

Congrès AFSP Aix 2015

Section Thématique 15:

**Quelle économie politique pour quelle « crise » ?**

---

**Good in a crisis: Constructivism's institutionalism and the  
political economy of disequilibrium**

Colin Hay, CEE, Sciences Po, Paris

Email: [colin.hay@sciencespo.fr](mailto:colin.hay@sciencespo.fr)

---

---

## **Good in a crisis: Constructivism's institutionalism and the political economy of disequilibrium**

Colin Hay, CEE, Sciences Po, Paris

---

**Abstract** Properly understood, constructivism is ontologically institutionalist. Yet, unlike more conventional institutionalist approaches, it is profoundly wedded to the inherent contingency of social, political and economic change. This prepares it well for the analysis of crisis and disequilibrium and suggests that it might be capable of providing an institutionalist antidote to the characteristic tendency in comparative political economy to see path dependent dynamics as self-equilibrating. From a constructivist perspective, path dependent dynamics are no more likely to prove self-equilibrating than they are cumulatively destabilising – and the identification of such cumulatively destabilising dynamics offers a vital and fresh perspective on the origins of crisis and institutional disjuncture. Returning to the ontological origins of constructivism's institutionalism (in Berger and Luckman and Searle), this paper seeks to map out a constructivist institutionalist political economy of crisis and disequilibrium, contrasting it with more conventional institutionalist approaches and showing how it might better prepare us for the times in which we now acknowledge ourselves to live.

---

Constructivism, as Jeffrey Checkel has noted, is 'trendy' – and it is no less trendy today than it when these words were first published over a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> And, perhaps partly as a consequence, it remains both highly controversial and, judging by the tone their responses, intensely frustrating to its critics.<sup>2</sup> This

---

<sup>1</sup> Checkel 2004, 229.

<sup>2</sup> For recent examples of such palpable exasperation see, for instance, Bell 2011, 2012, Marsh 2009.

should not surprise us. For constructivism challenges conventional approaches in some profound ways and yet, at the same time, is notoriously slippery and difficult to pin down precisely. It means different things to different authors (and sometimes, seemingly, to the same author even in the pages of a single contribution), it covers a multitude of differing (and at times seemingly incommensurate) positions and, even in what are taken to be its defining texts, it often lacks a clearly stated set of core claims. It is also treated, by its advocates, admirers and detractors alike, as a normative theory, an ontology, an epistemology and (if more rarely) a methodology.

In what follows my aim is to attempt to inject some clarity into this confusion. The task is, however, an ambitious one and one fraught with perils. Constructivism is difficult to specify precisely because, in the end, *it does* mean different things to different people – and, to compound the problem, the content of such meanings has itself changed over time. There is no escaping this; nor is there is anything inherently wrong with it – it is just how things are. Inevitably, then, some self-declared constructivists will empathise more closely with the account of constructivism that I offer here than others. And that perhaps makes it important to explain how I have gone about the task of clarifying and articulating as clearly and sympathetically as I can the constructivist position that I here outline and ultimately seek to defend.

### **Constructivism as ontology**

The approach adopted is a simple one: to be a social constructivist I contend, is to emphasise (having, ideally, reflected systematically upon) the process of social construction. As such, the origins and defining analytical features of social constructivism should in principal be traceable to, and identifiable from within, the ontology of social construction on which its name at least would suggest it is ostensibly predicated.

It is, accordingly, with Berger and Luckmann's classic statement of such an ontology, *The Social Construction of Reality* and its more recent restatement and

development by the analytical philosopher John R. Searle that I start.<sup>3</sup> In so doing and in keeping with the emphasis in both on ontology, it is perhaps useful to begin with Berger and Luckmann's understanding of reality itself. This, in terms in fact very close to those later used by Searle, they see as "a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition", in that "... we cannot wish them away".<sup>4</sup>

Two things are immediately interesting, striking even, about this definition. First, it is remarkably close to that typically offered by philosophical realists such as Bhaskar,<sup>5</sup> but with one difference – the second point. The difference is that realists invariably posit a reality independent of our knowledge or understanding of it whereas constructivists (at least on the basis of this definition) emphasise the independence of reality from human volition. The distinction might seem trivial, but in fact it is extremely important – for it allows constructivists to identify a category of things (like money, marriage and, indeed, the government) that (they content) exist and draw whatever properties they have from our (collective) knowledge and understanding of them. The ten euro note in my pocket is only a ten euro note (as distinct from a scruffy piece of paper) insofar as it is regarded as such – its value is not intrinsic to it as a piece of paper and is derived principally (if not quite exclusively) from a status bestowed upon it socially. Its materiality, its physical facticity, gives us no clue to its social significance or role. That it is a piece of money (as distinct from merely a piece of paper) is a social and not a physical, natural or, in Searle's terms, a 'brute' fact. This does not make it any less real (a fact that I will rely on when I present it at the bar to settle my tab later), but it does mean that its reality

---

<sup>3</sup> Berger and Luckmann 1966; Searle 1995, 2005, 2010. This, I think, is a logical move which can be defended in its own terms. However, it is also reassuring that Berger and Luckmann and, indeed, Searle, though rarely discussed in any detail, are typically cited, in effect, as inspirational philosophical under-labourers by prominent social constructivists in precisely the texts most often regarded as defining of the approach (see, for instance and *inter alia*, Wendt 1992, 1999; Adler 1997; Schmidt 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Berger and Luckmann 1966, 13.

