'Something rotten' and the social construction of social constructivism: a comment on comments

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

The issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy* on 'The Social Construction of Europe' documents not only the arrival of social constructivism in European Union (EU) studies, but also the fact that this approach is already taken sufficiently seriously by an established journal. At the same time, even the term 'social constructivism' remains deeply contested and is subject to construction and deconstruction by established scholars in the field such as Andrew Moravcsik (Moravcsik 1999) and Steve Smith (Smith 1999). The former smells something rotten emanating from a 'Copenhagen School' which he (mis-)constructs as the 'force of continental constructivist theories' (Moravcsik 1999: 669). The latter is more sympathetic to the constructivist enterprise, but then (de-)constructs most of us as being 'far more "rationalist" in character than "reflectivist"' (Smith 1999: 683). At least, we do not smell (yet), but we are probably neither fish nor fowl. At this point, we would like to (re-)construct the pleasant aroma emanating from social constructivism against both rationalist and reflectivist critics.

We proceed in two steps. First, we argue with and against Steve Smith that social constructivism constitutes indeed the somewhat messy middle ground between the rationalist mainstream and more radical 'reflectivism' or 'postmodernism'. Second, we argue with and against Andrew Moravcsik that most theoretical claims derived from social constructivism in the Special Issue 'compete with and should be tested against other mid-range theories' (Moravcsik 1999: 670).

2. IN DEFENCE OF THE 'MIDDLE GROUND'[2]

Let us start with meta-theory. Steve Smith claims that there is a false unity in the Special Issue. All the articles share is 'an opposition to the meta-theoretical assumptions of the dominant theories of European governance' (Smith 1999: 683). He predicts that social constructivism is going to split into two main camps, one more rationalist, the other more reflectivist. This split is necessary, he argues, 'because the

approaches adopt fundamentally different epistemological assumptions' (Smith 1999: 690). The Special Issue does not, however, share the 'fault line politics' that would emerge as the logical consequence of Smith's binary approach to constructivism. Quite to the contrary, it aims to chart the characteristics of a terrain that is not limited by an exclusive pole mentality.

To that end, the Special Issue assembles quite a variety of different theoretical orientations – ranging from Jeffrey Checkel's (Checkel 1999) rather modest constructivism to Thomas Diez's more radical reflectivism (Diez 1999). Collecting diverse constructivist approaches and elaborating their potential for studying European integration entail the two major goals of the Special Issue. First, it demonstrates that European integration is a profoundly social process. Socialization matters for the way that political decisions are taken, policies are developed and concepts are understood. Second, the impact of the social can be assessed by way of resorting to a variety of constructivist positions.

While drawing on Adler's metaphor of the middle ground, the Special Issue thus takes great care to identify the differences between constructivists (Christiansen *et al*. 1999: 535–7). This perspective acknowledges the differences, yet stresses the ability of constructivists to talk beyond the middle ground with either the fish or the fowl on each pole of 'rationalism' or 'radical reflectivism'. The crucial point is stressed in the introductory article which emphasizes that there is indeed not one constructivist theory, but a range of constructivist positions. The issue contributes to an understanding of the different positions and of each specific contribution to understanding and explaining the 'social construction of Europe'.

In other words, while Steve Smith is right about quite serious epistemological disagreements between Checkel and Diez, he overlooks that even modest social constructivism does not share the individualist ontology of rational choice. The 'logic of consequentialism' of instrumental rationality is different from the 'logic of appropriateness' or a 'logic of argumentative rationality' (see March and Olsen 1989, 1998). The two latter modes of action are intrinsically social and focus on collective understandings and systems of meanings. The 'middle ground' which social constructivism occupies between rational choice and what Steve Smith calls reflectivism, thus, has two features: constructivism shares with rational choice an epistemological commitment to truth-seeking, and the belief that causal generalization in the form of middle range theories (cf. Moravcsik's claims) is possible. The difference concerns ontology. As to more radical reflectivism, let alone postmodernism, social constructivists share the ontological concerns about social understandings and systems of meanings. They might differ on epistemology, as Steve Smith rightly points out.

