



Review Article

The essence of constructivism

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The relationship between constructivism and postmodernism is complex and ambivalent. The two books reviewed in this essay present contrasting visions on the matter. While the postmodernist critique reveals some contradictions in the way constructivists partake in the ‘politics of reality’, a linguistic perspective on global politics makes the case for the continuing complementarity of the two main postpositivist approaches in IR, constructivism and poststructuralism. Attempting to find an inclusive way out to address the postmodernist critique, this review essay argues that social facts are the essence of constructivism. Not only do social facts constitute an ontological common ground for constructivists, but they also provide them with precious ‘foundations of reality’. On the basis of the distinction between the *act* and the *observation* of essentialisation, the essay develops a postfoundationalist position that makes it possible to grasp the essence of constructivism without partaking in the ‘politics of reality’.

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Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality

Maja Zehfuss

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, 289pp.
ISBN: 0 521 89466 2.

Language, Agency, and Politics in a Constructed World

François Debrix (ed.)

M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 2003, 281pp.
ISBN: 0 7656 1081 7.

The relationship between constructivism and postmodernism is complex and ambivalent.¹ Among International Relations (IR) scholars, opinions continue to diverge whether the two approaches are involved in ‘dangerous liaisons’ or not (Price and Reus-Smit 1998). The two books reviewed below present



contrasting visions on the matter. Maja Zehfuss' volume is the most systematic and thorough postmodernist critique of constructivism written to date.² In the author's view, '[t]he significance of constructivism in IR, especially its role as [a] critical but acceptable alternative to the mainstream, is such that critique is necessary' (Zehfuss 2002: 9). Zehfuss contends that in contradiction with the assumption that the world is socially constructed, many constructivists claim a reality to start from, thus partaking in the 'politics of reality'. Contrary to this sceptical stance, the volume edited by François Debrix makes the case for the continuing complementarity of 'the two main intellectual enterprises of the nonfoundationalist debate in IR:' constructivism and poststructuralism (Debrix 2003b: 4).³ In this view, not only is language 'crucial in shaping the contemporary outlook of global politics' (Debrix 2003a: x), but it also provides a fruitful meeting point for dialogue between the book's contributors, whether constructivist or poststructuralist.

Acknowledging the relevance of Zehfuss' critique, this review essay argues that constructivists can address the 'politics of reality' in their own pragmatist terms rather than going all the way to postmodernist relativism. Indeed, Debrix's attempt to revive the linguistic dialogue between constructivists and poststructuralists is one possible way to do so: rather than problematically appealing to an *a priori* reality, constructivists would do better to problematize the key vehicle of its representation, that is, language. As I argue below, however, despite its merits this view also has clear limits, first and foremost that of excluding non-linguistic constructivism from the solution. In this essay I suggest another way out, one with which, it is hoped, constructivists of all sorts will feel comfortable. Too often, the subdivision of constructivism into allegedly rival variants and the inquisition into who are its 'genuine' disciples lead to futile label wars. Here, I instead seek to build on what is common to all IR constructivists. This is certainly not to deny the existence of crucial differences among IR scholars but rather to acknowledge that whether 'thick' or 'thin', 'critical' or 'conventional', 'liberal' or 'realist', 'neo-classical' or 'posty', constructivists of all tendencies share a similar focus on social facts, the portions of the world that are treated as if they were real by social agents. Although they may use varied conceptual tools and reach different conclusions, all constructivists essentially pose the same questions: how are social facts socially constructed, and how do they affect global politics? As objects of study that lead constructivists to a common ontological ground, social facts are the essence of constructivism.

In addition to this ontological meaning, social facts are the essence of constructivism in another, epistemological sense. Contrary to postmodernist antifoundationalism, I argue that social facts constitute the only 'foundations of reality' upon which constructivists can build knowledge about global politics and social life in general. Such a 'postfoundationalist' position⁴ is made



possible by the fact that social agents, as they continually reify social facts and take them for granted as part of the order of things, provide constructivists with an already essentialized world that allows them to remain agnostic about reality. In order to make this argument, in the third section of the essay I introduce a crucial distinction between the *act* and the *observation* of essentialization. While the former is rightly condemned by postmodernists, the latter is fully justified in a constructivist perspective. In the first two sections, I explore the complex and ambivalent relationship between the two approaches through a critical assessment of Zehfuss' and Debrix's volumes.