<sup>5</sup> As, for instance, in Bhaskar 1979; see also Marsh and Furlong 2002; Sayer 2000.

derives in significant part precisely from the knowledge and understanding that I and others have of it (as money). As such, its existence is not (*pace* the realist definition) independent of my and/or others' knowledge of it – though the paper in my pocket would, of course, remain a ten euro note even if I did not know what such a thing were or, indeed, were it to fall into the hands of a toddler. But it would not remain a ten euro note if no one knew what it was.

If the ten euro note problematizes at least this standard realist notion of reality does the constructivist definition fare any better? Is the facticity of the note in my pocket really independent, as Berger and Luckmann seem to imply, of human volition? Well, in one obvious sense, 'yes' – try as hard as I might I cannot wish the piece of paper in my pocket into a twenty euro note, or a ten pound note when I step off the Eurostar and find myself in a country where the euro is not the acknowledged currency of exchange. In that sense, of course, its reality is independent of my volition; it is what it is (a ten euro note) and I cannot wish it into something else (though I can act on my volition and take it to a bureau de change in the hope that they might do a little better). But that it is a ten euro note (rather than a twenty euro note, a ten pound note or just a piece of paper), that it takes the form it does (a piece of paper that fits easily in my pocket) and that it is recognisable as such (to those who know what a ten euro note looks like) is itself a product of human volition – and in that sense, its reality, though clearly distinguishable from my (or any other specific) volition, is intimately (in Berger and Luckmann's terms, 'dialectically') related to human volition more generally. Such is the nature of social facts and the essence of social and political change – and, however, clumsy their definition of reality itself, that is Berger and Luckmann's point.

It is Searle, however, who takes this furthest.<sup>6</sup> His own definition of reality is very similar to that of Berger and Luckmann. It leads him to differentiate, in effect, between three types of existence or 'facticity': (i) those things that can be said to exist independently of our thought (natural or brute facts); (ii) those

---

<sup>6</sup> Searle 1995, 2010.

things which, on a routine day-to-day basis may exist largely independently of our conscious thought but whose very existence in the first place is a product of human thought and volition and whose specific facticity today bears clear traces of this irredeemably social origin and evolution (many institutional facts and the practices to which they give rise, such as voting, are of this kind); and (iii) those things (such as a self-fulfilling prophecy or a consensus) whose very facticity is a product and reflection of our thought and which endure only for as long as our thoughts are of a particular kind (the self-fulfilling prophecy is of course shattered by the very realisation that it *is* or *just might be* a self-fulfilling prophecy). Social constructivists, unremarkably perhaps, are more interested in the second and third categories of facticity identified above. For it is only these that can be said to have been socially constructed. Thus, what differentiates their social ontology from others is its emphasis on both the existence of social facts and the distinction between social facts and natural or brute facts – the distinctive facticity of the social, in other words.

### **The socially constitutive nature of institutional facts**

Crucial to this is social constructivism's poorly understood and often overlooked institutionalism. Again, it is Searle who sets this out most clearly, though once more he builds directly and explicitly on Berger and Luckmann in so doing. It is with their account that we should perhaps start. Central to it is the notion of habitualisation. As they suggest, "all human activity is subject to habitualisation. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, *ipso facto*, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern". Such patterning is invariably indicative of the existence of institutions. Indeed, as they go on to explain, institutionalisation occurs whenever there is a "reciprocal typification of habitualised actions".<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Berger and Luckmann 1966, 71, 72.

This is a crucial observation. For what makes such typification reciprocal is language (and the shared or inter-subjective understandings to which it gives rise). Language is, in effect, the medium in and through which that reciprocity is established and maintained – and, accordingly, the medium in and through which the simultaneously enabling and constraining qualities of institutions are affected (in the regularisation of the practices to which they give rise). As this suggests, institutions are characterised by both historicity and control (their contribution to the regularisation of social practices within a specific domain, locus or setting – an institutional context). For Berger and Luckmann, such control is intrinsic to institutions. As they put it, institutions achieve a reality that “confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact”.<sup>8</sup> That they do so, and thereby achieve such an effect, is principally through the assignment of roles to actors and the codification (both formally and informally) of such roles through the establishment and reproduction of a series of rules and associated expectations (norms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, contextualised modes of rationality and so forth).

Yet, anticipating later themes in sociological variants of the new institutionalism in particular, Berger and Luckmann perceptively acknowledge that it is not principally through formal rules but through the more informal and tacit management of expectations that institutions come to shape, order and impose a regularity upon social (and, by extension, political) conduct. Such expectations are, of course, ideational – partly inter-subjective (insofar as they are conserved between institutionally-situated subjects), partly subjective (in that they vary from individual to individual, being shaped to a large extent by differential exposure to, and experience of, institutionalised practices). Berger and Luckmann also emphasise one of what might now be seen as the defining principles of what is typically referred to as ‘constructivist institutionalism’,<sup>9</sup> namely that “the institutional order is real only so far as it is realised in

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 1966, 76.

