

Rethinking the Arab Uprisings through the lenses of constructivism

Ferial Menaifi^{1*}

¹ University of Constantine3- Salah Boubnider, (Algérie)

ferial.menaifi@univ-constantine3.dz

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Abstract :

Since the wave of the Arab Uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010, there has been significant research among political scientists aiming to understand the leading causes of the region's fragmentations.

In this regard, the main objective of this paper is to explore the constructivist assumptions and explain how this approach can offer a better understanding of the spread of Arab uprisings in the MENA region.

The study concluded, even though constructivism can offer a better understanding of the driving forces of the Arab Uprisings, it is still limited to explain its ongoing process.

Keywords: Arab Uprisings; Constructivism; Ideas; Identity; MENA

*Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

The constructivist approach is considered one of the most prominent approaches in international relations since the end Cold War. Moreover, this new approach has proven its explanatory power against traditional paradigms, which have found themselves unable to explain and conceive the new agenda and multiple challenges that have emerged recently in global politics.

While mainstream paradigms (realism and liberalism) emphasize physical factors to explain social and political phenomena, constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas and cultural factors. In particular, constructivism gives ontological substance to ideas and discourses that can have the same effect as physical forces.

Many scholars and academics value constructivism's ability to explain and predict abrupt changes in the behavior of a state or society. Notably, constructivist work has regained considerable attention following the recent events that have shaken the Arab world since 2010.

The Arab Uprisings event has effectively interpreted the constructivist assumptions and highlighted the role of ideas and discourses in social construction. For instance, it was through the collective discourse of protestors that the most authoritarian regimes in the Arab world were overthrown; as what occurred in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen.

In this context, this research paper aims to discuss the analytical potential of constructivism and, beyond that, to see what it can offer to understand better the different outcomes that shaped the MENA region after the Arab Uprisings.

2. The analytical potential of constructivism

Constructivism is considered one of the most relevant social approaches that touched the field of international relations. It emphasizes knowledge and how it plays a significant role in the construction of the world¹.

The first appearance of the term "constructivism" in international relations was in the late 1980s, with the relevant contribution of Nicolas Onuf in his famous essay, "World of Our Making"².

Unlike IR mainstream, which has taken its bearings from developments in economic and political theory, constructivism – like critical theory – is rooted in insights from social theory and the philosophy of knowledge³.

It is a social theory that approaches international politics and stresses the centrality of ideas and human consciousness. Moreover, constructivism was the

first approach that gives a holistic and idealist view of structures; and considers how structures construct actors' identities and interests⁴.

2.1 Key concepts of constructivism

Constructivism has highlighted many substantive points in world politics and provided new insights into international relations, including the meaning of anarchy and the nature of power, the relationship between state identity and interest, the role of ideas and norms in international politics. These points make a nice contrast with realism and liberalism⁵.

A. Structures and actors are mutually constructed (Agent/Structure problem)

Mainstream paradigms, notably realism, define structure in material terms, such as power distribution, and treat the structure as a constraint on actors. In contrast, constructivists provide a normative structure that includes collectively held ideas such as knowledge, rules, beliefs, and norms that not only constrain actors⁶.

In fact, the agent (actor) /structure debate focuses on the nature of international reality – more precisely, whether what exists in IR, and the explanation for it, should revolve around actors, structures, or both. To avoid having to choose between agency and structure and to make it possible to deal with the nature of their relationship, Alexander Wendt argued that just as social structures are ontologically dependent upon and therefore constituted by the practices and self-understandings of agents, the causal powers and interests of those agents, in their own turn, are constituted and therefore explained by structures⁷.

Furthermore, constructivists assume that actors and structures mutually constitute each other; anarchy must be interpreted to have meaning; state interests are part of the process of identity construction. It means states have enduring interests such as power and wealth and are constrained in their ability to further those interests because of material forces such as geography, technology, and the distribution of power.

Accordingly, power is both material and discursive; and change in world politics is both possible and difficult⁸.

