



Postmodern International Relations: Postmodernism beyond Social Constructivism

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ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the concept of postmodernism in International Relations (IR), exploring its dual meaning as both a historical period and a theoretical approach. It traces the emergence of postmodernity as a description of the post-Cold War global order characterized by complex interdependence and transnational challenges. The paper then delves into postmodernism as a theoretical stance in IR, emphasizing its focus on social construction, discourse analysis, and critique of power structures. Special attention is given to social constructivism, particularly Alexander Wendt's work, as a "mainstream" adaptation of postmodernist insights within IR. The paper argues that constructivism represents a "postmodernism with mainstream characteristics" for the IR discipline, maintaining a state-centric ontology while incorporating ideational factors in explaining international politics. Finally, the paper posits that postmodernism in IR can be understood as a historical consciousness of postmodernity, reflecting on and responding to material changes in the global order. This perspective highlights the interplay between theoretical innovations and historical context, suggesting that postmodernist approaches in IR are both timeless theoretical contributions and products of specific historical circumstances.

KEYWORDS:

International Relations, postmodernism, constructivism, globalization

1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of International Relations (IR), the concept of postmodernism has emerged as a powerful lens through which to view and analyze the complexities of global politics. However, its significance extends far beyond the mere recognition of an increasingly interconnected world populated by interdependent state and non-state actors. This paper argues that postmodernism in IR represents a fundamental shift in the discipline's intellectual landscape, introducing a deconstructionist intuition and mindset that challenges the very foundations of traditional IR theory. At its core, postmodernism in IR is not simply a descriptive framework for understanding the globalized world of the post-Cold War era. Rather, it is the importation of a radical philosophical perspective into the field, one that questions the notion of objective reality and emphasizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge, power, and identity. This social constructivist approach, rooted in postmodernist philosophy, has profoundly influenced how scholars conceptualize and study international relations.

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Furthermore, this paper contends that the traditional discourse of postmodern international relations, often equated with globalization, carries within it an implicit "End of History" narrative. This narrative, intrinsic to postmodernist philosophy, suggests a culmination of ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy. Such a perspective not only shapes our understanding of current global dynamics but also influences predictions about the future of international politics. By examining the dual nature of postmodernism in IR – as both a theoretical approach and a historical consciousness – this paper aims to unpack the complex relationship between postmodernist thought and the discipline of International Relations. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate how this intellectual paradigm has not only changed our understanding of global politics but has also transformed the very way we approach the study of international relations itself.

The paper is structured to provide a comprehensive exploration of the argument and its implications for the field of International Relations. We begin with an introduction that presents the main argument and introduces the concept of "postmodernism with mainstream characteristics" in IR. This is followed by a background section that delves into the origins of postmodernist thought in philosophy and its initial

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reception within the IR discipline. The paper then moves on to analyze the constructivist breakthrough, focusing particularly on how Wendt's approach successfully introduced postmodernist insights to mainstream IR. Building on this, we examine the unique position of constructivism as a form of "statist postmodernism," serving as a bridge between postmodernist ideas and traditional IR theories. The subsequent section discusses the impact of this development on the discipline, including how the success of constructivism has shaped the IR field and led to the marginalization of other post-positivist approaches. We then explore the relationship between postmodern IR and the globalization discourse, including its connection to the "End of History" narrative. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications of "postmodernism with mainstream characteristics" for the future of IR theory and research. This structure allows for a thorough examination of our argument, providing a logical progression from the historical context to the current state of the discipline and its potential future directions.

II. THE POSTMODERN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The notion of a globalized world wherein the modern sovereign state is challenged by, and called upon to cooperate with, non-state entities is a familiar construct in the IR discipline and is referred to as the "postmodern" international system. This notion emerged as a response to the perceived mutation of world politics toward the close of the twentieth century, specifically in the post-Cold War period, which witnessed the increased salience of a range of transnational issues and forces in world politics. Among these issues, we encounter a canonical and well-known list: the global environmental and resource crisis, international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, financial instability, mass migration, transnational organized crime, global health and pandemic preparedness, and so on and so forth. As the plethora of observers reiterate, these transnational issues demand cooperation between state- and non-state actors to be effectively addressed. State capabilities are no longer sufficient to tackle the global problems of the contemporary world. That being the case, the primacy of the sovereign state in shaping global politics is now being challenged by a multitude of non-state entities. These entities are not only those who most overtly challenge the authority of the state (such as in the case of transnational terrorist and criminal networks) but also include actors (including NGOs, multinational corporations, and international institutions *inter alia*) whose capabilities, expertise, and cooperation are pivotal to effectively handle global problems.