The Essential Problem of IR Constructivisms

In her thought-provoking book, Zehfuss sets out to critically examine the works of three leading constructivist scholars: Alexander Wendt, Friedrich Kratochwil and Nicholas Onuf. Although the tenor of the book is highly abstract and theoretical, the author relates her arguments to a concrete development in contemporary international politics: the shift of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) towards using the military instrument in the international realm after the end of the Cold War. Informed by the postmodernist rejection of any essence, Zehfuss' (2002: 197) thesis is that '[a]ll constructivisms critiqued in this book posit "reality" as a significant point of reference [...]: the "reality" of international politics for Wendt, everyday "reality" for Kratochwil and "reality" as raw material for Onuf.' In the author's Derridean perspective, this repeated essentialization of reality is a political move that stops short of constructivism's critical potential. The book's structure unfolds logically. Zehfuss devotes three chapters to extensive critiques of Wendt, Kratochwil and Onuf. She then presents the Derridean claims about the 'politics of reality' before concluding with related implications for intellectual responsibility in IR.

Zehfuss criticizes Wendt's constructivism mainly for its essentialization of identity. Although he claims that international relations are not given but socially constructed, Wendt (1999) explicitly takes as exogenously given the 'corporate identity' of the state. As Zehfuss (2002: 63) puts it: 'How either the actors or the ideas about self and other get constituted in the first place is not part of the account. This, in my view, misconceptualizes identity construction.' She reinforces this point by suggesting that domestic politics, overlooked by Wendt, have predominantly constituted the FRG's identity as a nonmilitary power. In addition, Wendt's essentialized conception of identity leads him to search for causal relations between identity and behaviour. Yet Zehfuss uses the German case to show that there always exists a plurality of contested identities in a state. Therefore, none can be identified as the 'real' cause of behaviour.



Turning to Kratochwil's variant of constructivism, Zehfuss' (2002: 229) critique concentrates on the conception of 'intersubjectivity as the politically neutral realm of the shared through which communication becomes possible.' The author contends that Kratochwil's depiction of intersubjectivity as 'shared interpretations' emphasizes the rationality of communication to the detriment of its politics. She bluntly recalls that "everyday language" is not innocent or neutral' (Zehfuss 2002: 222). For Zehfuss, the failure to recognize the politics of intersubjectivity leads to irresponsibility because it turns political questions into technical problems. She argues that in the German debate about military involvement abroad, the recourse by various statesmen to intersubjective meanings such as norms followed a political, instead of a rational, logic.

Finally, regarding Onuf, Zehfuss' (2002: 191) main criticism concerns his 'universalist claim on the basis of *a priori* existing material conditions.' She first recalls Onuf's (1998: 59) reliance on speech act theory: 'talking is undoubtedly the most important way that we go about making the world what it is.' The author then contends that Onuf implicitly blunts this claim by arguing that speech acts 'must be properly addressed to the material circumstances' (Zehfuss 2002: 182). This seems to imply that there is a prior material reality 'out there' upon which the socially constructed world depends. In Zehfuss' view, even if Onuf were correct in contending that materiality imposes limits, the only thing that would ultimately be significant is our representation of these limits. To illustrate this point, she recalls that the lack and inadequacy of military equipment in the FGR in the 1990s (i.e. a material limitation) was treated by German statesmen as 'problems to overcome, not boundaries to which kinds of deeds or speech acts were possible' (Zehfuss 2002: 183).

From a postmodernist stance, the common mistake made by Wendt, Kratochwil and Onuf of essentialising certain parts of reality is highly problematic. As Zehfuss (2002: 36) puts it: 'reality cannot be known other than through representations. [...] Therefore, claiming a reality to start from, be it one of states, norms or natural raw materials, already involves a political act.' From a Derridean perspective, the 'logic of supplementarity', whereby interpretation adds signification and then creates reality, means that 'there is nothing outside the text' (Derrida 1967). The immediate corollary of this key postmodernist claim is that '[t]he assertion of an independently existing reality, which in itself cannot be proved and seems to demand no proof, works to support particular political positions and to exclude others from consideration' (Zehfuss 2002: 245). For example, Zehfuss argues that Wendt's bracketing of domestic politics supports the political position of certain German statesmen who claimed that external pressures necessitated a shift towards military involvement. Like Jim George and David Campbell (1990: 280), Zehfuss understands 'theory as practice'. An allegedly methodological bracketing turns out to have crucial political consequences. The disclosure of the 'politics of



reality' is the apex of the postmodernist critique. In her conclusion, Zehfuss suggests that unless IR theorists 'bring the political back in' (see Edkins 1999), they will continue to lapse into 'irresponsibility' and 'good conscience'.⁵

