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# Social Constructivism and Discursive Approaches

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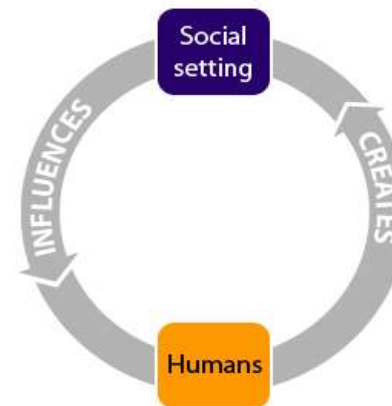
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# Introduction

– Social constructivism and discursive approaches: **what do they have in common**?

  – Share emphasis on the **role of norms, values, ideas, identities and discourse in the constitution of the social world.**

  – Point to the **constitutive dimension of language.**

– But there are also **many differences**. Which ones? (this is what our today's session will be about :-)

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# Social constructivism

– Human beings are **not separate from their environmental context** (structure) and ideas and beliefs that form the ideational environment that actors find themselves within **inform the actions of individuals.**

– Individuals (collectively) **reproduce or 'reconstruct' this environment** through their behaviour and actions. Risse (p. 160) argues that constructivism "is based on a social ontology which insists that human agents to not exist independently from their social environment and its collectively shared systems of meanings ('culture' in a broad sense)".

# Social constructivism

– Constructivism is **not ontologically rationalist** or materialist

– To study actors effectively one needs to understand how their **beliefs about themselves** and about **what the correct or 'right' thing to do** impact on what they do

– **Key thinkers**
  – Thomas Risse
  – Jeffrey Checkel
  – Thomas Christiansen

# Social constructivism

**Structure and agent**

— Distinction between **agents** (actors such as individuals or states) and the structural context that they find themselves in

— **Agents and structures are mutually constitutive** (structural factors both shape the way that actors behave and who they are + at the same time the regular actions of individuals -  collectively following these ideas - reconstruct these structures.

— **Real-life example:** a good citizen who does not steal

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# Social constructivism

– **Logic of appropriateness**: behaving in line with what is acceptable in a given society (including a society of states)

– **Logic of consequences**: operating according to what will happen to the actors (i.e. will they benefit or lose out from their actions).

– Different theories based on different logics.

# Social constructivism

**Social constructivism and study of the EU**

- Areas of study

  - Identity as a core part of states' decisions to integrate

  - Importance of states perceptions and their impact upon EU decision-making.

European Union

CREATES

INFLUENCES

European political actors

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# Social constructivism

– **Three variants of constructivism (accoding to Checkel)**
  – **conventional**
  – **interpretative**
  – **critical/radical variants**

**Conventional constructivism**
- school dominant in the US
- examines the role of norms and, in fewer cases, identity in shaping international political outcomes. scholars positivist in epistemological orientation
- strong advocates of bridge building among-diverse theoretical perspectives;
- their typical methodological starting point: the qualitative,´process-tracing case study
- Examples of EU studies research:
  - exploring functioning of EU institutions with the explicit goal of building bridges between rationalist and sociological work (Caporaso)
  - causal effect of norms by focusing on mechanisms of persuasion and role playing within COREPER (Lewis)

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# Social constructivism

**Interpretative constructivism**

– greater popularity in Europe

– explores the role of language in mediating and constructing social reality.

– commitment to various forms of post-positivist epistemologies → not explanatory in the sense that A causes B

– 'how possible' questions

– deeply inductive research strategy that targets the reconstruction of state/agent identity, with the methods encompassing a variety of linguistic techniques

– Example: Hopf (study of Soviet and Russian identity)

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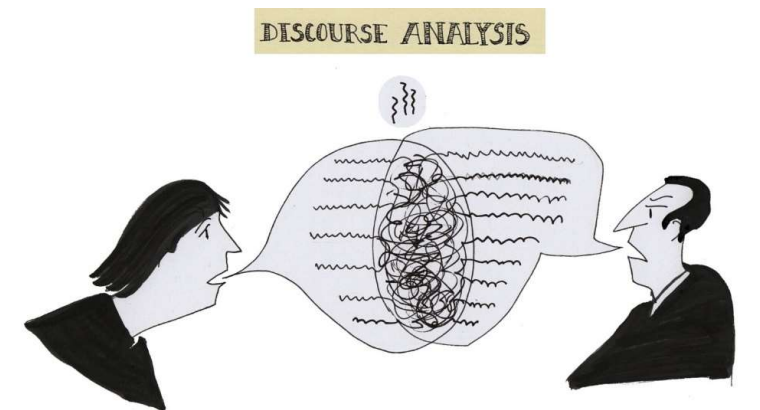# Social constructivism

**Critical/radical constructivism**

– maintains the linguistic focus, but adds an explicitly normative dimension

– discourse theoretical methods emphasized, but with a greater emphasis on the power and domination

   inherent in language.

– sources of theoretical inspiration: linguistic approaches (e.g. Wittgenstein) and continental social theory

   (e.g. Habermas, Bourdieu, Derrida)

– the scholarly enterprise is not neutral (our choices - analytic or methodological - are not innocent)

– politicized view of academy

# Discursive approaches

– Discourse analysis = one of the most **widespread research approaches** across the social sciences

– DA challenge **the idea of fixedness** that is presented by the main rationalist theories

– Supports the social-constructivist idea that Europe and European identity are constructed from the perspective of the individual.

– 'Things do not have meaning in and of themselves, they only become meaningful in discourse.' (Wæver).

– Europe as 'an essentially contested concept.' (**Thomas Diez**)

– 'All our accounts of the world… are embedded in certain discourses' (**Thomas Diez**)

# Discursive approaches

– **Large variety of research questions** and epistemological and ontological stances

– **Peculiarity of discourse analysis**, can be both used as
  – a mere analysis technique by the most rationalist and positivist scholars,
  – a general theory of politics in a constructivist and interpretive perspective.

– European discourse as a dependent or independent variable?

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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**Thank you very much for your attention**

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