IR textbooks record attempts to "periodize a unique 'postmodern' historical period and social reality – one characterized by dramatic increases in the size and speed of global movements of information, capital, and goods, and an increasingly 'virtual' social environment ever more saturated by media and signification."¹ The whole formulation of a post-modern global system as a signifier of the political condition of the contemporary world ostensibly hinges upon the prediction of the eclipse of the modern sovereign state resulting from the purported emergence of "postmodern states" defined in textbooks as "states with high levels of cross-border integration. The economy is globalized rather than 'national'. The polity is characterized by multi-level governance at the supranational, national, and sub-national level. Collective loyalties are increasingly projected away from the state."² Thus, the conception of post-modern international relations is a statement that tackles the very paradigmatic foundation of the IR discipline – the unitary sovereign state as the most fundamental unit of analysis. The construct of postmodern statehood taps into a number of key recurring ideas found in the contemporary globalization discourse regarding governance and economic activity in the globalized world: "Multilevel governance in several interlocked arenas overlapping each other. Governance in context of supranational, international, transgovernmental, and transnational relations. 'Deep integration': major part of economic activity is embedded in cross-border networks. The 'national' economy is much less self-sustained than it used to be."³

It is relevant to note that the postmodern as a category to describe ongoing empirical transformations and phenomena in the contemporary world is so thoroughgoing as to make substantial claims on what is arguably the foremost and overriding problem of the whole disciplinary enterprise of IR – international conflict, aka war. The scholarship posits that the character of war is changing, and, in its current form, it displays features that allow observers to talk of "postmodern war." As they claim, "[g]lobal society is moving from the modern to the postmodern age. This is a process that has been under way for several decades and is the result of a wide range of economic, cultural, social, and political changes that are altering the meaning of the 'state' and the 'nation'. As this happens, it will affect the character of war. In some parts of the world the state is deliberately transferring functions, including military functions, to private authorities and businesses. In other areas, these functions are being seized from the state by other political actors."⁴ To fully grasp the relevance of postmodern warfare in the contemporary world, not only we are reminded that the so-called private military

¹ A. Burke, "Postmodernism," in C. Reus-Smith and D. Snidal, *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 359-60.

² R. Jackson and G. Sørensen, *Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 311.

³ Jackson and Sørensen, *Introduction*, 299.

⁴ M. Sheehan, "The Changing Character of War," in J. Baylis, S. Smith, and P. Owens, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 215-228.

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corporations (PMCs, also known as “contractors”) already played a decisive role in post-Cold War theaters such as Angola, Croatia, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone, but we may also want to consider how certain private economic actors are more or less indirectly involved in the conduction of operations in theaters of armed conflict. In this regard, think of the utilization of Elon Musk’s SpaceX Starlink satellite terminals by both state actors confronting each other in eastern Ukraine during Russia’s ongoing Special Military Operation.

The postmodern category has been effectively incorporated in IR terminology and its common usage is now widespread and unquestioned. Whenever employed, the term postmodern refers more generally to the idea of the increased role and impact of non-state entities, corresponding to the relative decline in the role and impact of state actors, in contemporary global affairs. This applies, as the postmodern story maintains, to a multitude of levels and areas, including the global economy, governance, and warfare. But is this supposedly new condition of world affairs called “postmodern”? Implicit in the textbook descriptions of what are called postmodern international relations is a transition or evolution from a “modern state system” of sovereign states being, as assumed by mainstream IR theory (most prominently, structural realism or neorealism), the dominant political actors in world politics to a largely new situation where the primacy of the modern state are now challenged by a growing number of sub-, trans-, and supra-national forces. If the system of sovereign states, also referred to as the Westphalian state system, presumes the undisputed primacy of the modern state as the most powerful and influential actor in international politics, then an international political environment that witnesses the relative decline in the power and capabilities of the sovereign state vis-à-vis challenges and players whose scope lies beyond the scope of the Westphalian state must be called post-Westphalian or, indeed, post-modern. By transitive property, because the Westphalian state system is also called the “modern” state system (in contrast to the pre-modern, feudal system of Medieval Europe), it follows that the post-Westphalian state system shall also be called, indeed, “post-modern.”⁵