<sup>9</sup> For a review, see AUTHOR xxxx.

performed roles”.<sup>10</sup> Institutions, in other words, only exist in and through the practices to which they might be seen to give rise; though such practices (for example, specific instances of institutionalised patriarchy) are sadly (at least in this instance) all too real, institutions themselves (patriarchy, in this example) are revealed as analytical concepts which help up make sense of such practices. They are, as such, ‘as if real’ rather than real *per se*.<sup>11</sup>

This, as I have sought to show, is already a highly distinctive and ontologically nuanced conception of institutions and institutional practice. In terms of the analytical insight it offers arguably it compares very favourably with the more recent outpourings of new institutionalist scholars – many of whose signal contributions to our understanding of social and political life (notably those about historicity and path dependence) it largely anticipates.<sup>12</sup> But, once again, it is Searle who takes us furthest – building upon and extending Berger and Luckmann’s insight to reveal more fully the implications of social constructivism’s ontology of social institutions, indeed its institutional ontology of the social.

Though limits of space prevent a full elaboration, three elements of this are particularly noteworthy. The first is the distinction that Searle draws between *regulative* rules – which regulate pre-existing practices, activities and, indeed, social artefacts (specifying, for instance, the form that a ten euro note must take in order that it be regarded as ‘legal tender’) – and *constitutive* rules – which are (as the term implies) constitutive of, and which thereby create *de novo*, the very possibility that a piece of paper might serve as a medium of exchange.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, institutions are not just regulative (though they typically rely upon regulative rules for their persistence and reproduction over time) but are genuinely constitutive of the social practices they institutionalise. Accordingly, their existence is itself constitutive of the specific opportunity for social and

---

<sup>10</sup> Berger and Luckmann 1966: 96.

<sup>11</sup> On which see AUTHOR xxxx and, for a partial critique, Jessop 2014.

<sup>12</sup> See also Schmidt 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Searle 1995: 27.



political interaction that they provide. The institution of money, for instance, is constitutive of the very possibility that I might exchange the piece of paper in my wallet for a pint of beer and some shiny pieces of metal (coins) at the bar. That possibility would not exist in the absence of the institution. Institutions, in short, configure social and political space and are constitutive of the opportunities and constraints which characterise that space. For social constructivists, men and women alike make institutions but not in (institutional) circumstances of their own choosing.

Second, and no less significantly, Searle reaffirms Berger and Luckmann's emphasis on a more dynamic notion of institutional practice rather than the more characteristically new institutionalist focus on institutions *per se* in what he calls the 'primacy of process'. As he very simply puts it, "social objects [social and institutional facts] are always ... constituted by social acts".<sup>14</sup> Money, in other words, only exists in the exchanges to which it gives rise and their consequences; in the absence of the practices it makes possible, the institution has no meaningful existence. The social is comprised of a series of such practices; but the very condition of existence of these practices is the socially constitutive properties of the institutions out of which they arise and from which they derive their meaning.

Finally, Searle has some very prescient and important things to say about the specificity of institutional (as distinct from merely social) facts (the former are, as he argues, a sub-class of the latter). In addition to suggesting that institutional facts are constitutive of social space in that the opportunities they provide serve to structure and configure that space for actors, he argues that all institutional facts derive ultimately from the attempt to deliver some kind of social function. And, as he puts it, "the key element in the move from the collective imposition of function to the creation of institutional facts is the imposition of a collectively recognised status to which a function is attached".<sup>15</sup> This leads him to infer that

---

<sup>14</sup> Berger and Luckmann 1966, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Searle 1995, 41; see also 2005, 2010, 22.

all institutional facts are essentially of the form “X counts as Y in C” where ‘X’ is the thing itself, ‘Y’ the status to which the function is attached, and ‘C’ the relevant institutional context. An example might help to clarify the point: X (this piece of paper marked with a cross in this way) counts as Y (a vote for this candidate and this party rather than another combination of candidate and party) in C (the context of this particular electoral contest taking place within this particular first-past-the-post single member district electoral system). There is, as Searle himself notes, a certain ‘magic’ performed here<sup>16</sup> – as the physical object X, the piece of paper ceremonially deposited in the ballot box, is transformed into a socially and (here, above all) politically meaningful Y (a vote cast in an ostensibly democratic electoral process for one candidate rather than another). In this process and very many others like it, things (pieces of paper and the like) come first to stand for or signify but ultimately to stand in for or *become* something other than themselves (a certain multiple of a unit of exchange, a vote and so forth).

Indeed, one might extend the logic of Searle’s argument to suggest that the extent of the institutional conjuring trick required in cases such as these is at least in part responsible for the highly ritualised and ceremonial character of the process by which, say, votes are cast and counted.<sup>17</sup>

An important implication of all of this is that institutional facts only exist by virtue of human agreement. As such, they are socially and politically contingent; rather more socially and politically contingent, in fact, than most institutionalists today acknowledge (a point to which we return presently). But this, of course, does not mean that they can simply be willed away. I cannot, having regretted my choice at the ballot box, withdraw and recast by vote in favour of another candidate, just as I cannot wish my ten euro note into a twenty euro note. That notwithstanding, institutions, institutional facts and the institutional practices in

---

<sup>16</sup> Searle 1995, 45.