Overall, Zehfuss' critique of constructivism is both relevant and convincing. Her most important contribution is to point out how the basic assumption of constructivism, that reality is socially constructed, has sometimes been misunderstood in IR. Constructivism has its roots in critical theory, as Price and Reus-Smit (1998; also see Wyn Jones 2001: 12–15) argue, in that it seeks to problematize the taken-for-granted, to 'make strange' what is regarded to exist 'out there'. Indeed, to claim that reality is constructed aims precisely to highlight that it is neither 'determined by the nature of things' nor 'inevitable' (Hacking 1999: 6). This critical stance is perfectly consistent with Berger and Luckmann's (1966/1991: 15) first statement of constructivist social theory, almost 40 years ago: 'Sociological interest in questions of "reality" and "knowledge" is thus initially justified by the fact of their relativity.' Consequently, it seems that certain IR constructivists misinterpret this critical dimension when they take identities, intersubjectivity or raw materiality for granted. As Zehfuss (2002: 246) rightly puts it: 'If the "real" is not natural, what is held to be real must be questioned.' To be sure, appeals to an *a priori* existing reality seem to fit oddly with the assumption of its constructedness. I tackle this problem at more length below. Suffice it to say here that methodological shortcuts that lead the analyst to reify identities, norms or materiality run counter to constructivism's core assumption that reality is socially constructed. Its critical disposition fades in front of such politically consequential essentialization. The great achievement of Zehfuss' book is to bring this fundamental issue to the attention of IR theorists.

More specifically, Zehfuss is particularly perceptive of Wendt's and Onuf's limits. In addition to the abovementioned (and widely acknowledged) shortcomings associated with 'bracketing' identities, the author notices Wendt's problematic neglect of language: 'Wendt's actors cannot communicate about their behaviour; they communicate *through* their behaviour' (Zehfuss 2002: 49; also see Smith 2000: 160–61). Language is clearly a missing link in Wendt's theory. Zehfuss (2002: 98) also convincingly shows that because he 'ultimately restricts identity to a question of boundaries,' Wendt cannot properly handle its complexity and contingency (also see Campbell 1992/1998: 220–21). Since Onuf is usually seen as the father of a more critical brand of constructivism in IR, one might think that he would escape the postmodernist critique more easily than Wendt. But this is not the case. Contra Onuf's argument about the material limits of speech acts, Zehfuss recalls that material reality does not impact *directly* on the social world but does so through its meanings and representations. In other words, it is not material reality *per se* that provides the 'limits of possibility' (Wendt 2000: 166) of the social



construction of reality, but the meanings that are socially attached to it. However, both Wendt and Onuf give the ultimate precedence to materiality in the social construction of reality. For postmodernists, Wendt's (and Onuf's) 'rump materialism' permeates a 'relentless quest for the essence of international relations' (Doty 2000: 137). As I argue below, if constructivism has an essence one should not look for it in the physical reality.

The postmodernist critique put forth by Zehfuss also has a few shortcomings. First, Zehfuss is less convincing in her assessment of Kratochwil's variant of constructivism. Although she rightly notes that the Habermasian rational-argumentative model of communication does not entail a neutral conception of intersubjectivity, I believe she misinterprets Kratochwil's thought in contending that he 'does not conceptualise norms themselves and their effects as political' (Zehfuss 2002: 148). To the contrary, the author of *Rules, Norms, and Decisions* repeatedly states that norms 'figure prominently in defining issues and in legitimization and delegitimization attempts' (Kratochwil 1989: 206). Clearly, Kratochwil is perfectly aware of the political effects of norms: one could even say that this is what his book is all about. Second and more generally, it is regrettable that Zehfuss never extends her warning against the 'politics of reality' to other IR theories. Constructivism is surely not the only approach to fall into the essentialization trap, and although this by no means excuses its own problems, it compares advantageously to mainstream theories regarding the volume of taken-for-granted reality. George (1994), for instance, denounces realism for claiming the independence, inevitability and immediateness of the reality 'out there'. But Zehfuss lumps everyone together by emphasising the (alleged) close links between constructivism and rationalism. She even concludes that the partial essentialization of portions of reality is 'part of what makes a constructivist a constructivist' (Zehfuss 2002: 251). As I argue in the third section, she may turn to be right; but not exactly for the reasons she believes.