Among the general public and beyond IR may be more familiar with what in IR calls post-modern system in terms of “globalization.” Sociologist Anthony Giddens defines

globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”⁶ It is conventionally said that the historical epoch unfolded since the end of the Cold War is an era characterized by (1) greater global interdependence, called globalization in the popular discourse, especially in the economic and financial realms, and (2) the impossibility, underpinned and sustained by the unipolar dominance of the United States as the sole remaining superpower, of major wars between major global powers.⁷ The consensus on the causal distinction between these two features remains contested among IR scholars. Ian Clark argues that, contending with the “tendency to regard the current high degree of globalization as simply a consequence of the end of the cold war” coupled with the “more general argument about the end of the Westphalian order”⁸ and the emergence of a postmodern condition of the global system, globalization is neither merely the consequence nor the cause of the end of the Cold War, but rather both. Globalization, then, simply signifies “a hybrid situation in which states share a host of responsibilities with both intergovernmental organizations and a multiplicity of non-governmental and transnational actors.” Looking at the immediate future, the international order “needs to be redesigned to take account of the new division of labour between states, global networks, and the rudimentary forms of global governance. Currently, the identity of states is undergoing considerable change, to the extent that we can describe them as globalized states.”⁹ We see from this account that, at any rate, the general globalization discourse speaks of globalization in the same terms in which IR scholars talk more technically of a post-modern world of complex interdependence and transnational cooperation in face of common global challenges.

III. POSTMODERNISM IN IR

Not only is the postmodern a marker of a specific historical period, but it also refers to a distinct theoretical attitude, or an “analytical orientation,” called postmodernism or post-structuralism in IR.¹⁰ Anthony Burke defines its “most fundamental and powerful characteristic [being] its systematic denaturalization of the real and the given, with the aim of social critique in the name of some ethical good.”¹¹ As acknowledged by those who ascribe to it, postmodernist in IR gained momentum after the end of the Cold War as soon as, in the words of Jim George, “patterns of thought and

⁵ R. Cooper, *The Post-Modern State and World Order* (Demos: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2000).

⁶ A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1990), 64.

⁷ John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁸ I. Clark, “Globalization and the Post-Cold War Order,” in J. Baylis, S. Smith, and P. Owens, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 519.

⁹ Clark, “Globalization,” 525.

¹⁰ D. Campbell, “Poststructuralism,” in T. Dunne, M. Kurki, and S. Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 211-2.

¹¹ Burke, “Postmodernism,” 359.

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behaviour identified as corresponding with an enduring essence of global existence are coming under increasing scrutiny as old ideological commitments and alliances are reformulated, territorial boundaries are hastily redrawn, and new symbols of identity are constructed or resurrected.”¹²

The post-Cold War “discovery” of the unmaking and re-making of identities spurred increased and unfettered interest in ideational factors, thereby challenging such “positivist” theories in IR as neorealism and neoliberalism which held the belief in the possibility of “objective” knowledge which can form a single universal body of theory. The post-positivist challenge recognizes the human cognitive limits, the idea that knowledge not based on truth but on conjectures and conventions, the fact that “Theory is always for someone or for something,” the need for interpretative (hermeneutic) methods in the social sciences, and the rejection of rationalist epistemology and materialist ontology.

In general, the mission of the post-positivist approaches is to discover political bias in established theory and, more broadly, to expose the “the presence of opinion in every claim to truth, of subjectivity in every claim to reason, and value judgments in every assertion of fact.”¹³ Significant to IR postmodernism is that this approach to international relations is inspired by an ensemble of popular and well-established authors in a variety of other fields (mostly belonging to the humanities) in the Western 20th-century tradition, including philosophy, linguistics, literary criticism, and psychoanalysis, among others. As Burke recounts it, “[p]ostmodern writing in international relations has arguably developed an epistemology (and a sociological analysis of power) that synthesizes key insights from the literature that developed and critiqued the semiology of Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, the language games of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and the early Michel Foucault.”¹⁴

Before and besides its application in IR, postmodernism is a multifaceted philosophical and cultural movement that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, whose original and pathbreaking idea is the challenge to the certainties and grand narratives of modernity while embracing the fragmented, diverse, and contingent nature of existence in the contemporary world. Postmodernists declaredly break with the tradition of modernity signified by the tendencies of the European Enlightenment that prescribed mankind to apply reason to dominate the natural environment and improve his own material condition in the world. Modernity therefore

implies faith in scientific rationality (instrumental reason), objective and absolute Truth, linear historical progress, and confidence in technological development. Rejecting the idea of a universal truth or a singular narrative that can comprehensively explain reality, postmodernism celebrates plurality, hybridity, and the blurring of boundaries across various domains, including art, literature, philosophy, and society. It emphasizes the subjective nature of knowledge, highlighting the role of language in constructing reality through language games, the ubiquity of power dynamics, and role of cultural context in shaping individual and collective understandings of truth.