The good news is that social constructivists can engage in meaningful conversations with both meta-theoretical approaches, because of either shared ontology or epistemology. In contrast, rational choice and radical reflectivism have little to say to each other, because the common ground for a meaningful exchange of views is small. The bad news is that claiming a 'middle ground' is a somewhat uncomfortable position, because it is subject to constant (de-)construction by our friendly ontological or epistemological neighbours.

Yet, one should not overemphasize the differences. Take Steve Smith as a card-carrying member of the more reflectivist crowd. When he writes about epistemology, he emphasizes the differences between rationalism and reflectivism centring around the question of whether reasons can be causes, etc. But when he comments on the articles in the Special Issue, he praises them as showing that 'the dominance of rationalist approaches has restricted the development of the literature on European integration, and that social constructivist approaches can offer convincing (and, I would argue, deeper) explanations of European integration' (Smith 1999: 684–5). Andrew Moravcsik comes to the opposite conclusion and claims that constructivists 'have contributed far less to our empirical and theoretical understanding of European integration . . . certainly far less than existing alternatives' (Moravcsik 1999: 670). Both statements show a commitment to explanation, even though, ironically, the rationalist Moravcsik uses the language of understanding, while the reflectivist Smith employs an explanatory imagery. But both statements contain strong truth claims and, if they are not just meant as rhetoric, they imply that we need some common standards by which to judge whether a theory illuminates or darkens our understanding of the EU.

3. 'TO WHAT ISSUE WILL THIS COME?' DEBATING 'RATIONALISM'[3]

Dealing with Andrew Moravcsik's comment is both easy and difficult. It is easy, because, in principle, we share his view that 'claims derived from constructivist-inspired theories compete with and should be tested against other mid-range hypotheses' (Moravcsik 1999: 670). We are a little less certain, though, that social constructivist approaches are currently in a position to formulate such hypotheses and, moreover, that a purely deductive approach to generating hypotheses is possible from a constructivist position. But commenting on Moravcsik's comment is also difficult, because it is ultimately up to the reader of the Special Issue to decide whether his indictments are correct. How shall we deal with the accusation of a 'characteristic unwillingness of constructivists to place their claims at any real risk of empirical disconfirmation' (Moravcsik 1999: 670)? Moravcsik then goes on to adjudicate that '[h]ardly a single claim in this volume is formulated or tested in such a way that it could, even in principle, be declared empirically invalid' (Moravcsik 1999: 670).

Rather than engaging in a character defence, we would like to make several points in response. First, the Special Issue, as we understood it, was not about 'testing hypotheses'. Rather, the editors and the contributors had the more modest goal of bringing the potential of constructivist approaches for studying the social construction of Europe to the attention of scholars engaged in European studies. The aim was to point out a rich variety of research in the field of European integration, and open up a future research agenda rather than present rigorously tested empirical findings or adjudicate among rival hypotheses. The contributors intended to show how research inspired by social constructivism provides a new theoretical lens to important themes of empirical concern to most EU scholars.

They seek, for example, to facilitate a view on newly emergent institutions, concepts, and principles. As Rey Koslowski argues, 'a constructivist approach is useful because constructivist analysis is not wedded to existing legal structures or political organizations as "units of analysis" *per se*' (Koslowski 1999: 565). It facilitates a way of assessing and understanding aspects of an emergent polity in that it seeks to identify the characteristics and meaning of new institutions. Drawing on socio-historical institutionalism, constructivists stress the role of routinized practices and the unintended and intended consequences of institution-building.[4] Koslowski's contribution thus turns to a different notion of constructivism that aims to provide a deeper understanding of European integration as a social and historical process.[5]

Second, Moravcsik misunderstands social constructivism. Take his first paragraph: he correctly points out that Alexander Wendt (as well as the editors of the Special Issue) has presented social constructivism not as an international relations *theory*, but as an ontology. Some sentences later, however, Moravcsik treats constructivism as yet another substantive theory, next to three rationalist theories – realism, liberalism and institutionalism. He claims that the 'advent of constructivism promises to add a wider and perhaps more sophisticated range of theories concerning the causal role of ideational socialization' (Moravcsik 1999: 669). Let us reiterate here that social constructivism *per se* does not offer an alternative to substantive theories of international relations or European integration. It can, thus, not be tested against realist, liberal, institutionalist or neo-functionalist hypotheses. Social constructivism is a meta-theoretical approach offering an ontology which differs from, say, rational choice. While we can evaluate empirically substantive propositions derived from a 'rationalist' ontology, we cannot 'test' rational choice as such in any meaningful sense. The same holds true for constructivism (or reflectivism, or any other meta-theoretical approach).