<sup>17</sup> See Faucher and AUTHOR xxx for a more detailed elaboration development of this theme.

and through they are reproduced exhibit an intrinsic contingency which sets them apart from natural or brute facts since the former, quite literally, are contingent upon human agreement in this way. My vote is only a vote insofar as I am deemed to have performed what I am required to have performed in order to vote. I need to get my 'X' right and I need to get it right in the right context, 'C', in order that my piece of paper can become (through the institutional conjuring trick performed in the polling station and at the count afterwards) a vote for the candidate of my choice in this election. And that, crucially for Searle, requires not just inter-subjective agreement (about the constitutive rules that makes an X a Y in this context) but also language – a medium in and through which to express, register and record that agreement (and the rules that make them possible) over time. For, without that, institutions have and can have no historicity. Their path dependence, if you like, is linguistically achieved.

That, in short, is the constructivist perspective on institutions; indeed, that is the constructivist perspective. Constructivism, as I have sought to show, is an institutionalism; for what differentiates social life (ontologically) from the realm of nature (at least from a constructivist stance) are institutions and the social constructions in and through which they are instantiated and reproduced. Constructivism, as a social ontology, builds from an understanding of the different facticity of things natural, social and institutional – it is an ontological institutionalism and one which largely predates, just as in different respects it both anticipates and challenges, the new institutionalism.

What is perhaps remarkable is how little appreciated this is. One does not typically think of institutions when one thinks of constructivism. But institutions are central to Berger and Luckmann and they are central to Searle – and, indeed, if one looks for them they are also central to what are invariably taken to be the seminal works of constructivist theory in international relations (which typically start by discussing the institutional context in which their chosen privileged actors, states, are embedded).<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> See, especially, Wendt 1992.

In what follows my aim is to explore a little more thoroughly the still largely unacknowledged implications of constructivism's ontological institutionalism. I might be seen, in the process, to be offering and advancing a constructivist institutionalism.<sup>19</sup> But that would be a misreading. My aim is in fact is a subtly different one – to reveal something of the character of the institutionalism that I see as inherent, intrinsic and already present within social constructivism. I seek to draw attention to and to explore the implications of something that already exists, rather than to make the case for something new.

### **Constructivism as institutionalism – constructivist institutionalism**

If constructivism is rightly seen as an institutionalism – and, as I have argued, an institutionalism which predates the turn to institutional analysis in sociology and political science since the 1990s – then what kind of an institutionalism is it? If what characterises constructivism is its institutionalism, then what in turn characterises this institutionalism? What, in particular, sets it apart from other institutionalisms?

To answer these questions it is necessary to reflect a little on what might characterise an institutionalism in the most general terms. Here, again, my argument is a simple one: all institutionalisms are, or can at least be understood as, sociologies in that they are informed by the assumptions they make about the relationship between institutionally-embedded actors on the one hand and the institutional contexts in which they find themselves on the other. Constructivism is certainly no exception in having a deeply socialised conception of the actor; indeed, the standard critique of practically all contemporary institutionalisms is that they have an *overly*-socialised conception of the actor – though the critique itself is a long-standing one.<sup>20</sup> In fact what sets constructivism apart as an institutionalism perhaps more than anything is not its socialised but its

---

<sup>19</sup> As, to some extent, I have done before in AUTHOR xxxx.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Wrong 1961.

*politicised* conception of the institutionally-situated actor. Constructivism is a profoundly *political* sociology in a way that other institutionalism are not. For it seeks quite consciously and often in contrast to other institutionalisms to identify (often where it might not otherwise be apparent) the political authoring of institutional, institutionalised and institutionalising processes and the difference that actors make to institutional dynamics. It seeks, in other words, to discern and uncover the politics in institutional design, institutional reproduction and institutional change. And it sees that politics as intrinsic to institutions precisely because it sees institutions, as we have seen, as conditional and contingent upon human agreement.

As this perhaps suggests, constructivism is characterised too by quite a specific (if nonetheless inclusive) conception of politics and the political – which it associates with contingency rather than fate, indeterminacy rather than predictability and social construction rather than natural necessity. Politics is, in short, the realm of the socially contingent and institutions are, by their very nature, socially contingent and hence irredeemably political.<sup>21</sup>

This emphasis upon contingency which, as I have argued, it derives directly from the ontology of institutional (as distinct from natural or brute) facts, puts constructivism at odds with other institutionalisms. These tend to squeeze out politics or reduce politics to rational and/or norm-driven behaviour. In such conceptions politics, far from being open-ended, creative and contingent, is a source of determinacy, predictability and equilibrating dynamics. This constructivists challenge. In so doing they set out a rather different and distinctive understanding of the relationship between institutionally-embedded actors and the institutional environments in which they find themselves and which serve to configure the opportunities and constraints they must negotiate.