Quintessential to the postmodernist sensibility is the emancipatory vision stemming from the earlier revelation that reality and its truths are socially constructed.¹⁵ As social structures are viewed as resulting from and enabled by linguistic constructs,¹⁶ the linguistic deconstruction thereof is viewed to wield the potential to emancipate the subaltern and marginalized subjects – in terms of race, gender, class, etc. – from existing power structures. Postmodernism is therefore charged with an ethical, emancipatory mandate and carries the vision of a more democratic and inclusive society (Vattimo, 1985). The emancipatory logic of postmodernism encompasses a critical interrogation of power structures and dominant discourses, aiming to dismantle oppressive systems and liberate marginalized voices (Foucault 1975). Inspired by the Gramscian idea of cultural hegemony introduced in the first half of the twentieth century during Italian fascism (Gramsci 1971) and rooted in skepticism toward metanarratives and a recognition of the multiplicity of truths, postmodernism offers a framework for challenging hegemonic ideologies and advocating for social justice.

As we can see, then, postmodernism in IR is but a part of a far larger intellectual effort to develop critique and deconstruction of Western theories and ideas and their political hegemonic implications. Or, in other words, it is an application of the broader intellectual deconstructionist toolkit and ethical sensitivity to the specific field of international relations. Postmodernism is but one of the post-Cold War post-positivists approaches and is guided by the belief that the “West” and its rules are a myth imposed by the West itself; such established concepts of “modernity,” sovereignty, and anarchy (amounting to a “positivist-empiricist metaphysics”)¹⁷ are not objective realities, but rather a metanarratives; so that the goal of postmodernism, generally speaking, is to deconstruct these concepts, i.e. to

¹² J. George, *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 1.

¹³ Burke, “Postmodernism,” 362.

¹⁴ Burke, “Postmodernism,” 362.

¹⁵ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

¹⁶ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

¹⁷ George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, 411.

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reveal the ideas behind the actions (the so-called *discourse*).¹⁸ Overarching in postmodernist research is the emancipatory ethos which strives to expose the asymmetric (hierarchical) power relations informed and brought about by dominant discourse of international politics.¹⁹ That is why David Campbell declares that “the overall purpose of a poststructuralist analysis is ethical and political.”²⁰

The emergence of postmodernism in IR marks a significant turn towards interrogating the “identity” of international political actors, encapsulating what is canonically referred to as the “third debate” between rationalists and post-positivists.²¹ As mentioned above, postmodern IR scholars challenge conventional understandings of power, sovereignty, and identity by foregrounding the multiplicity and fluidity of identities in global politics. This approach diverges from traditional realist and liberal perspectives, which tend to prioritize state-centric analyses and homogeneous identity categories. Instead, postmodernism in IR underscores the constructed nature of identities, emphasizing the role of discourse, language, and narrative in shaping perceptions of self and other. By deconstructing dominant discourses and exposing the power dynamics inherent in identity formation, postmodernist IR scholarship encourages a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of international relations, one that acknowledges the diverse and contested nature of identities within the global arena.

Especially, postmodernism in IR spawned a the so-called “linguistic turn” in the discipline,²² motivating a shift towards emphasizing the centrality of language, discourse, and representation in shaping existing understandings of international politics, driving the momentum of a textual approach to international politics and the more-than-linguistic responses to it.²³

IV. THE SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVIST MOMENT

From the vantage point of IR, we are familiar with the term “postmodernism” as it comes to such non-mainstream, post-positivist strands of IR theory. These include postcolonialism, feminism, and critical theory. What these have in common is the understanding of the reality of international political hierarchies as socially constructed through language (discourse) and social practice and were all sparked by the postmodernist philosophical intuition and insistence on the socially constructed nature of reality and the emancipatory ethos of deconstructing existing hegemonic discourses of identity and power structures.²⁴ While the above-mentioned post-positivist strands can still be said to be – and they themselves revindicate their place – on the margins of IR scholarship to openly and declaredly challenging mainstream IR theories (mostly, neorealism and neoliberalism) and their underlying hegemonic discourses of anarchy, sovereignty, and security,²⁵ we have a well-known post-positivist approach that, for some reason, is now occupying a prominent place in the mainstream of IR scholarship: social constructivism.