In the same vein, this relationship between structure and actor clearly defines the concept of anarchy. Constructivists define anarchy as an empty vessel and has

no intrinsic logic of its own unless some inter-subjective set of norms and practices are filled in. International structures exist only through the reciprocal interaction of actors employing constitutive rules and social practices⁹.

B. Identities and interests in global politics

In his passage, explaining the meaning of constructivism, Alexander Wendt identifies the relationship between identity and interest, as they are essential parts of the international system:

*"Constructivism is a structural theory of the international system that makes the following core claims: (1) states are the principal units of analysis for international political theory; (2) the key structures in the states system are intersubjective rather than material; and (3) state identities and interests are in important part constructed by these social structures, rather than given exogenously to the system by human nature or domestic politics"*¹⁰.

Accordingly, social identities and interests are constantly changing during the interaction. They may be relatively stable in specific contexts, in which case treating them as given may be beneficial. This stability, however, is a result of ongoing practices that represent self and others in specific ways, not a given fact about the world¹¹.

This idea challenged the realism assumptions profoundly since Alexander Wendt advocated that realists were wrong in their interpretation when they defined the international system as an anarchical and a self-help system. Instead, the global system is created and recreated through interaction between states; as a result, it can change as states change their behavior¹².

Constructivists also challenged realists when explaining the cause of intra-conflicts that emerged in the world after the end of the cold war. Their conception of identity defines the cause of conflict mainly as a result of intra-state identities clashes.

More importantly, constructivism treats identity as an empirical issue to be theorized within a historical context. In contrast, neorealists proclaimed that all actors in the international system have only one meaningful identity because each actor seeks to protect its self-interest.

Thus, constructivists argue that realists' understanding of world politics has overlooked the fundamentals basic of the international system, the role of agents within it, and how they interact¹³.

C. The power of norms and ideas in international relations

It was clear that the contribution of constructivists has gained credibility and agreement as a solid and new approach inside the field of international relations theory after the end of the cold war. Indeed, constructivist insights about world politics have successfully explained the main reason behind the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolarity system; arguing that changes in the cognitive perceptive and ideas of Soviet Union leaders about the Western block and the possibility of cooperation instead of confrontation were an excellent opportunity to create a peaceful world.

This new insight has vigorously challenged the traditional approaches, which explain that any change in the structure of the international system is the result of tremendous changes in the balance of power, which is determined by physical and material forces like military power and economic capabilities.

Conversely, constructivists maintain that understanding global politics requires both material and discursive power; Indeed, the power of ideas and norms can surpass the physical powers and lead to unpredictable changes in the international system.

Furthermore, constructivists have expanded the concept of power. They suggest that "power" is not only the ability of one actor to get another actor to do what they would not do otherwise, but also the production of identities, interests, and meanings that shape the ability of actors to control their fate¹⁴.

3. The Arab Uprisings: a constructivist interpretation

The Arab Uprisings is a term used to describe events that occurred in many Arab countries in 2010. This trajectory began in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, after the immolation of a young street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, which sparked large demonstrations led by young Tunisians, forcing President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali to resign. However, this tragic incident sparked the region and tipped the Arab world into a historic, revolutionary process fraught with surprise and uncertainty. Indeed, constructivism provides a better framework for addressing the Arab uprisings by underscoring the following aspects:

3.1 Explaining the diffusion of norms

Constructivism thinks that intersubjective knowledge and ideas shape social reality and its evolution. Individuals draw on the rules, norms, and cause-effect

understandings that give material objects meaning, and these become the source of people's reasons, interests, and intentional acts¹⁵.

For instance, when constructivists emphasize the role of shared values and ideas in understanding revolutions, they provide the best explanation for the Egyptian revolt. In other terms, without understanding the specific Egyptian culture of pan-Arabism, strong religious beliefs, and national pride, it is difficult to comprehend why Egyptians have allowed the country to go from autocratic ruler to Islamic ruler to autocratic ruler¹⁶.

Moreover, constructivism argues that the growing impact of interdependence, globalization, the spread of democratic, liberal ideas and human rights, shared collective norms, values, and identities among Arab societies drive countries to concentrate on improving living standards, expanding freedom and democratization¹⁷.

