



# **Constituting International Political Economy**

**Kurt Burch and  
Robert A. Denemark,  
editors**

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Political  
Economy  
Yearbook**

**VOLUME 10**

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# Constituting International Political Economy

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edited by  
Kurt Burch  
Robert A. Denemark



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# Preface

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Volume 10 of the *IPE Yearbook* marks the arrival of a new editorial team. As our first act—and on behalf of the entire IPE Section of ISA—we admiringly thank William Avery and David Rapkin for their diligent work and valuable efforts. They crafted the *Yearbook* into a prestigious outlet for contemporary IPE research, and they leave a remarkable legacy that we will strive to maintain. We are especially grateful for their counsel and assistance in the transition.

The *IPE Yearbook* has four new coeditors: Kurt Burch, Robert Denmark, Mary Ann Tetreault, and Ken Thomas. We vary in rank, experience, methodological predispositions, and primary interests. Our hope is to bring diverse perspectives to the series and the profession while continuing the *Yearbook*'s tradition of important analyses of substantive issues. Each volume will feature at least two members of the editorial team, one of whom will always have a primary interest in the topic under consideration.

The first named coeditor for each volume charts the project's course and character by contacting representative scholars, wrestles with defining questions, and organizes the thematic coherence of the volume. This coeditor shapes the contributions and the volume with two goals in mind: to deepen the understanding of those readers with specific interest in the topic and to broaden the understanding of those who expect the volume to convey state-of-the-art work. We make these goals our editorial challenge.

To this end, the second coeditor is a full partner acting as ombudsman to the profession, primarily by ensuring that the volume informs not only those keenly interested in the specific topic but also those interested but unfamiliar with its vocabulary and nuances. This editor aids the primary coeditor, but also serves as an advocate for the profession in general. The remaining coeditors help the active pair as necessary, but they focus primarily on planning and coordinating subsequent volumes. As one volume nears completion and another begins, we will change roles. Such rotating will keep the perspectives diverse and the editors fresh.

We thank the IPE Section of the ISA, under the able leadership of Lorraine Eden and Simon Reich, for its continuing support. We hope forthcoming volumes confirm their confidence in us. The Departments of

Political Science at the University of Delaware, Iowa State University, and the University of Missouri at St. Louis help support this endeavor in various ways. Lynne Rienner and her staff are our enthusiastic partners, providing us able assistance and boundless support. We especially appreciate the unwavering support and affection of many friends, teachers, colleagues, and family members.

*K. B.  
R. A. D.*

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*Kurt Burch*

## Introduction

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The chapters in this volume respond in diverse ways to changes affecting both the global conditions and practices of international political economy (ipe) and the discipline of IPE. The myriad changes reshaping the character of ipe include the formation of trading blocs; the creation of the World Trade Organization; the introduction of free market principles in Eastern Europe and southern China; the heightened perception of the volume and speed of global financial matters; the efforts to introduce democracy and promote liberal social relations; the prospects for restructuring political relations following the Cold War and at the dawn of a new millennium; and, of course, the conditions wrought by corporate and industrial layoffs, dispersed chains of production, slow economic growth in industrial economies, and chronic global poverty.

Simultaneously, the discipline of IPE and its mainstream theories are subject to changes and challenges. Observers and critics challenge conventional IPE theorists to better account for social change. The debates between neorealists and neoliberals affect the nature of theory and apt policy implications. Postpositivist critiques from critical theorists, historical sociologists, feminists, and those employing interpretive frameworks challenge the philosophical, scientific, ideological, and theoretical premises of positivism and realism. Postmodern theory challenges the claims to truth, reality, and knowledge that ground social science generally. Consequently, postmodern theories raise larger questions: Is theory constitutive or explanatory? If theory is constitutive, can it be grounded in foundations, or should (must) it invoke incomparably interpretive claims? Steve Smith (1995:26–27) boldly emphasizes these significant issues:

In my view [constitutive versus explanatory theory] is the main meta-theoretical issue facing international theory today. The emerging fundamental division in the discipline is between those theories that seek to offer explanatory accounts of international relations, and those that see theory as constitutive of that reality. At base this boils down to a difference over what the social world is like; is it to be seen as scientists think of the “natural” world, that is to say as something outside of our theories,



or is the social world what we make of it? . . . Opposed to [constitutive theory] stands virtually all the work contained in the three dominant paradigms of [IR and IPE:] realism, pluralism, and neo-Marxism.