For constructivists social and political realities are at least partially constituted by actors through the subjective and inter-subjective understandings they

---

<sup>21</sup> AUTHOR xxxx.

develop to make sense of their experiences and to orient themselves towards their environment – and through the behaviours to which such understandings give rise. Consequently, the ideas actors hold are integral to understanding (and hence explaining) their behaviour. Such a constructivism emphasises the *contingency* of social and political realities which are typically (and in other institutionalisms) seen as materially given, fixed and immutable (as in the ‘imperatives’ generated by a ‘crisis’ or by the condition of ‘globalisation’).<sup>22</sup> The result is a more political, dynamic and open-ended institutionalism – emphasising sources of *disequilibrium* and *contingency* and the role of political processes in shaping paths of institutional change.

This leads to an institutionalism characterised by six distinguishing features:

1. A focus on the processes of institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation rather than on institutions per se;
2. An understanding of actors’ engagement with institutions as mediated ideationally (with institutionally-situated actors orienting themselves towards their institutional environment through a series of subjective and inter-subjective understandings, cognitions and normative dispositions);
3. A characteristic focus on institutional change as politically contingent;
4. An understanding of actors’ interests and normative orientations to be socially constructed rather than materially given;
5. A rejection of any presupposition of institutional equilibrium and an acute sensitivity to the importance both of moments of crisis and their political constitution (though, probabilistically, these may be infrequent, they are likely to prove enduring in their significance);
6. An inductive approach to process tracing calling for a political anthropology of institutionally-situated action and change.

---

<sup>22</sup> Hacking 1999, AUTHOR xxxx.

In the final sections of this paper I look briefly at each of these six tenets of constructivism in a little more detail, illustrating each with respect to our understanding of crises in general and the global financial crisis in particular.

*From institutions to institutional practices: a praxiological approach*

The first defining tenet of constructivism as an institutionalism is already strongly prefigured in Berger and Luckmann and Searle's common emphasis on the primacy of process in the understanding of institutional facts and institutional practices. Constructivists are typically far less interested in detailing, mapping and describing structurally the form institutions might be seen to take than they are in describing, analysing and elucidating the always on-going process of constitution and reconstitution in and through which institutional practices both reaffirm and, at the same time, contribute to the evolution of institutions and institutional complexes (like patriarchy and the state).

This emphasis on practice and process rather than structure and institution derives, arguably, from two sources. The first is a certain perhaps characteristic suspicion on the part of constructivists that institutions and, in particular, institutional complexes (like the state and patriarchy) do not really exist as such – but are, rather, analytical devices (conceptual abstractions, in effect) which we use to help us make sense of the social and political practices which are in fact the real substance of social and political life. If patriarchy and the state are at best 'as if real' simplifying analytical devices which might help us better see the connections between real instances of 'patriarchal' oppression or the disparate practices legitimated in the name of state authority, then it is perhaps the latter that we should be more interested in focussing upon. Put slightly differently, social processes are real, but structures and agents (and hence institutions and institutionally-situated actors) are abstractions (analytical constructions that are only 'as-if-real'). The task for constructivists is to deploy such constructs to explore the 'real'. This involves a rejection of any institutional reification in favour of a focus on processes of social construction and their impact in

processes of institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation.

Second, this analytic and empirical focus on practice and process – on institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation rather than on institutional structure (or on institutions as or ‘as if’ structures) – reflects and arises directly out of the constructivist ontology of the social. Social and institutional facts are not made and given, but are constantly being made and remade in and through the practices to which they give rise and out of which (and at the same time) they are constituted and re-constituted. It is these practices that we should study, if only to guard against the characteristic institutionalist danger of reifying as fixed and given institutional realities which, by their very nature, are open-ended, fluid and contingent.

For research on the global financial crisis this would entail a focus on (i) the pathological/disequilibrating interaction between capitalist institutional configurations and particular growth strategies in the period before the crisis; (ii) the identification and analysis of the institutionalised rationalities in and through which such cumulatively destabilising practices became habitualised; and (iii) the contested politics of crisis definition and response (seen as integral to de- and re-institutionalisation).

#### *Ideational mediation and cognitive filtering*

A second core tenet of constructivism is that actors’ access to the social, political and, above all, institutional environment in which they find themselves is always and necessarily mediated ideationally. Actors orient themselves to their environment through a veil of ideas - understandings, cognitions and normative dispositions. Some of these are inter-subjective, some subjective.

Within a constructivist ontology actors do not directly encounter institutions, nor are their actions directly motivated by them. Both are mediated ideationally. Actors orient themselves to institutions on the basis of their normative values



(their sense of duty and obligation, their sense of what is right, their sense of what is desirable), their perceived interests (both singular and collective, projected over a variety of different time horizons and in different institutional domains) and their understandings of the opportunities and constraints that different institutional contexts afford them (only some of which arise from direct experience). For constructivists, it is an ontological truism that actors' behaviour is informed not by the actual contours of the institutionally-configured terrain in which they find themselves, but by perceptions and hunches (some well-informed, some poorly informed, some accurate, some inaccurate, many untested and some in principal unknowable in advance of the action to which they give rise). Of course, there is a relationship – acquired and filtered by direct and mediated experience – between that institutional context on the one hand and the ideas about the institutional context which actors hold and which motivate and inform their behaviour on the other. But that relationship is itself complex, dynamic and contingent. Actors learn from their mistakes but the context in which they try to apply that learning is itself evolving (not least through this evolution of actors' strategies in the light of such learning processes). Consequently, actors never have complete information and the information they acquire through their ongoing encounters with the institutional landscape in which they exist is partial and, at very best, retrospectively significant (in that it might well have helped them develop a better strategy at the time they acted).