Ideational socialization connotes a substantive proposition derived from a (sociological) understanding of institutions which is in turn inspired by a constructivist ontology. In this understanding, the EU consists of a system of principles, rules and procedures which might have socializing effects on actors exposed to these norms. Socialization then means the process by which actors internalize the norms which then influence how they see themselves and what they perceive as their interests. In plain English, this is what is meant when constructivists talk about the 'constitutive' effects of norms and institutions. After some further operationalization, we can test empirically whether norms indeed have these constitutive and socializing effects, whether they merely constrain the behaviour of actors, or better: under which conditions does a 'constructivist' understanding of what institutions do apply, and when can we capture their effects by a 'rationalist' understanding of institutions (on the difference, see also Checkel 1999)? In sum, we cannot 'test' rational choice against constructivism, but we can evaluate empirically the conditions under which sociological (or constructivist) institutionalism offers a better explanation of the effects of norms than rationalist institutionalism. The same holds true for liberalism, etc.

Another misunderstanding which permeates Moravcsik's comment concerns the notion that constructivism somehow deals with ideas, while 'rationalism' deals

with (material) interests. It is noteworthy in this context that he uses the terms 'ideas', 'discourse', and 'identity' almost interchangeably in his comment. The problem is that there is no way that we can theorize about the role of ideas as such. Ideas are (individual or collective) states of mind which are all-pervasive in social life. Even our understanding of our material interests are only our 'ideas' about our material interests (even if these ideas are social facts and sticky over centuries). In other words, it is impossible to evaluate ideas 'against' interests in any meaningful sense, unless we specify *which* ideas we mean and *which* interests. We can then test, for example, whether actors are motivated by principled beliefs or norms of appropriate behaviour or by, say, the instrumental search for power or material resources. Or take the notion of identity. Collective identities are not simply any type of ideas, but those ideas which define social groups and how they distinguish themselves from one another. We can then evaluate empirically whether 'Europeanness' is part of that collective identity, how European integration affects various collective identities, or whether a sense of Europeanness embedded in the collective national identity of policy-makers has any impact on their actual policies toward the EU (as opposed to their understandings of economic interests; for example, Risse *et al*. 1999).

These clarifications lead us to our next point. We are rather surprised by Moravcsik's charge that hardly a single claim in the Special Issue is *formulated* (we concede the point on 'testing') in a way which could be declared empirically invalid. Checkel, for example, does precisely this (Checkel 1999; Moravcsik acknowledges this later in his comment; see Moravcsik 1999: 673). Ben Rosamond, whose claims fall under the 'in principle indeterminate' indictment, advances the proposition that globalization is not an objective reality external to the EU, but that there are several globalization discourses inside the EU ranging from an 'empty signifier' to neo-liberal conceptions (Rosamond 1999). He asks four questions to clarify the connections between globalization and European integration. His conclusions disconfirm the notion that globalization means the same to everybody and simply favours neo-liberal preferences. This runs against the conventional wisdom in about 80 per cent of the literature on globalization and can, 'in principle', be disconfirmed empirically.

Moravcsik goes on to accuse Marcussen *et al*. of committing similar sins by making indeterminate claims. He quotes two propositions about the relationship between identities and perceived interests (Moravcsik 1999: 672–3). The first connotes a situation in which identities are rather stable and consensual ('embedded'). In such a situation, collective identities define the realm of legitimate interests in a political discourse. The second proposition connotes critical junctures in which identities are unstable and contested. We claim that perceived instrumental interests of actors determine in such a situation which identity constructions are promoted. Moravcsik overlooks the fact that the two propositions apply to different social situations which should have been apparent from the context of the paragraph. Once the various terms are specified, particularly the notion of 'critical junctures', the propositions can be easily subjected to empirical tests and disconfirmation.