Constructivism cannot be defined as a single, universal theory, but rather as an approach, an ontology. As a post-positivist approach, constructivism is not the opposite of (neo)realism or (neo)liberalism, but of rationalism in general. “Constructivism” as a term was first used by Nicholas Greenwood Onuf in the 1989,²⁶ and the approach that takes its name has soon become the most influential post-positivist approach to IR. As is well known in IR, constructivism holds that reality is not entirely material and objective but is also a social construction determined by intersubjective meaning and ideas. The social constructivist premise is that something exists only when common (inter-subjective) meaning is attached to it: “to construct something is an act which brings into being a subject or object that otherwise would not exist.”²⁷ These are independent from power and define roles and meanings and preferences are endogenous, not

¹⁸ L. Hansen, “Poststructuralism,” in J. Baylis, S. Smith, and P. Owens, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 172.

¹⁹ P. Lawler, “The Ethics of Postmodernism,” in C. Reus-Smith and D. Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 378–90.

²⁰ Campbell, “Poststructuralism,” 225.

²¹ Y. Lapid, “The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era,” *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1989): 23–54.

²² M. J. Shapiro, *Language and Political Understanding: The Politics of Discursive Practices* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

²³ See, for example, the “visual turn” or “aesthetic turn”: R. Bleiker, “Visual Autoethnography and International Security: Insights from the Korean DMZ,” *European Journal of*

International Security 4 (2019): 274–299; L. Hagström, “Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 65 (2021): 331–342.

²⁴ R.W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” in R. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 204–254.

²⁵ P.R. Conway, “The Citadel of Scholarship’: Rediscovering Critical IR,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 51, no. 1 (2022): 305–329.

²⁶ N.G. Onuf, *World of Our Own Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

²⁷ K. Fierke, *Critical Approaches to International Security* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2015), 56.

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exogenous, to social actors. The perception of war and peace, or of friends and foes, does not prioritize material power (as the realist paradigm does) but rather ideational power.²⁸ Reality is a social construct, and it is influenced by ideas, thus it has no independent objective value. Since reality is a social construction made up of inter-subjective meanings (that is the meanings attached to it by subjects and their interactions), constructivists study reality as a set of ideas or a body of thought which interprets reality and thereby influence the behaviors of social actors by defining roles, meanings, and, by that, identities.

Alexander Wendt is nowadays well regarded as the most prominent theoretician and exponent of constructivism in IR. In this well-known 1992 article,²⁹ further expanded in his *Social Theory of International Politics* in 1999, popularized constructivism in IR and made it compatible with and acceptable to the disciplinary mainstream. Arguably, how he managed to do so, unlike such post-positivist approaches as feminism and the critical tradition, owes to his acceptance of a statist ontology within the theoretical framework of his brand of social constructivism. Although Wendt, as a constructivist, emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behavior and international politics, central to his contributions is a state ontology which maintains that sovereign states are still the primary unit of the international system. As he admits: “My premise is that since states are the dominant form of subjectivity in contemporary world politics this means that they should be the primary unit of analysis for thinking about the global regulation of violence.”³⁰ What Wendt tried and managed to do in his *Social Theory* is to formalize constructivism within the IR discipline and popularize the idea that the actions of international political actors are shaped by the intersubjective meanings they attribute to the international system (the famous saying “anarchy is what states make of it”) and that perceptions and beliefs about the world shape political outcomes. How it was possible for him to manage to do so is by accommodating state-centered ontology that forms the linchpin of the entire mainstream IR tradition. Only by doing so could he integrate the social constructivist idea that reality, meanings, identities, and preferences are socially constructed and apply it to the nation-state as the most fundamental unit of analysis of mainstream IR theory.

Unlike the more radically critical post-positivist approaches to IR which challenge the dominant discourses of state

authority and sovereignty and international anarchy on the analytical and ethical levels, Wendt’s constructivism does not contest the legitimate authority of the unitary nation-state as the constitutive building block of the international system and does not discuss the assumption of international anarchy as the essential condition. On the contrary, international anarchy is itself the starting point of his constructivist theorizing, so that what matters to him is not whether anarchy is an objective fact of reality but rather how the international social system of sovereign states interprets, gives it meaning, and behaves accordingly by virtue of different “cultures of anarchy.”³¹ Just like with the realist and liberal paradigms, the ultimate issue of concern is not about the existence of anarchy but how international political actors manage and navigate it. The preservation of the constitutive IR tenets of state sovereignty (condensed in the formula “no superior outside,” or *de jure* or external sovereignty, and “no equal inside,” or *de facto* or internal sovereignty) and international anarchy allowed Wendt’s “statist” constructivism to maintain and develop academic engagement and dialogue with the dominant theories and paradigms in the discipline.

