful combination or division of labour among them. They are almost lacking in both papers. This is the leitmotif of my comment.

My following questions and comments are more or less concerned with the issue of how to conduct constructivism-inspired research better. I will argue under four broad headings, namely theoretical identity, analysis of dynamics, formation of alternatives and empirical foundation.

2. Theoretical Identity

First, mainly concerning the paper by Prof. Schmidt, the theoretical identity of the “Discursive Institutionalism” should be discussed. She divides her “old institutionalisms” in three, namely rationale choice, historical and sociological and then locates her discursive institutionalism contrasting with those three. But I am not fully persuaded why we should add
the “discursive” one as a separate and independent school in already crowded space of institutionalists. In fact, she concedes in some points that the difference of Discursive Institutionalism and to other Institutionalisms are more of question of degree rather than categorical.

True, school-building might make differences among approaches clearer. But some differences are fundamental and others are not. Rational Choice Institutionalism and Sociological Institutionalism diverges on ontology, the most fundamental level, but Sociological Institutionalism and Discursive Institutionalism only part ways rather on analytical focus, namely the former on structure and statics, the latter on process and dynamics. Therefore, it is misleading, in my view, to juxtapose four institutionalisms.

It is especially so when each “ism” is neither all-encompassing nor self-sufficient, which is the contention of those constructivist scholars in political science. If those “isms” are standing in parallel and mutually exclusive, it makes sense to compare them and evaluate merits and demerits of each. To analyse complex and dynamic character of concrete political decision making, however, what we need is to adopt several approaches stepwise, or make a combination of several elements in different approaches. Thus it is better to differentiate theories at the level of its elements, e.g. rationalist or sociological/ culturalist ontology, functional or historical explanation, actor orientation or institution/ structure orientation.

So my first question, mainly to Vivien, is why do we have to raise the fourth pillar? Why can’t we simply say like this; this part of my framework is from Sociological Institutionalism, that part is from Historical Institutionalism, and they are specifically tailored to my research?

3. Analysis of Dynamics

In my second section, I broadly deal with the problem of dynamics. What pushes us towards ideational factors was our interest in political dynamics. Both papers are trying to bring the dynamics in to the political analysis and explore the way forward. But, as is mentioned in the previous section, constructivist approaches, at least as used in most of political science works, are not standing on their own. Most says, “ideas are important”, but few
would say, “only ideas are important.” Then, the next natural question would be “when they are important and how those ideational factors interact with others.” It is like saying the salt is important for cooking without specifying the purpose it serves best. Without them, methodological advocacy of constructivism will only end up in the eternal defence of its existence.

Prof. Schmidt points the analysis of dynamics as a merit of her Discoursive Institution- alism. To me, this claim is simply questionable. For, if we keep the framework looser and indeterminate, it is only natural that there emerges the room for movement and dynamism. In order to say that constructivism is superior in that regard, we should establish specific tools and criteria for the constructivist explanation of dynamism. Conceptual clarifications and elaborations by Professor Schmidt, two types, three levels, and whatever, are valuable for that purpose. By that, she can impressively narrate the different dynamics of Europeanisation of national capitalisms and democracies. But, do those concepts serve other purposes? I suspect that they are well tailored to Professor Schmidts' work but not necessarily to others. Then, can't we have those general criteria like utility maximization and various equilibrium concepts as the rationalists have?

Here, Professor Kondo's attempt to established three-layer model of constructivist explanation is important. Especially, his attempt to link the macro through the meso to the micro-level is welcome basis not only for the constructivist scholarship but also for the political analysis in general.

Still, what is lacking in his framework is conflict among discourses and its consequences. His framework offers useful insights in linking the levels and therewith introducing dynamics. But how the horizontal aspects of dynamics would be analysed? In Prof. Kondo's framework, dynamics is mainly emerged from the interaction between the “top” and the “bottom”. And there, the “top” is implicitly supposed as a single person or a single corporate body. I have to ask, however, haven't we, political scientists, traditionally focussed on the political struggle over the position of the “top”, like party system, democratization or coalition building. Then, the natural questions would be; Why a specific discourse has won against other discourses? Can the constructivist theories offer an endogenous explanation for the emergence, struggle and dominance of discourses?
I found some related deficiency in Vivien's impressive work on European Politics, in that they are not taking due consideration to the competing discourses within a society. For example, Germany was said to be the country of the co-ordinative discourse. When we draw our attention to the Public Law discourse, however, we can easily see the influence of Carl Schmitt, and those discourses which follows the French model and emphasise clear separation of the “Public” and the “Private”. In this discourse, the “Public” is standing above the “Private” and not tainted by the private interest co-ordination.

In view of those counter-discourses and horizontal struggles, it is not clear from both papers when the ideational factors have added values against usual interest-based explanations and power-based coalition approaches for concrete political incidents. Craig Parson (2002) has done a exemplary job in this regard. He has specified some conditions under which we can reasonably reject the competing explanations and safely say that idea did indeed matter. We need find out more of those “scope conditions” or “relative strength” of the constructivist scholarship. For, as rationalist analysis is not all-purpose, at least currently, so is constructivist one.

Then most fruitful way of research for constructivists is to be specialized in their strength. Or using other approaches as complementary devices to support main arguments based on constructivist insights. There would be several useful general strategies for the combination of research methods and it should be explicitly discussed. Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger (2000) has already proposed two ways of combination. “Funnel strategy” and “Path-dependent strategy” highlighted by Mahoney and Snyder (1999) in their discussion of micro-macro linkage may serve as a useful metaphor also for the combination of methods. Further, totally forgotten “Crisis, Choice and Change” by Gabriel Almond and others is still worth re-reading as an attempt in post-behaviouralist US political science to analyse political dynamics and change by synthesising then most advanced theories (Almond, Flanagan and Mundt 1973).