The contributors to this volume advance *constitutive* theory, or *constructivist* accounts (these terms are synonymous), of issues relevant to the discipline of IPE and the social conditions and practices of ipe, although they differ on the philosophical question of foundations. Indeed, as constructivist theorists, the contributors see the relationship between the discipline and the social practices in constitutive terms; that is, the discipline helps structure rules and roles in the ipe, as well as its character and conditions. Inextricably, however, political economy actors reshape the structured, disciplined character of ipe and IPE. The contributors evince unease and anxiety about these relationships, changes, and challenges. They protest, among other ills, chronic and worsening domination, persistent poverty, gender discrimination, and other forms of exploitation, as well as “the myopic and ethnocentric” character and “effective silences” (Smith, 1995:23, 24) of prevailing policy approaches and academic treatments of such subjects. At the same time, the contributors worry that for many people social construction and postpositivism conjure images of relativism and nihilism. Thus, most of the contributors share the hope to remake IPE and ipe to advance different or better social practices and relations.

Three goals motivate this volume:

- To illustrate constructivism or social constitution as a valuable (meta)theoretical approach relevant to IPE and ipe as constituted and constituting constructions
- To illustrate IPE as a worldview, a discipline, and a set of global practices and conditions, and
- To participate in and extend scholarly conversations

Although the editors and the contributors hope the entire volume illustrates the foci, dynamics, and virtues of constructivist analyses, its substantive focus is the reciprocal co-constitution of practices and discipline. However, most contributors address the construction of IPE and the implications that follow. Several chapters consider how social dynamics, policy concerns, and/or philosophical judgments help constitute the discipline of IPE, its premises, foci, and analytic frameworks. Other chapters similarly consider the social construction of patterns and practices in the global political economy. Indeed, several chapters illustrate the incongruence between the nature of the social world as alleged in conventional IPE’s premises and the alternative characterizations available from the vantage of other social groups, social behaviors, and approaches.

In raising such issues, the volume poses questions about conventional versus alternative framings of IPE and the need for scholarly conversations about such matters. What insights and consequences might follow from alternative approaches to IPE? What social practices, rules, and roles does conventional IPE constitute? What alternatives (theories, frameworks) arise if diverse outlooks, choices, and social behaviors become either professionally acceptable subjects of inquiry or analytic premises? Beyond the vision or concern of conventional IPE theorists, what alternatives are arising in the changing outlooks, choices, and practices of social actors responding to the burdens and boons of globalization, the challenges of industrial decay and informational abundance, or the social consequences of dispersed production and disposable labor?

This volume offers no uniform set of answers. Rather, it seeks to illustrate and construct alternatives and to spark scholarly and public discussion of such alternatives. Constructivism offers one potentially attractive means of exploring the interplay of discipline and social practices. In turning to constructivism, theorists also turn to the significant debates that animate the social sciences generally. Indeed, by (re)turning IPE scholars to the contextual details of specific situations, constructivism (re)turns those scholars to the tangible concerns confronting people. At the same time, constructivism (re)turns IPE theorists to humanity and the humanities by circling into the wider concerns of social science and social inquiry.