For research on the global financial crisis this implies a focus on (i) the ideas informing economic and related policies in the pre-crisis phase and the (problematic) assumptions about institutions on which they were predicated; (ii) the discursive construction of the crisis (as one of debt rather than growth, for instance) and the implications for policy responses and their consequences; (iii) the possibilities for the contestation of dominant crisis narratives in a context of continued low-or-no growth.

*The politically contingent character of institutions*

A third core tenet of constructivism is that institutional change is profoundly and necessarily political and, accordingly, politically contingent. Indeed, the task of a constructivist approach to institutions is to reveal that politics and, in the process, to demonstrate that political contingency, especially where it might not otherwise be clear (as, for instance, when contingent institutional facts are naturalised and presented as non-negotiable).

There are a number of elements of this. Whilst ideas and ideational systems (policy paradigms, norms, conventions, approaches to the construction of perceived interests and so forth) are path dependent, they are both constantly changing (even if only iteratively) and prone to more rapid change (in and through challenge and contestation).

Second, all social and political events and institutional settings are interpretively ambiguous – they can sustain a variety of competing narratives and discourses which might in turn inform very different policy sets or responses.<sup>23</sup> In other words, any specific contextual setting or condition can sustain a variety of different and competing narratives which might inform very different policy responses (deficit reduction might be a logical response to a crisis of debt but it is most unlikely to be seen as an obvious or logical solution to a crisis of growth). Consequently, policy responses are contingent upon their ideational and political processing. The implication of this, sadly ignored in more mainstream perspectives, is that all policy responses are contingent and conditional upon the political/ideational filters in and through which they are generated.

For research on the global financial crisis this implies a focus on (i) the politics of paradigmatic consolidation and contestation; (ii) an emphasis on the inherent ambiguity and interpretability/contestability of the moment of crisis itself; and (iii) crisis construction and policy responses to crisis as a resolution (however temporary) of such interpretive ambiguity.

---

<sup>23</sup> See for instance Benford and Snow 2000, Craig 2014.

*Relativising political motivation: beyond self-interest*

Crucially from a genuinely constructivist perspective (I emphasise this only because it strikes me that much ostensibly constructivist work violates this tenet), actors' interests are not and cannot be thought to be given materially or, indeed, contextually. Though they invariably draw on a variety of inter-subjective (and hence social) constructions (and, as such, are far from normatively neutral) they are also highly subjective and simply cannot be assumed to be conserved between actors of a given 'type' (capitalists, bankers, the working class, public servants and so forth). Relatedly, constructivism cannot afford to, and does not, assume that actors' behaviour is motivated solely by considerations of self-interest – and that actors act the way they do by virtue of a necessarily instrumental disposition towards the environment in which they find themselves.

Thus, from a constructivist perspective, the invariably linked notions of interests as materially given and conduct as narrowly instrumental are simplifying distortions. Indeed, they are typically part of an analytical rather than a genuine ontology in that they are chosen less for their ontological credibility than for the analytic convenience they afford.<sup>24</sup> For such assumptions make possible, where otherwise it would not be, a deductive mode of reasoning that allows us, in effect, to predict the content of actors' behaviour given who they are and where they are located (a working class voter in a first-past-the-post electoral system, an elite civil servant in a publicly funded bureaucracy and so forth). Such assumptions (though they come in a variety of different forms) dominate institutionalism. Yet the point is that they are starkly incompatible with constructivism.

Their appeal is that they serve to render actors' behaviour predictable given the context in which it arises. But this is to deny agency, contingency and, in the process, the very politics which constructivism seeks to identify and interrogate.

---

<sup>24</sup> AUTHOR xxxx.

For constructivists, by contrast, interests are perhaps best seen as idealised perceptions and projections (of credible future scenarios from which I might perceive myself, and those whose well-being I value, to benefit). They are deeply normative (my perceived interests depend on those things I love, respect, value and admire and those I do not). They are also, invariably, compound (I can have different interests in different things), contradictory (I can have different interests in the same thing – think of the trade-off between gratification and well-being or self-esteem, for instance), ambiguous (I can, and often do, struggle to discern my interests), contested (quite what I take my interests to be will vary from one day to the next even in the same context), contingent (for all of the above reasons and more besides) and political (in that what I take my interests to be is likely to influence the causes I fight for and those about which I remain less animated).