As it happened, ever since the Cold War was drawing to a close, constructivism has been used to explain and give account of what the theories pertaining to the realist and liberal paradigms could not, especially as concerns global change;³² on the other way around, neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism are invoked whenever constructivism falls short of explaining certain international political outcomes. It is beyond doubt that constructivism is nowadays the most advanced and sophisticated approach to IR, and Alexander Wendt’s theoretical writing on constructivism is solidly maintaining its standing in IR syllabi as a seminal work in the discipline. The groundbreaking contribution of constructivism to the IR discipline was to articulate the substantive, in a systematic way, the idea that “identity and norms shape state interests and must be incorporated to generate superior explanations.”³³ As is recognized among the constructivists themselves, however, the unmistakable success of social constructivism fundamentally obscures the internal, and often irreconcilable, diversity within the constructivist tradition.³⁴ Wendt’s articulation of constructivism is but only one of the several possible applications of the idea that “reality is socially constructed” to the analysis of international politics and global change. The minimum common denominator which endows constructivism with consistency and specificity is the

²⁸ See T. Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998): 171–200.

²⁹ A. Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 391–425.

³⁰ Wendt, *Social Theory*, 9.

³¹ Wendt, *Social Theory*, 246–312.

³² M. Barnett, “Social Constructivism,” in J. Baylis, S. Smith, and P. Owens, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 163–66.

³³ Barnett, “Social Constructivism,” 157.

³⁴ E. Adler, “Constructivism and International Relations,” in W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, and B. A. Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations*, (London: Sage, 2002). 95–118.

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viewpoint that international politics is a process, or set of social relations, wherein ideational factors (norms, ideas, and culture) have at least the same relevance as the material ones, which compels the sympathetic scholars to place attention to the social construction of meanings (including knowledge) and social reality.³⁵ The merit and achievement of Wendt's constructivism, at the time of its formulation, was to make this post-positivist intuition acceptable and accessible to a discipline so constitutively grounded on the assumptions of state sovereignty and international anarchy.

The dialogue that constructivism, especially owing to Wendt's systematic theorization, was able or willing to establish with the positivist (and rationalist) IR tradition resulted in the marginalization of other post-positivist approaches being the poststructuralist/postmodernist, critical, and feminist theories. According to prominent constructivist theoretician Emanuel Adler, constructivism managed to strike a "middle ground" between the radical relativism (or interpretivism) undergirding the most extreme strands of post-positivism and the positivist assumption of material reality as objectively given: "Constructivism is the view that *the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on the dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world.*"³⁶ What matters to constructivism, therefore, is not the mastery, propounded by the poststructuralist revolution, of human agency over the material world but rather the interplay of mutual constitution between the structural constraints set by the material reality and the human interpretation of it.

Wendt himself, in his *Social Theory*, engages with postmodernism and complains of it the "epistemological anxiety" and skepticism "all the way down" as concerns the objectivity of the material world and its facts, that is the "postmodernist view that we cannot even know if seemingly observable entities, like cats and dogs, exist out there in the world."³⁷ Wendt and constructivism concede that material reality exists and still plays a role in posing structural constraints to the behaviors of social actors. In international politics, the constraints are set by the anarchical structure of the international system. The constructivist breakthrough is the postulation that reality is interpreted through social construction, shared ideas, and meanings, that is to say, reality does exist but constitutively depends on the social interpretation of it. Interpretation and social construction, however, do not occur arbitrarily and in a manner disjointed from material reality. Thus, the power of social construction in shaping the world is not infinite and almighty, but a check

and limitation to it is posed by the unsurmountable material facts of reality. What Wendtian constructivism maintains as given, objective, and undeniable is the material pre-eminence of the authority of the sovereign state as a political actor, which lays the ground on which to establish the constructivist state-centered ontology.

To summarize the discussion on constructivism elaborated so far, we can say that constructivism has advanced the field by introducing, at the level of systemic theorizing, the constitutive role of ideational factors, alongside material constraints, in producing outcomes in international politics. In epistemological terms, constructivism is undoubtedly a post-positivist approach, yet it stops short of postmodernism's unfettered skepticism toward the objectivity of the material world, thereby avoiding the indulgence on linguistic and textual analytical matters typical of the latter. Rather than launching, like postmodernism does, a radical challenge to state-centered foundations of the IR discipline, constructivism integrates itself within the statist ontological framework and manages to maintain a common ground for engagement and dialogue. "Constructivism challenged the discipline's mainstream on its own terms and on issues that were at the heart of its research agenda, [...] offer[ing] alternative ways of thinking about a range of concepts and issues, including power, alliance formation, war termination, military intervention, the liberal peace, and international organizations."³⁸ It would not have been possible to talk about these issues, arguably, if not by keeping intact the statist foundational premise of the whole IR research agenda.