So, my second question to both is how you can locate the horizontal struggle over power in your framework (cf. Bieler and Morton 2008) and what is the relative strength of ideational approaches.
4. Formation of Alternatives

But where lies the real strength of constructivist analysis? I would argue here that
constructivists are potentially well placed in exploring alternatives, and answering the “how”
questions. To the contrary, in my view, constructivist approaches are generally weak in an-
swering the “why” questions, in comparison with the interest and power-based coalition ap-
proach, for example. Parsons (2002) is arguing roughly on the same line, when he asks not
“why European Integration” but “which European order”.

Formation of alternatives is almost by definition cannot be explained by the rational
choice analysis, except for such quasi-vulgar Marxist reasoning as regarding discourse and
idea as just a reflection of the interest of the speaker. For, alternatives and pay-offs should
be determined beforehand and fixed during a play.

To the contrary, constructivist scholarship has, at least in theory, no difficulty in admit-
ting the change in preferences and alternatives during the “play”, to use the terminology of
the game-theorists. One of the prominent and hopeful direction is deliberation theory, which
will be discussed later in a separate session.

It is one thing to say it is potentially hopeful, completely another to implement it. In or-
der to fulfil its potential, we need more of methods and tools of constructivist analysis than
theories. Therefore, my third points is how do we really identify and analyse the ever chan-
ging discourse in the stream of time. Now I am proceeding to my last point.

5. Empirical Foundation

My final point concerns the actual exercise of constructivist research programme. It is
one thing to talk of theoretical potential, but quite another to convert it to the real strength.
Here lies the most lamentable deficiency in the constructivist scholarship in political science,
in my view. In other words, the problem is not theoretical but about implementation.

One of the usual weaknesses in those works is there weak empirical foundation. In
spite of their claim that they analyse discourse and ideas, their treatment of texts and materi-
als are often too crude. In Professor Schmidt’s paper, she takes pains to distance her dis-
cursive institutionalism from the post-modern everything-is-discourse type of arguments. I sympathise with her, but we should be as careful as post-modernists and historians when we want to say that we are dealing with discourse. The “meaning” of the text or discourse cannot be settled so easy, especially because we are tackling many issues of rather high abstraction. Thus post-modernists are ever watchful to find out the symptoms in the text, historians are exploring the unpublished or even digging out unfound materials.

But some of constructivist analysis, even those often highlighted in the surveys and review articles, is insufficient in that regard. It seems to me rather rare even in constructivist historical work to find out archival evidences, even they are available. How can you talk of “people” without delving into the real world? As a result, those works are risking danger either of the lopsided interpretation or the repetition of stereotyped narratives.

In contrast, some rationalist or interest based scholars are actually exploring the archives. Problematic his treatment of sources is (Lieshout, Segers and van der Vleuten. 2004), Andrew Moravcsik (1998) is an example. The work of Isabella Mares is another good example of the benefit of archival work and the use of multi-method research (Mares 2003a; 2003b). Why not constructivists take the lead? Before toying with the theories, empirical constructivists should rush to the library and the archive, to explore the relevant material exhaustively. We should have the same eagerness of the politmetricians for data-gathering and processing. Only difference is that theirs are quantitative and ours are qualitative.

Some constructivist works should be appreciated, too. Parsons (2002) built his argument on some research in the Archive of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, and Jabco (2006) has used many official documents and materials of the European Institutions and interviews extensively. I myself is also trying to trace the development of European social policy discourse, by examining all the presidency conclusions and the important social policy documents since 1993.

But there is another problem often associated with the constructivist scholarship. In spite of the fact that the analysis of ideas and discourse has been the most traditional methods in historiography, and some constructivist works are heavily dependent on them, there are some works which just use them very casually and do not mention them as previous
work. In some sense, it is justifiable that those works are making dialogue only with political science works, for theirs will be also read only within the political science community. Substantially, however, main points in some constructivist works are offering a new interpretation of discourse or ideas and very close to what historians have done. Why should those works not measure the novelty of their arguments against previous scholarship in historiography? Who would trust those who treat such preceding academic discourse without due respect, only because they are outside political science?

At this point, perhaps most frequently cited ideational works by Sheri Berman are more that questionable (Berman 1998). Her “Social Democratic Moment” has been highly praised in the constructivist circle, saying that it has given an new, idea-based explanations to the political trajectory of the Swedish and German social democrats. As a scholar of German social democracy, I cannot agree to such appreciation, except for the reasons of academic politics in the US. Ideational and programmatic history is one of the oldest method in the study of socialist movements. And those arguments ascribing the cause of German social democrats’ failure to their ideology have been presented for sixty years! Her work not only provides insufficient attention to those works but also differs from them only at the margin. Her treatment of relevant literature is also questionable. In her world politics article (Berman 1997), she refers to Eley and Nipperdey but not Wehler. This means that she uses only one side of academic controversy and ignore the other, without mentioning the very existence of controversy. Things may be better with the part of Sweden, but as far as Germany is concerned, her analysis is regression. In her recent book (Berman 2006), the arguments are almost based on the works of other scholars, and she herself had not take pains to analyse the discourse at first hand.

As is clear from the example of Berman, constructivist scholarship is advancing the front theoretically, but that explored field is not well populated by empirical studies, for the instruments for cultivating the soil is still in development and production.

So, my last question to both is very simple. “What should be done”?

5. Conclusion
To summarise the points I have raised, the theoretical and potential virtue of the constructivism is too often confronted with actual performance of the Rational Choice Institutionalism or the Historical Institutionalism studies. What we should do now is to match empirical and substantive findings with the theoretical claim.

References