For research on the global financial crisis this implies the need for a political anthropology of interest identification, construction and re-construction in the context of the crisis (and the experiences to which it has given rise). More prospectively, it also entails and a focus on what Mark Blyth has usefully termed the rendering ‘actionable’ of shared perceived interests (especially in and so far as these have been recast in the light of the crisis and the understandings of it that have emerged).<sup>25</sup>

Yet, from a genuinely constructivist perspective (the adjective is, once again, significant), even that is inadequate. Acknowledging that actors’ interests are not materially or contextually given (such that all similarly located actors are assumed to have the same interests and, if rational, to go about acting on them in the same way) is not enough. For constructivists it is no less problematic to assume that actors’ behaviour is narrowly instrumental. There can be, and are, multiple motivations for actors’ behaviour, only some of which are instrumental. To reduce all motivational dispositions to base instrumental ones is rather

---

<sup>25</sup> Blyth 2002.

reducing the cast of the Mr Men to Mr Greedy and Mr Mean. The politics of institutional change, even (perhaps particularly) in moments of crisis, is not just a story of *homo oeconomicus* ... It is just as much a story of Mr Creature of Habit, Madame Altruiste, Monsieur Dutiful, Professor Je Ne Sais Quoi and many, many others ...

Consequently, the proposed political anthropology of interest constitution and re-constitution in the context of the crisis needs to be extended to include, at minimum, a political anthropology of interest salience – which would examine the extent to which the politicisation of the crisis has, or has not, encouraged actors to mobilise and act politically on the basis of their perceived (shared) interests relative to other potential motivational dispositions.

#### *Challenging the assumption of self-equilibrating institutions*

A fifth core tenet of constructivism emerges almost naturally out of the others. From a constructivist perspective there can be no guarantees, and hence should be no expectation, of institutional equilibrium (not even of dynamic equilibrium). If institutions are understood as contingent upon the social constructions out of which they arise and in and through which they continue to exist and they are also understood as disciplining of actors' conduct and practice in an almost Foucauldian way, then they are certainly likely to give rise to path dependent evolutionary tendencies. But there is absolutely no reason to assume that such path dependencies should prove cumulatively stabilising over time rather than cumulatively destabilising. That is something, it seems, the global financial crisis has taught us; but it should not be news to constructivists.

The inflation of a financial asset bubble through the institutionalised 'irrational exuberance' of market actors is a good example of such a cumulatively destabilising path dependency.<sup>26</sup> But the key point is that constructivism is perhaps particularly sensitive and attuned to such disequilibrating dynamics, to

---

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Schiller 2000.

moments of crisis and, above all, to their political constitution (and the politics of their constitution). Though, historically, these may be infrequent, their enduring significance trumps their scarcity and warrants close scrutiny.

The reason for this characteristic focus on crises and disequilibrium is rather simple.<sup>27</sup> For, from a constructivist perspective the distinction between equilibrium and disequilibrium is itself an analytical rather than an ontological one. To assume that systems exhibiting path dependence are in dynamic equilibrium is, again, merely a convenient simplifying analytical distortion. There is no logical reason to presume that path dependencies are indicative of self-equilibrating tendencies and, as the global financial crisis reminds us to well, path dependencies are just as likely to be cumulatively destabilising as they are to be self-stabilising (certainly over any significant span of time). But here another constructivist insight kicks in. For constructivists, interested as they have always been in moments of crisis, are typically strongly aware of the enduring historical significance of those conjunctures in which it all goes wrong. Accordingly, their approach to institutional process tracing has arguably always been one that has sought to identify potentially disequilibrating path dependencies and the ideational preconditions of their reproduction over time (such as equilibrium assumptions in prevailing economic orthodoxies). This gives constructivist approaches something of an advantage, particularly now, over most conventional approaches to institutional change which have tended to be built on the basis of more or less stylised equilibrium assumptions.

For research on the global financial crisis this implies a focus on the ideational and institutional sources of disequilibrium, their interaction, the conditions under which path dependencies can become catastrophic and the resources available for the narration of economic pathologies as constitutive of crisis.

*Constructivism as a political anthropology of institutional and ideational change*

---

<sup>27</sup> AUTHOR xxxx, Blyth 2002, 2013, Widmaier et al. 2007.

Finally, and perhaps unremarkably, all of this leads constructivists towards a distinctive set of methodological choices. Methodologically, constructivism entails an inductive approach to 'process tracing' in the form of a political anthropology of institutional change. For, since institutional change is contingent and there is neither the presumption of institutional equilibrium nor that exhibited path dependence can be taken as an index of equilibrium, institutional dynamics have to be studied empirically and cannot be derived theoretically or modelled (without very significant potential distortion) prospectively.

This entails a methodology of process tracing, yet one in which the constitution, identification and renegotiation of interests are the subject of analysis not a presumption (as in most historical institutionalism).

For research on the global financial crisis this implies a genealogy of institutional and ideational pathology prior to the crisis and a process tracing account of crisis narration and of the mobilisation of constituencies of shared interest in and through the process of crisis definition and blame attribution.

## **Conclusions**

In the preceding account I have sought to show that constructivism's ontology of social and political life is profoundly institutional. It is institutions which characterise social as distinct from natural reality and it is institutions which configure the very social and political terrain we inhabit. Institutions are what set us apart from the natural world; they are, in a way, our defining achievement and they are, crucially, the product of social construction. Though rarely understood as such, that makes constructivism a profoundly institutionalist mode of thinking.

I conclude with two brief observations which follow more or directly from this and yet which are at best implicit in the analysis I have developed. The first concerns the relationship between constructivism and interpretivism – a difficult

and complex issue that I have deliberately left until the end. The second concerns the distinctly political character of constructivism's institutionalism. I take each in turn.