Yet, the indispensable innovation brought by constructivism is the key poststructuralist/postmodernist intuition that reality is socially constructed and the logically consequent assertion of the explanatory status of ideational factors such as intersubjective meanings and ideas. The constructivist breakthrough into the IR mainstream effectively compelled the latter to never ignore the ideational factors that make the fabric of international relations. From this perspective, we can talk of constructivism as "statist postmodernism" or, more creatively and cogently, "postmodernism with mainstream characteristics" in IR. At the end of the day, Wendt himself pays homage to postmodernism in the following terms: "Whatever else one might think about postmodernism, it is its nature to interrogate all aspects of social life as well as the status of those who claim to know them. Asking embarrassing questions embodies the reflexive, self-critical mindset of the Enlightenment at its best."³⁹

³⁵ S. Guzzini, "A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations." *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 2 (2000): 149.

³⁶ E. Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics." *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 322. Italics in original.

³⁷ Wendt, *Social Theory*, 49.

³⁸ Barnett, "Social constructivism," 167

³⁹ Wendt, *Social Theory* 89.

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V. POSTMODERNISM AS HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

So far in this chapter, we have defined the meanings of postmodernity and postmodernism from the perspective of IR. The former is a statement of a (presumed) fact – the fact of a deeply integrated global environment emerged after the Cold War where nation-states can longer act independently and in disregard of an entire host of non-state actors in dealing with common challenges. The latter is an intellectual development which brings to the fore the systematic postulation of the idea that reality is socially constructed by human agency. In IR, the postmodernist theoretical input takes the name of social constructivism. As elaborated above, constructivism differs from IR postmodernism proper in the fact that it maintains the state-centered ontology of the IR tradition and is devoid of the critical-emancipatory impulse denounce ubiquitous and oppressive power relations through discourse deconstruction that characterize the latter. From this perspective, social constructivism is but the acceptable form of postmodernism in IR. It may appear from this articulation that postmodernity is an empirical statement of a historically contingent fact (the post-Cold War world) while postmodernism is a philosophical or theoretical position that elaborates on a universally and eternally valid perspective on the socially constructed dimension of reality. However, while it is true that postmodernism/constructivism brings a timeless contribution to the IR debate, possibly providing for “superior explanations,” it is also a fact that the emergence and popularization of theoretical innovations does not occur in vacuum.

Key constructivist scholar Stefano Guzzini points out, to understand the roots of constructivism we must refer to the historical context in which it has emerged.⁴⁰ The presence of ideas, identities, and culture in international political frameworks was certainly not new, and even Hans Morgenthau in his *Politics Among Nations* mentioned that a shared culture, especially diplomatic culture, is essential because it is the source of a common language. The significance and specificity of shifting the focus on ideational factors and the formation of identities formulated by constructivism cannot therefore be fully grasped if not by locating it within its concrete historical context of origin. The decolonization processes of the 1960s and 1970s that made the European rules of international society obsolete were an early case of identity making and re-making. But most decisively, an additional moment providing the context for the rise to prominence of constructivism is the end of the Cold War, which the then-dominant IR theories failed to account for. As is held by the IR canon, Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestrojka* spurred the reflection on the importance of ideas and their impact on political organizations and identities, thereby providing historically qualified ground for the rise of

constructivism in the IR canon. This context, together with the seeming disappearance of the bipolar confrontation and of the questions of power balances typical of IR realism, made the questions of identity prominent in IR research, which resulted in the constructivist incorporation of the causal role of ideational factors in the definition of state interests and in the process of their redefinition. “Constructivism was tailor-made for understanding what had been unthinkable to most scholars,”⁴¹ that is the idea that state identities and therefore preferences and interests could be made and re-made with some degree of agency vis-à-vis material constraints thanks to the independent role of intersubjective or shared ideas.

It appears as ironical the fact that the relevance attributed to the constructivist insight on the causal power of ideational, non-material factors was admittedly occasioned by a very material historical contingency. Namely, the ending of the Cold War, which the rationalist IR theories failed to explain based on purely materialist explanations, provided ideational explanations with a remarkable window of opportunity for ideational explanations to assert their relevance in the discipline. Arguably, without such historical development in the material world during the late- and post-Cold War era, there would have been little need and space for constructivism to emerge and develop within the dominant IR research and debates. From this sociological perspective on knowledge, constructivism, which we may also call postmodernism with acceptable characteristics in IR, as an ontology and approach stressing non-material factors, is essentially tied to its material conditions of origin, without the consideration of which we cannot understand its specificity and the justification of its very existence.