Prominent scholarly themes arising in this book include the nature of theory, the character of constructivism and social constitution, the roles of rationality and rules in accounts of social life, the implications for exploitation and domination of the theoretical premises we entertain, and the construction of conventional IPE and possible alternatives. Other substantive themes include the character of political life and commercial society; the nature of cultural and political-economic hegemony; the treatment of women, children, minorities, and the marginalized in the global political economy; and the character of globalization. Again, we make no effort to draw definitive conclusions. Rather, the individual contributors form conclusions (drawn from other scholarly conversations) for the reader to consider. As a matter of editorial policy, we decided not to try to impose any uniformity or orthodoxy. In keeping with constructivist and interpretive premises, we instead encourage readers to form their own impressions. Yet, we also encourage readers to construct meanings and understandings with an eye to participating thoughtfully in active conversations. Such an approach promotes social construction through shared understanding, not through wholly idiosyncratic methods.

Such conversations advance when one scholar asks of another, "What do you think?" To advance our own discussion, we invited several notable scholars to offer commentaries on the volume as a whole. We restricted the

commentators only by imposing a page limit. We did not edit or censor their material, except at their request to check spelling and other such matters. Like all provocative and entertaining conversations, their comments respond to diverse points, themes, and concerns. We hope their comments illuminate readers, enliven conversations, build bridges between subfields, and send the debate spiraling into unanticipated directions.

Although the chapters of this book cover diverse themes that defy simple or rigid classifications, they do fall into several distinct groups. In Part 1, speaking to our first goal, Nicholas Onuf presents his most concise and eloquent statement of constructivism. His “Manifesto” introduces novice readers to the frameworks, motivating concerns, and insights of constructivism, yet familiar readers will encounter fresh ideas and a sharp argument.

Parts 2, 3, and 4 address our second goal. They illustrate the social construction of IPE as a worldview, as a discipline, and as a set of global practices. The chapters by Kurt Burch and Stephen J. Rosow in Part 2 demonstrate the construction of IPE upon often incongruent principles of modernity and liberalism(s). The chapters by Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, Anne Sisson Runyan, and Nicholas Onuf in Part 3 demonstrate both IPE as a constructed disciplinary discourse and the analytical and political limits that those constructions impose. The chapters in Part 4 turn to the construction of social practices in ipe. Mark Rupert investigates the constitution of “far-right” responses to the consequences of globalization. Wayne S. Cox and Claire Turenne Sjolander consider the constructions of “us” and “other” that arise from the universalizing and fragmenting dynamics accompanying globalization.

The chapters in Part 5 critique constructivism and seek to spark discussion of key issues, thus addressing each of our goals. James C. Roberts and Ralph Pettman contest, respectively, alternative approaches to behaving in the global political economy and studying IPE. Roberts suggests modifying constructivism with rational choice elements, whereas Pettman examines the dramatic limits to rationalist discourse in any vein. Part 6 represents our explicit effort, mentioned above, to maintain scholarly exchange and to make (self-) critique an essential element of scholarly and social life. The section contains the alphabetically ordered commentaries on this volume by Joshua S. Goldstein, James K. Oliver, V. Spike Peterson, and Roger Tooze.

I thank the contributors for their thoughtful work and collective insights. I’m especially delighted by our burgeoning friendships. I thank the commentators for agreeing to participate generously in our social and scholarly enterprise. I thank Bob Denemark for his able partnership, keen eye, and diplomacy. I appreciate Emily Smith’s help with office chores and administrative matters and Joann Kingsley’s assistance with computer and library matters. Each of these “contributors” substantially shaped the volume you hold.

# *Part* 1

## Constructivism



# Nicholas Onuf 1

## A Constructivist Manifesto

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*To explain is never anything more than describing a way of making: it is merely to remake in thought.*

—Paul Valéry, “Man and Sea Shell”  
(quoted in Karatani, 1995:24)

*Constructivism* is a theoretical stance whose name points up its central and distinctive claim. Social relations make people social beings; people as social beings make a whole world, and not just a world of meaning, out of their social relations. Because international relations are always, necessarily, social, this claim has many and diverse implications for International Political Economy (IPE) and International Relations (IR) as fields of scholarship. The most obvious implication is that scholars (people, relations) always begin in the middle. Context is unavoidable. So are beginnings. I begin with the process whereby we (as people, scholars) make the world and the world makes us.