Given the ostensible similarities between social constructivism and interpretivism it would surely be remiss to conclude without having offered at least some reflection on the relationship between the two, as I see it. It is tempting, given the preceding account, to think perhaps of constructivism as *interpretivism's institutionalism*. But that won't quite do. For although interpretivism and constructivism come at many of the same questions and issues, they do so from rather different directions and from rather different starting points. Constructivism, as I have sought to show, is an ontology; interpretivism, by contrast, is largely epistemological in its animating problematic. And that lends each a rather different analytic structure. Constructivism, most clearly in Berger and Luckmann and Searle but more generally, I would contend, starts with and builds its analysis from the question of the nature of the social. Indeed, it is in seeking to establish the ontological distinctiveness of the social that it reveals the socially conditioning and social constitutive nature of institutions. Its institutionalism follows logically from this. In an almost parallel way, it is interpretivism's positing of the (epistemological) question of the conditions of establishing knowledge and understanding that leads it to the inherently perspectival and interpretive character of all social understanding. It is but a short and very logical step to the historicising of such understanding in cultural traditions. As this suggests, the concept of tradition in interpretivism and that of institution in constructivism play almost entirely analogous roles.<sup>28</sup> That, in turn, suggests the potential synergies between these cognate perspectives.<sup>29</sup> These are complementary and potentially compatible approaches; but they are not, in the end, part of the same endeavour – and it is important, if we are to understand the rather different forms that they take, to understand that.

---

<sup>28</sup> See especially Bevir and Rhodes 2012, Bevir, Rhodes & Weller 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Which I explore in far greater detail in AUTHOR xxxx.



The second issue can be dealt with rather more quickly. Thus far I have tended to emphasise that social constructivism is a profoundly *social* mode of analysis and one that issues from and develops out of an (institutional) ontology of the social. But it is also profoundly *political* in a rather distinctive – and in fact surprisingly normative – way. For, as a mode of analysis it is characterised by one thing more than any other – its aim to identify and reveal the politics in processes which might otherwise be seen as natural or necessary (see also Hacking 1999; AUTHOR 2002, 2007). Its aim, in other words, is to reveal the contingency and hence the politics inherent in and intrinsic to any and all social processes, particularly those that we have come to see as natural, necessary or non-negotiable and thereby non-contingent and apolitical. To argue that something is socially constructed is, in the end and above all, to argue that it can (and perhaps should) be different from how it is and how it is perceived to be. It is, in short, to argue for politics and to politicise the social. That is why constructivism needs to have a place in any interpretive approach to social and political analysis.

## References

- Adler, Emmanuel (1997) 'Seizing the middle ground: constructivism in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3 (3), 319-63.
- Bell, Stephen (2011) 'Do we really need a new constructivist institutionalism to explain institutional change?', *British Journal of Political Science*, 41, 883-906.
- Bell, Stephen (2012) 'Where are the institutions? The limits of Vivien Schmidt's constructivism', *British Journal of Political Science*, 42, 714-19.
- Benford, Robert D., and David A. Snow (2000) 'Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (1), 611-639.
- Bevir, Mark and Rhodes, R. A. W. (2012) *Interpreting British Governance*. London: Routledge.
- Bevir, Mark, Rhodes, R. A. W. and Weller, (2013) 'Traditions of governance: interpreting the changing role of the public sector', *Public Administration*, 81 (1), 1-17.

- Bhaskar, Roy (1979) *The Possibility of Naturalism*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Blyth, Mark (2002) *Great transformations: Economic ideas and institutional change in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Blyth, Mark (2013) 'Paradigms and paradox: The politics of economic ideas in two moments of crisis', *Governance*, 26 (2), 197-215.
- Checkel, Jeffrey (2004) 'Social constructivisms in global and European politics', *Review of International Studies*, 30, 229-44.
- Craig, Martin (2014) 'Post-2008 British Industrial Policy and Constructivist Political Economy: New Directions and New Tensions', *New Political Economy*, forthcoming.
- Faucher, Florence & Hay, Colin (2015) 'Fragments d'analyse des rituels de vote en France et en Grande-Bretagne', unpublished manuscript, Sciences Po, Paris.
- Hacking, Ian (1999) *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jessop, Bob (2014) 'Towards a political ontology of state power', *British Journal of Sociology*, forthcoming.
- Marsh, David (2009) 'Keeping ideas in their place: in praise of thin constructivism', *Australian journal of political science*, 44 (4), 679-696.
- Marsh, David and Furlong, Paul (2002) 'A skin not a sweater: ontology and epistemology in political science', in D. Marsh and G. Stoker (eds.) *Theory and methods in political science*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sayer, Andrew (2000) *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage.
- Schiller, Robert J. (2000) *Irrational Exuberance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Searle, John R. (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Penguin.
- Searle, John R. (2005) 'What is an institution?', *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 1 (1), 1-22.
- Searle, John R. (2010) *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilisation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widmaier, Wesley W., Blyth, Mark, & Seabrooke, Leonard (2007) 'Exogenous shocks or endogenous constructions? The meanings of wars and crises', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51 (4), 747-759.
- Wrong, Dennis (1961) 'The over-socialised conception of man in modern sociology', *American Sociological Review*, 26, 183-93.