The Linguistic Construction of Reality

In contrast to Zehfuss', François Debrix's volume portrays constructivism and poststructuralism as two distinct but similar IR approaches that share the same post-positivist stance. Since 'a nonfoundationalist redescription of the world of IR entail[s] a remobilization (and transformation) of language' (Debrix 2003b: 4), constructivism and poststructuralism converge on linguistic issues. On that premise, the volume seeks to revive the dialogue by juxtaposing works from constructivists and poststructuralists. The first part discusses language and agency in a theoretical perspective. Onuf (2003: 27), for example, offers a declension of the different 'persons' of identity to examine how 'language makes us who we are.' The second part of the book provides cases and



applications of constructivist and poststructuralist analyses of language and agency in world politics. Particularly noteworthy is Janice Bially Mattern's (2003) analysis of the Suez crisis that skilfully shows how the Anglo-American identity was 'fastened' through the language-power nexus. The concepts of 'forceful narrative' and 'representational force', inspired by the works of Jean-François Lyotard (1983), aptly grasp the power of language in global politics and provide a promising bridge between constructivism and poststructuralism. Due to space constraints the empirical contributions to Debrix's book will not be assessed in detail here. Since my purpose is to explore the relationship between constructivism and poststructuralism, and because Onuf has already been discussed above, in the following pages I concentrate on Debrix's, Gould's and Fierke's theoretical chapters.

Although he brings constructivism and poststructuralism together under the same post-positivist, nonfoundationalist banner, Debrix (2003b: 5) insists on the need 'to provide a counter position to the fashionable tendency that consists of trying to fuse' them. The distinction between the two approaches is far from 'purely arbitrary' but is instead grounded on epistemological and ontological differences. Debrix (2003b: 7) contends that '[c]onstructivist language will emphasize the importance of reconstructive work, whereas poststructuralism will highlight the presence of deconstructive play.' Moreover, constructivists are interested in the normativity of spoken words whereas poststructuralists concentrate on performativity, written texts and discourse. Consequently, the distinction between the two approaches ultimately lies in the *outcome* of language. For constructivists, performativity depends on the words spoken by the agents; for poststructuralists language itself is the performance. Debrix (2003b: 23) concludes that because they offer different challenges to IR, 'both epistemes must be maintained.'

In his chapter, Harry Gould (2003) focuses on Onuf's constructivism to argue that there is a flaw in speech-act theory as IR constructivists use it. Briefly stated, the generation of rules (and eventually Rule) through a speech act may not work if the understanding of the semantics of the speech act is faulty. Gould challenges the speech-act theory on the basis of Donald Davidson's truth-conditional account of meaning, which emphasizes the *reception* of the speech act and its meaning. The crucial insight here is that the reception of a speech act depends on the understanding of what would be true if it were obeyed (Gould 2003: 62). Building on Onuf's claims about perlocution and its normative effects, Gould concludes that performatives derive much of their performativity from the *meaning* of their utterance.

Highly critical of the current state of the IR academic field, Karin Fierke's (2003: 82) chapter denounces 'the deployment of a war over language in IR, a war dominated by disciplinary silences.' In her view, labelling is the main



weapon used by mainstream scholars to ostracize linguistic constructivists. This war perpetuates the misconception, widespread across the discipline, that ‘language is an issue only for those occupying the margins of “postmodernism”’ (Fierke 2003: 68). To the contrary, Fierke posits that any approach or theory entails a particular set of assumptions regarding language, even though these assumptions often remain implicit. Consequently, the question is not whether language is important or not, but how it is important. According to Fierke (2003: 78), a Wittgensteinian conception of language games allows the analyst to understand how ‘the individual becomes a part of the social context, both constrained by its rules and capable of agency within it.’

Fierke’s critique of the ‘silences’ of our discipline is brave and perceptive. It would certainly deserve to be extended as a new, trenchant sociology of knowledge in IR. She is right to point out that in academia as anywhere else, ‘labels are often deployed in a political manner’ (Fierke 2003: 70). The fact that inquiries into language are almost systematically tagged as postmodernist and marginal has a lot to do with their rarity in IR: one may hypothesize that many constructivists who are willing to engage mainstream scholars have simply abandoned linguistic issues. Yet this is not to say, as Fierke (2003: 71) does, that some (phoney?) constructivists have been co-opted and disciplined by positivist theorists in response to the post-positivist challenge. Not only does this claim amount (somewhat contradictorily) to political labelling, but it also appears unfair to the more conventional constructivists whose works are themselves good enough not to need positivist ‘help’ to gain leverage in the discipline. Nonetheless, it is plausible that their neglect of language has been indirectly prompted by the ‘label war’ in IR. And although some progress has recently been made on the matter, no doubt constructivists would gain from taking language more seriously.