The co-constitution of people and society is a continuous process. General, prescriptive statements, hereafter called *rules*, are always implicated in this process. Rules make people active participants, or *agents*, in society, and they form agents' relations into the stable arrangements, or *institutions*, that give society a recognizable pattern, or *structure*. Any change in a society's rules redefines agents, institutions, and their relation to each other; any such change also changes the rules, including those rules agents use to effectuate or inhibit changes in society.

Recent discussions of “the agent-structure problem” (e.g., Wendt, 1987) have acquainted scholars with the claim that, at any given moment, agents and (what we see as) structure are the products of continuous co-constitution. The practical problem for scholars is deciding where to cut into the process. Beginning with agents tends to preclude adequate consideration of structure, and vice versa. Even scholars who are sensitive to this problem fall prey to it (e.g., Wendt, 1994:385, in calling constructivism “a structural theory of the international system”). The solution to the problem

is to emphasize rules, but never rules considered in a vacuum. To begin with rules leads simultaneously in two directions—toward agents and their choices, and toward social arrangements that eventuate from agents' choices.

Giving due regard to all three elements in the equation—agents, rules, and social arrangements, each continuously changing in relation to the other—replaces one practical problem with another. Now the practical problem is the sheer complexity of the social reality that any scholar may wish to investigate. It is no great discovery to say that everything is related to everything else, and no great comfort to know that everyone's starting place is arbitrary. This problem of complexity has two plausible solutions.

One solution is a postpositivist move to interpretation as the only suitable method for investigating the workings of society. Constructivism arose in the context of postpositivist criticism of conventional positivism's assumptions and limitations (Onuf, 1989:36–52). Yet constructivists need not repudiate positivism just because it is liable to criticism. A second solution is a systematic account of both the ways in which rules make agents and institutions what they are in relation to each other and the corresponding ways in which these relations constitute the conditions of *rule* to be found in all societies. Only then is it possible to see in context the many, often incompatible explanations that positivists have advanced for what agents do and how social arrangements work.

If such an account is metatheory (as Wendt, 1991, described my earlier work, 1989), then the measure of its worth is what it does to and for the diverse array of theoretical materials already available to us. I believe that constructivism allows us to form these materials—or at least a significant proportion of them—into a novel and compelling structure, all the while granting them a continuing, even enhanced utility on their own terms. At the same time constructivism exposes positivist assumptions and limitations built into these materials, and it can do so critically and constructively. This at least is my hope for International Relations as a relatively new field whose agents, rules, and institutions are not yet as settled as they will surely become.

Rules make agents of individual human beings by enabling them to act upon the world in which they find themselves. These acts have material and social effects; they make the world what it is materially *and* socially. Agents are never lacking in purpose, motives, or intentions, even if they find it difficult to articulate the reasons for their actions (Giddens, 1979:53–59; 1993:78–84). They use resources, made such through rules, to achieve their intentions. Whether agents articulate their reasons for acting by reference to the opportunities that available resources afford or observers do so for them, we recognize agents' interests in the results.

Although agency does not require the degree of self-consciousness that identity implies, agents are normally sufficiently aware of their identities, singular and collective, that considerations of identity motivate some of their actions. As agents, individual human beings can confer agency on others by enabling the latter to act on their behalf for specified purposes. Individual human beings may also join with others for collective action and enable specified individuals to act on behalf of the collectivity. Such collectivities exhibit material properties in their own right and, as I already suggested, become objects of identification.