It is based on this consideration that we fully understand the nature and significance of the postmodernist/constructivist integration of non-material factors at the level of major IR theorizing. At this level, intellectual advancements in the realm of ideas and abstractions are spurred and supported by the compelling force of material reality and historical development. It may be correct therefore to state that, from this perspective, postmodernism, bringing with it its variant rendered acceptable to mainstream IR theory named constructivism, is but a part of the broader intellectual and transdisciplinary reflection on the contemporary phase of historical development. In other words, postmodernism is but the intellectual tendency that reflects responds material fact of postmodernity. To simplify further, we can say that postmodernism is the self-reflexive historical consciousness of postmodernity. That being the case, postmodernism is the synthetic formula which allows us to capture, at once, both the intellectual tendency that stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, which is a timeless theoretical finding independent of historical contingency, together with its

⁴⁰ Guzzini, “Reconstruction,” 153.

⁴¹ Barnett, “Social constructivism,” 157.

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history-specific constitution as a reflection on and reaction to the contingent material fact of historical development.

The postmodern consciousness of the contemporary globalized era of expanded and deepened complex interdependence comes with an inherent prescriptive clause attached to it. Robert Cooper, for instance, argues in his essay on the conditions for peace in the post-Cold War era that nations must embrace a post-modern identity rejecting power politics and the use of force while practicing openness and transparency. Only this way, he maintains, would it be possible to avoid the risks of diplomatic misunderstandings between different cultures and civilizations in the globalized world.⁴² As we can see from this kind of argumentation, the global transformation which corresponds to the emergence of the post-bipolar world order implicitly incorporates the (postmodern) notion that state identity and preferences (in this specific case, regarding the use of force and the means of diplomacy) are fluid and malleable and should be purposefully adapted by the relevant actors in world politics in order to ensure peace and stability in the contemporary (postmodern) world.

In essence, in IR and beyond, we are postmodern whenever we position ourselves in the framework of a postmodern world of complex interdependence and concurrently, somewhat axiomatically, endorse the necessity of cooperation among state- and non-state actors in the face of common transnational challenges. At the same time, we call ourselves postmodern whenever, within the framework of this historical context, we contemplate the possibility that reality may be socially constructed by purposeful human agency in view of desirable tangible outcomes. Inasmuch as IR postmodernism has brought this fundamental idea into the IR discipline and, in its constructivist adaptation, has persuaded the discipline's mainstream to come to terms with it, we can say that the postmodernist insight was introduced in the IR discipline no more than the IR discipline was brought by postmodernism into an era which self-consciously calls itself "postmodernity."

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the multifaceted concept of postmodernism in International Relations, tracing its evolution from a radical critique of mainstream IR theories to its more palatable incorporation into the discipline through social constructivism. We have examined how postmodernism emerged as both a description of empirical changes in the post-Cold War global order and as a theoretical approach challenging positivist epistemologies.

The key innovation of this analysis has been to position constructivism as "postmodernism with mainstream

characteristics" - an approach that preserved core postmodern insights about the social construction of reality while maintaining enough common ground with traditional IR to gain widespread acceptance. This framing helps explain constructivism's success in advancing ideational and identity-based explanations within IR's state-centric ontology.

Furthermore, we have argued that postmodernism in IR can be understood as the self-reflexive historical consciousness of postmodernity itself. Rather than seeing postmodern theory as purely abstract, we have emphasized its roots in concrete historical developments, particularly the end of the Cold War and the perceived onset of a more globalized, interdependent world order.

This perspective opens up several avenues for future research. The following, among others, can be suggested in a tentative fashion: 1. Further historical analysis of how material changes shape theoretical innovations in IR and other disciplines; 2. Exploration of whether and how postmodern/constructivist insights can be applied to emerging challenges in global politics, such as climate change, artificial intelligence, or shifting power dynamics; 3. Critical examination of whether constructivism's "middle ground" position has come at the cost of diluting more radical postmodern critiques of power structures in international relations. 4. Investigation into how postmodern consciousness shapes policymaking and diplomatic practice in different cultural contexts.

In conclusion, by situating postmodernism and constructivism within their historical context, this analysis has sought to deepen our understanding of how IR theory evolves in response to global changes. As the international system continues to transform, the interplay between material realities and ideational factors will undoubtedly remain a crucial area of study for scholars seeking to explain and navigate the complexities of world politics.

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VIII. DISCLOSURE

The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work.

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