It is precisely the key contribution of Debrix’s book to show how much language matters — in IR just as in any social science. For instance, Bially Mattern’s (2003) analysis of ‘language-power’ clearly demonstrates that power — a concept upon which so much ink has been used in IR — still has an unexplored linguistic dimension. Language is also important at the theoretical level since, as Fierke (2003: 80) points out, any analysis ‘contains assumptions about the role of language, whether implicit or explicit.’ The chapter by Franke Wilmer (2003), for example, highlights how IR textbooks tend to use concepts that ‘de-realize’ war and rationalize its violence. Further, Debrix’s call for more attention to be devoted to linguistic issues is of particular importance for constructivists because, as a philosopher popular with them (e.g. Adler 1997; Ruggie 1998; Guzzini 2000) contends, ‘language is essentially constitutive of institutional reality’ (Searle 1995: 59). To be sure, constructivists cannot interpret the social construction of meanings without paying attention to linguistic issues. Here, the dialogue with poststructuralists suggested by Debrix



appears particularly pertinent, especially because these scholars have long reflected on the dangers of the ‘positivistic dream’ of a ‘*langage-tableau*’ that would neutrally mirror reality (Foucault 1966: 309). As constructivists are taking language more seriously in IR, theoretical cross-fertilization with poststructuralists promises to be very fruitful.

Yet, one should not forget that constructivism is not exhausted by language. The social construction of reality is not limited to speech acts and language games. Although these are some of the most important mechanisms that generate social reality, I believe they are never sufficient to constitute social facts and maintain them through time. Consider the classic example of marriage.⁶ Of course, the speech act performed by the officiant is crucial in the construction of the social fact: without it there cannot be a marriage. But for the marriage to become ‘really real’ for social agents, that is to make it part of their everyday life, the speech act alone will not be sufficient. Clearly, the marriage cannot persist through time as a socially taken-for-granted fact unless the newlyweds’ practices subsequently conform, on a daily basis, to the socially constructed meaning of a marriage (through loving behaviours, for example). This means that discourse is one among many other practices that are necessary for the social construction of reality. Yet it seems to me that the Onuf-inspired constructivism defended in Debrix’s book partly overlooks this. For instance, in his seminal volume Onuf (1989: 82, my emphasis) argues that agents ‘can use words, and *words alone*, to perform deeds.’ I rather think that language, to employ Wiener’s (2003: 263–64) metaphor, is one of several ‘stations’ on the bridge between the various mechanisms of the social construction of reality. One should not look for the essence of constructivism in language alone.

In this context, the exclusive focus on linguistic constructivism advocated by Debrix and his contributors severely weakens their call for more dialogue among IR theorists. One is astounded, for instance, to learn that Gould (2003: 51) is ‘unwilling to identify the works of Katzenstein, Wendt, Finnemore, and others like them as constructivist.’ Who have been the first scholars to give constructivism some credence in the United States, then? Is Onuf alone a constructivist? Such a restrictive understanding of the term is precisely the kind of political use of labels that Fierke (2003) correctly denounces in her chapter. Gould’s exclusion looks like a speech act intended to establish a new rule for denominating constructivists in IR. I, for one, reject such label wars. Despite their limitations, the constructivist studies disowned by Gould — be it Katzenstein’s (1996) path-breaking introduction of norms into orthodox security studies, Wendt’s (1987, 1999) importation of critical issues of social theory into the IR mainstream, or Finnemore’s (1996) innovative understanding of international organizations as purposive social agents — have all made contributions to constructivist theory-building that are as crucial as



Onuf's. Surprisingly, even key constructivist figures such as Kratochwil (1989) and Ole Wæver (1995), whose works are as informed by the speech-act theory as Onuf's, are absent from the book.⁷ Such a narrow understanding of constructivism is regrettable since it excludes numerous IR scholars concerned with the origins and effects of social facts from promising dialogue with poststructuralists. My view is that we need a more inclusive way out if the powerful postmodernist critique about the 'politics of reality' is to be taken seriously by constructivists of all sorts in IR.

Grasping the Essence of Constructivism

Acknowledging the relevance of Zehfuss' critique, this review essay argues that constructivists can address the 'politics of reality' in their own pragmatist terms rather than going all the way to postmodernist relativism. Despite its merits, Debrix's revived dialogue between constructivism and poststructuralism has the serious limitation of excluding nonlinguistic constructivism from the solution. Instead, I suggest a more inclusive way out based on the idea of social facts as the essence of constructivism. How is it possible to study socially constructed reality in a nonfoundationalist way? In other words, how can one grasp the essence of constructivism without partaking in the 'politics of reality'?