This connection between a perceived crisis and complex learning (Checkel 1999)

or identity change (Marcussen *et al.* 1999), argues Moravcsik, is not distinct from constructivism at all. Any instrumentally rational policy-maker should change her ideas when faced with real world events undermining confidence in these ideas. We agree with Moravcsik that a rationalist account – in this case liberal inter-governmentalism – can explain a change in ideas about strategies (preferences over strategies, to use rational choice language). But neither Checkel nor Marcussen *et al.* are concerned with changes in strategies. We claim instead that 'critical junctures' lead to changes in actors' ideas about their underlying interests and to changes in their collective identities. Rationalist accounts including liberal intergovernment-alism bracket and exogenize these interests and identities, while constructivism tries to bring them into the light of investigation. This is indeed the core of constructivist reasoning (see, for example, Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986).

The problematic rationalist tendency of bracketing interests and identities has been sufficiently demonstrated by Offe and Wiesenthal's seminal work on the 'two logics of collective action' (Offe and Wiesenthal 1979). As they show, while theoretical assumptions may assert that in liberal democracies all actors are equal in principle, empirical evidence proves that despite an institutional framework which endorses the realization of the principle of equality, sociological facts demonstrate the importance of difference. In fact, the shared experience and social structure of a society contribute to whether, and if so how, actors *know* their interests. As Offe and Wiesenthal point out, the rationale of collective actors differs crucially. The difference is, however, not simply based on given interests. Instead, it changes according to experience, i.e. position in relation to other actors and in relation to larger social structures. Depending on where actors stand, so to speak, it may appear rational to improve the rules of the game or, quite differently, not only to improve the rules of the game but change them altogether (Offe and Wiesenthal 1979: 94). Critical junctures such as the crumbling of long-time stable social structures are thus likely to cause profound changes in the perception of identity and interests.[6]

Of course, such claims about the effects of critical junctures are themselves subject to empirical evaluation and can be disconfirmed. It is here that we readily accept the limits of recent theorizing about social learning or collective identities. Why is it, for example, that the end of the Cold War led to a profound identity crisis among French political élites, while we cannot discern a similar effect among the German élites? How can the moment of critical juncture be precisely specified? For the time being, our claims are limited to stating that the impact of a juncture will be critical once certain core conditions for stable identities are destabilized. While a number of conditions can be named by drawing on recurring examples known from contingent events in history, at this stage of middle-range theory building, it is only possible to state that the particular power of a critical juncture lies in its 'unexpect-edness', i.e. critical junctures are different in varying historical contexts. We do not yet have good propositions about the conditions under which actors perceive external events as 'critical' for their collective identities. Identifying critical junc-tures and making more specific claims about their characteristic impact on politics is thus one issue on the future constructivist research agenda that provides an inter-esting challenge for further debates on the middle ground.

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NOTES

1   We thank Thomas Christiansen for comments on an earlier draft. Responsibility for this version rests with the authors.
2   The 'middle ground' imagery is, of course, taken from Emmanuel Adler's article (Adler 1997).
3   The term 'rationalism' is frequently used to connote rational choice approaches. However, rational choice only theorizes about one particular type of rationality characterized by the logic of consequentialism. Arguing and rule-guided behaviour concern different types of rationality. To use 'rationalism' exclusively for rational choice approaches is, therefore, problematic.
4   See Tilly 1975; Skocpol 1992; Thelen and Steinmo 1992; Pierson 1996; Wiener 1998.
5   See also, albeit from a normative standpoint, the contribution by Shaw (1999).
6   Further to work by constructivists in international relations theories which has demonstrated the impact of norms in global politics (Klotz 1995; Katzenstein 1996), European integration theorists have begun to chart ways of showing the impact of the constitutive force of norms in European integration. See, for example, Jachtenfuchs *et al*. (1998) who demonstrate the mutually constitutive impact of norms, identifying 'polity-ideas' as normative structures that are not only significant in the actors' perception of their own identity position during the process of European integration, but which are also (re)produced by actors.

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