Agency is always limited; agents are never free to act upon the world in every conceivable way they might wish to. Some limits are substantially material, and any rule on the subject is beside the point. Rules enabling any agent to act entail limits for other agents. Rules in general limit the range of actions available to agents. If no individual agent has full autonomy, then no collectivity is fully independent, either from the agents enabling it to act as it does or from other collectivities acting as agents. When collectivities operate as agents and through agents within very wide limits, we call them independent states and attribute sovereignty to them. Sovereignty is nevertheless a relative condition—a matter of degree (also see Onuf, 1995:47–48).

To repeat: Agents are free within limits. Their freedom depends on the ability to recognize material and social limits and to evaluate the consequences of ignoring or defying those limits. Agency requires a degree of cognitive competence normally available to individual human beings by virtue of their social existences. Agents exercise their freedom by making choices suiting their preferences. They do so in consideration of their (socially mediated) skills and resources.

Rules offer agents choices of the simplest sort. An agent may follow a given rule, or not. Either choice involves consequences that are more or less easy to calculate. Obviously, rules foster rational choice. As an empirical matter, they present agents with opportunities for clear, calculable choice far more often than interaction with other agents does.

Rules enable agents to make rational choices by prescribing a relation between agents and any given rule's content: Those agents covered by the rule should follow it. A rule necessarily indicates which agents it refers to and what they should do. These agents may act on this information without recognizing that it forms a rule, but any such agent (or well-informed observer) can, in principle, state the rule fully. The form in which a rule must be stated is exactly the same form that a speaker uses to get one or more hearers to respond to whatever that speaker says, thereby achieving some social end (though not, perhaps, the particular end that speaker intended).

When the speaker, hearer, and intention are all particular to the occa-



sion inducing the utterance, we call the speaker's statement a speech act, which takes the following form: Speaker asserts to, demands of, or promises to hearer the existence or achievement of some state of affairs. Speech acts fall into the three categories suggested by the verbs *to assert*, *to demand*, and *to promise*. They are, respectively, assertive, directive, and commissive speech acts (Searle, 1979:12–20). Whatever the category, particular speech acts are not prescriptive—they have no particular relevance to the next occasion inducing a speech act. A speaker may assert some state of affairs and secure the hearer's assent, or demand something from the hearer and have that demand met, or make the hearer a promise and have the promise accepted, without implications for the extended future.

If, however, some speaker frequently repeats a particular speech act because it succeeds in getting what the speaker wants from hearers, everyone involved begins to think generally about the implications of this repetitive sequence. Convention results, and with it some sense that the speech act itself, and not the speaker, accounts for the way hearers are inclined to respond. If conventions are rules, they are weak rules whose prescriptive effect, or normativity, goes no further than the evidence of regularity in conduct. As agents come to recognize the normativity of their regular conduct for what it is and act accordingly, the convention, or weak rule, is strengthened. Rules retain the form of a speech act while generalizing the relation between speaker and hearer. By combining these properties, rules acquire prescriptive force for themselves. All rules are normative, and all norms (as the term is commonly used) can be stated only in the form of rules.

Any rule in the form of an assertive speech act informs agents about some state of affairs and about likely consequences if they disregard this information. The content of such a rule may be highly general, in which instance we call it a principle (for example, the principle of sovereignty), or it may be very specific (for example, instructions for operating an appliance). However general, a rule in this form is an *instruction-rule*. Offering instruction, the rule is not typically couched in normative terms. Nevertheless, agents always know what they should do because the rule's content tells them something useful about their relation to the world.

Any rule in the form of a directive speech act, or imperative statement, is a *directive-rule*. Such a rule is emphatically normative. By telling agents what they must do, it leaves no doubt as to what they should do. A directive-rule typically specifies the consequences of disregarding the rule, thus aiding agents in choosing rationally whether to follow it.

A commissive speech act, in which the speaker makes a promise that some hearer accepts, gives form to a rule when other agents respond with promises of their own. Once generalized and endowed with normativity, this web of promises yields a *commitment-rule* that agents are likely to rec-