To begin with, I need to introduce a crucial distinction overlooked by both Zehfuss and Debrix. When the former contends that any claim about reality constitutes a political move, she conflates the *act* of essentialization with the *observation* of essentialization. Indeed, her critique of Wendt, Kratochwil and Onuf is relevant because these three authors commit *acts* of essentialization: they turn a representation of reality (about, respectively, identity, intersubjectivity and materiality) into the reality itself and assume its existence in an *a priori* way. As Zehfuss convincingly demonstrates, such *acts* of essentialization have crucial consequences: Wendt depoliticizes the construction of identities because he takes corporate identity as a methodological starting point; Kratochwil depoliticizes processes of communication because he conceives intersubjectivity as a neutral realm; and Onuf depoliticizes material conditions because he considers them to be natural limits to speech acts. In sum, these three constructivists claim some of their own representations to be real, primarily for analytical purposes. Beyond the deleterious political consequences just discussed, this move is also problematic because 'it has an impact on which ways of thinking are thought to be relevant in the discipline; for the necessity to take reality into account circumscribes what we may think' (Zehfuss 2002: 36; also see Ashley and Walker 1990: 262). This kind of 'mainstreaming effect', which limits the possibilities for alternative thinking, should be avoided. Thus constructivists should refrain from the *act* of essentialization.



Paradoxically, however, while analysts need to redouble their efforts to avoid acts of essentialization, social agents continually commit some. Indeed, acts of essentialization, or reification as Berger and Luckmann would put it, are commonplace in social life. They lie at the foundation of the social construction of reality. According to the sociological fathers of constructivism, ‘reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something other than human products — such as facts of nature’ (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991: 106). Repeated acts of essentialization result in the generation of ‘social facts’, the portions of the world that are treated as if they were real by social agents. In Ruggie’s (1998: 12) words, social facts are ‘those facts that are produced by virtue of all the relevant actors agreeing that they exist.’ The classic example is money: certain bits of paper count as dollars because we all believe they are just that — dollars — but not in virtue of a primordial or natural reality. Money is real for agents since in many instances they cannot but treat certain bits of paper as dollars. Once reified, social facts confront agents’ everyday life as ‘objective’ facts that cannot be ignored. They become taken for granted as part of the order of things although they are pure human creations. Searle (1995: 63) aptly captured this idea when he argues that institutional facts are ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective: their existence depends on collective meanings, though not necessarily on the individual agent’s particular beliefs.

Because they constitute the building blocs of socially constructed reality, social facts are the essence of constructivism. I believe that constructivists of all sorts can meet together on the common (and admittedly minimal) ontological ground of social facts. Indeed, social facts are generated through a wide array of social mechanisms — as varied as constructivists’ conceptual tools — such as speech acts and language games, representational force, constitutive practices, norm compliance, persuasion, rhetorical and communicative action, social learning, cultural change, socialization, internalization, cognitive evolution, intertextuality, regimes of truth, etc. In other words, the very useful plurality of concepts developed by constructivists to account for the social construction of reality revolves around social facts. Since they constitute its ontological core, social facts are the essence of constructivism.

In sum, in their everyday life social agents continuously commit *acts* of essentialization that generate countless social facts. Thus, the task of constructivists is to *observe* these acts, not to commit them in lieu of the agents. This is the basic meaning of the distinction between the act and the observation of essentialization. When constructivists talk about the reality of social facts, they should always do so from the agents’ position. I should emphasize that I do not use the term ‘observation’ in any positivist meaning, but rather to underline the detachment that any analysis requires. Ultimately, it is clear that observation *is* interpretation: social reality is a web of



intersubjective meanings, and meanings cannot be studied in any 'objective' way. I agree with Charles Taylor (1971/1977: 126) that '[w]e can only continue to offer interpretations: we are in an interpretative circle.' Yet some interpretations make more sense than others, and constructivists should strive to observe/interpret agents' acts of essentialization as empathetically as possible. The impossibility of objective observation is no reason for not trying to pragmatically interpret social reality with as much detachment as possible.⁸

The fact that constructivists can content themselves with observing (rather than committing) acts of essentialization opens new epistemological possibilities. To put it bluntly, constructivists have no need to be foundationalist because social agents already are. Constructivists do not have to commit acts of essentialization prior to the analysis since agents continually essentialize reality. This suggests that social facts are not only the ontological common ground of constructivism, but also its epistemological 'foundations of reality'. The observation of essentialization provides constructivists with some foundations to develop knowledge about social life without having to adopt a foundationalist epistemology. Such a 'postfoundationalist' position is made necessary by the fact that, on one hand, constructivists have 'endorsed wholeheartedly' the idea that there can be no ultimate knowledge that actually corresponds to reality *per se* while, on the other hand, 'they have not shied away from offering more contingent generalizations about aspects of world politics' (Price and Reus-Smit 1998: 272–74).

Now, in more practical terms, how is it possible to observe something as intangible as acts of essentialization? I suggest that constructivists can observe reification through agents' practices. Indeed, if social facts are 'real' it is precisely because they produce concrete effects through practices.⁹ Practices are behaviours endowed with meaning, and as such they reflect the intersubjectivity of social life. Returning to the example of money, it is obvious that one can observe its 'reality' as a social fact through many different practices, such as daily purchases. But this should not lead the analyst to pretend that money is 'really real' and then commit the *act* of essentialization. Rather, constructivists should always remain agnostic about reality, neither assuming it nor denying it. In the end, to know if social reality is really real makes no analytical difference: the whole point is to observe whether agents take it to be real, and to draw the social and political implications that result.

Crucially, the *acts* of essentialization sometimes wrongly committed by constructivists always precede the analysis — that is, they are performed deductively — and often serve as methodological shortcuts. Wendt's (1999) 'rump materialism' is an obvious example of such essentialization *ex ante*. Onuf's essentialization of materiality is similarly problematic since his speech-act theory assumes the limits drawn by physical reality before performing any analysis of social practices. On the contrary, a correct *observation* of



essentialization necessarily proceeds from the analysis (i.e. via induction or abduction), as part of the conclusions reached through the study of social practices. As such it does not derive from prior assumptions, but rather constitutes an *ex post* research outcome.

An example from IR literature may help to illustrate what a correct observation of essentialization is. The research programme on security communities is a well-known case (see Adler and Barnett 1998). For researchers in this programme, the existence of a security community is not assumed prior to the analysis. To the contrary, a primary objective is to study the security dynamics in particular regions in order to *observe* whether agents' practices suggest that they take for granted their membership in a (socially constructed) 'nonwar community'. Only when this first observational step is taken can one study the social and political implications of such a social fact. Deutsch *et al.* (1957) used this kind of inductive method when attempting to identify the social conditions that are necessary for a security community to exist, such as mutual responsiveness or a compatibility of major values. Just as the pioneers of the research programme searched for tangible practices among peoples that would indicate an integrative process towards the construction of a 'sense of we-ness', more recently scholars have sought to identify 'indicators' of security communities, such as mechanisms of multilateralism and unfortified borders (Adler and Barnett 1998). The existence of a common intersubjective system of meanings about threats, or culture of security, is another indicator of a security community that the analyst can observe (see Pouliot 2003; Pouliot and Lachmann 2004). Similarly, the recourse to 'representational force' rather than to physical violence in times of crisis indicates that agents act as if they were part of a security community (Bially Mattern 2001, 2003), as do the disciplined practices that reflect liberal mutual identification (Williams 2001). In the end, all these works are premised on the idea that security communities cannot be assumed *ex ante* by the analyst, but rather need to be observed through practices before one can assess their political implication for global politics. As Wæver (1998: 77) aptly puts it: 'the community works when the actors choose to act *as if* there is a community.' That is where any constructivist analysis should begin.

Critics may retort that 'it is humanly impossible to problematize everything at once' (Wendt 1999: 36) and that pure nonfoundationalism is simply unachievable. Even Zehfuss (2002: 247), in her concluding thoughts, admits that 'we all have to start somewhere.' Indeed, the necessity of a starting point is not called into question here. What *is* questioned, though, is *where* exactly one is to start from, especially once one knows how easy it is to partake in the 'politics of reality'. In this essay I suggest starting from the social reality that *agents*, as opposed to analysts, take for granted. Obviously, it is impossible to perfectly adopt the viewpoint of agents, if only because we need minimal



foundations such as language and commonsense to interpret them. But through rigorous interpretation one can minimize this bias. Clearly, the method based on the observation of essentialization requires a lot of work. Constructivism, it should be clear, is no methodological shortcut. There is a price to be paid if one wants to build on the valuable insight that reality is socially constructed.

From my exploration of the complex and ambivalent relationship between postmodernism and constructivism, I conclude that the latter has a distinctive essence compared to other IR (and social) theories. Contrary to widespread foundationalism, the essence of constructivism is not a transcendental and primordial reality 'out there'; nor is it limited, as postmodernism suggests, to linguistic performativity. Social facts are the essence of constructivism. Essentialized by agents, social facts provide constructivists with 'foundations of reality' that allow them to develop knowledge about social life while remaining agnostic about reality. One must give due merit to Zehfuss for convincingly demonstrating that this essence has sometimes been misunderstood in IR. Constructivists should never claim anything to be real except from the viewpoint of social agents. Otherwise, they run the danger of irresponsibly participating in the 'political construction'¹⁰ of international politics. And as Zehfuss (2002: 222) rightly points out: 'This is particularly problematic when the claim is that what is being investigated is how the world is constructed.' Departing from postmodernist relativism, I have attempted to develop a postfoundationalist position that allows constructivists to study reality without partaking in its politics. Overall, this review essay strongly supports Debrix's call for more dialogue between constructivism and postmodernism. Doubtless, this relationship is mutually beneficial. In this sense, one is baffled by Robert Keohane's (2000: 129) view that 'one does not have to swallow the contaminated epistemological water of postmodernism in order to enjoy the heady ontological wine of constructivism.' On the contrary, the distinctive tannins and fruits that make the essence of constructivism are best appreciated after a cooling glass of postmodernist water.

Notes

- 1 For helpful comments on various drafts of this essay, I am grateful to Emanuel Adler, Janice Bially Mattern, Magdaline Boutros, Jim Farney, Henry Farrell, Bill Flanik, Christian Rouillard, Jean-Philippe Thérien, three referees at the Journal of International Relations and Development and the journal's editors. I also wish to acknowledge funding from the Fonds québécois pour la recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).
- 2 In this review essay, I use the term 'postmodernism' as an 'umbrella concept linking post-structuralism and deconstructionism' (Delanty 1997: 101). Thus, postmodernism is inclusive of, but not limited to, poststructuralism. The two approaches share 'an organizing strategy', according to Der Derian (1989: 4), that seeks 'to deconstruct or denaturalize through



detailed interpretation the inherited language, concepts, and texts that have constituted privileged discourses in international relations.’ Drawing on Delanty (1997: 95–109), I consider postmodernism to be informed by three central ideas: textuality (i.e. society is to be interpreted as a performative text), plurality (there is no single correct viewpoint) and antifoundationalism (there exist no foundations for knowledge, no ultimate essence of reality). In accordance with these principles, poststructuralism specifically focuses on the ways language constructs reality (and on the arbitrariness of the links between the two). Because Zehfuss discusses postmodernism whereas Debrix talks of poststructuralism, I use both terms alternatively in the review part of this essay.

3 According to Debrix (2003b: 24, fn. 3), constructivism and poststructuralism are nonfoundationalist approaches because both ‘counter certain foundational claims that seek to ground knowledge of/about the world in a predetermined set of postulates.’ Nonfoundationalism is to be understood as a philosophical and theoretical current that falls somewhere in the middle of a spectrum of positions bordered at one end by antifoundationalism (a position that ‘rejects any claim to a foundational approach to knowledge and being’ (*ibid.*)) and on the other by foundationalism (a position that assumes the existence of transcendental foundations for understanding the world and grounding the truth in an independent reality). For the sake of simplicity, in this essay I use foundationalism and essentialism interchangeably.

4 I thank one reviewer for suggesting this formulation.

5 Interestingly, some feminists have also faulted constructivists for not problematising the partiality of their claims in terms of gender, thus ‘avoid[ing] responsibility for their political effects’ (Locher and Prügl 2001: 121).

6 I thank Emanuel Adler for this example.

7 Concretely, Kratochwil’s name appears only once in the index whereas Wæver is simply never mentioned, neither in the index nor in the bibliography.

8 There are, of course, some constructivists who do not share this epistemological stance. The most noticeable ones probably are the self-declared ‘positivist’ or ‘naturalistic’ constructivists, who rely heavily on scientific realism as a philosophical basis (e.g. Wendt 1999; Dessler 1999). In my view, however, Wendt’s attempt to bridge positivist epistemology and post-positivist ontology with the help of scientific realism results in a ‘failed marriage,’ to borrow Kratochwil’s (2000) metaphor. The main reason for this failure is that since social facts are made of intersubjective meanings, they cannot be interpreted in any objective way. The distinction between the subject and its object, assumed by positivists (including Wendt), cannot hold because theories are not about independent objects but rather about ones that are (at least partly) constituted by the understandings the analyst has of them.

9 It is interesting to note that the ‘reality’ of practices is fully consistent with the postmodernist view that ‘structures themselves only exist by virtue of the practices of agents’ (Doty, 1997: 372). In a similar vein, Ted Hopf (1998: 178) argues that ‘[t]he power of social practices lies in their capacity to reproduce the intersubjective meanings that constitute social structures and actors alike.’ The reality of practices is a crucial meeting point between constructivism and postmodernism, one that suggests that some ‘posty’ scholars (here I am especially thinking of Foucault’s followers) may find more to agree with in my argument than others.

10 The expression is R.B.J. Walker’s, quoted in Zehfuss (2002: 261).

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