In the same vein, constructivists have pointed out the diffusion of norms, especially those that emanate from international organizations.

In this regard, the influence of EU values on Arab uprising was considerable. The EU as an actor represents a 'normative power,' disseminating values and norms throughout the world, notably in the Mediterranean and Arab world. The purpose of this liberal diffusion of ideas, which appears to be devoid of authority and imposition, is to spread democratic and market values gradually¹⁸.

3.2 Changes are a combination of material and ideational powers / factors

As it was demonstrated in the above section, the spread of democratic norms, human rights, and freedom of ideas (normative powers) among Arab societies were decisive factors to drive the revolt to success. However, this could not happen without the assistance of physical powers, notably the impact of advanced technologies; Arab youths were able to reconstruct their future through the help of social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and BlackBerry messenger.

Thus, the "social media revolutions" which played such a large role in the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya are best understood through a constructivist framework because it involved a new youthful generation which can only be understood through the prism of the shared new youth culture¹⁹.

On the other side, the spread of ideas of freedom, democracy, and human rights in Arab countries that suffered from injustice and inequality, remodeled the structures and identities constructed over decades, thus proving another

constructivist assumption about the mutual relation between the structure and identity.

3.3 Perception / Actor relation

Constructivism has also highlighted the role of "perception" in the construction of identity and interests. Once Arab citizens changed their perception of the authoritarian regime, they could act differently, without fear and hesitance. They believed that their dictator's leaders were not immune to change, and they could be deposed. Indeed shifting perceptions and reconstructing a new one was a powerful catalyst for developing a new structure and creating a different social reality.

On the other side, it seems, the new post-Arab uprisings regimes are reconstructing a new perception, which rejects the monopoly of power and adapts more flexible cultural norms that favor the sharing of power.

3.4 The role of language, discourse, and symbols

Inspired by Michal Foucault's researches, many constructivists underscore the impact of discourse and language on the construction of social reality. The dominant discourse in a specific society can lead to significant changes; language has the power of diffusing the emotion of solidarity or disobedience.

Indeed, during the Egypt Uprising in 2011, protestors have used certain expressions to show their resentment and anger over the old regimes; such as the Arabic term 'إرحل' which means "Go Out"; this word has created a massive mobilization among protestors and fueled their revolution.

4. Conclusion

Arab uprisings were an unpredictable event that had shaken the MENA region due to their serious implications on the local, regional and international levels. Sooner the phenomenon has attracted political scientists from different perspectives and grounds to study the new concept, especially scholars of comparative politics.

However, whereas the comparative-politics literature on the Arab uprisings and their aftermath demonstrates theoretical progress with sophisticated empirical analysis, there has been significantly less theoretical engagement by international relations theorists²⁰.

In this regard, the discussion above attempted to analyze the Arab Uprisings under the prism of international relations theory, specifically social constructivism.

It is important to acknowledge constructivism influence on global politics. Constructivism provides alternative interpretations of a number of central themes in international relations theory, such as the meaning of anarchy and power balance, the relationship between state identity and interest, power elaboration, and the prospects for change in global Politics²¹.

Furthermore, Even though rational theories, notably realism, offer some analyses of the Arab uprisings, such as the rise of General al-Sisi, it cannot explain the historical attraction of many Egyptians and Tunisians to Islamist ideologies and thus the success of Islamist parties following the uprisings. On the other hand, liberalism has failed to explain why the forces of the Arab upheaval did not come together to create a new democracy²².

However, while social constructivism can offer useful analytical tools to explain profoundly critical events and remarkable changes in world politics such as the Arab Uprising, it is necessary to consider some of the theory's lacunas.

For instance, constructivism might overlook the risk of dangerous power; it means how power ripples throughout the normative order and how states and non-state actors will compete, sometimes violently, to redefine international society's fundamental norms and community boundaries. Social construction is an ongoing and, at times bloody, process²³.

Although constructivism is agnostic about changes in global politics, it restores much variety and difference to world affairs and highlights the practices that maintain intersubjective order, but it offers no more hope for change in world politics compared to other paradigms of international relations such as realism²⁴.

To sum up, scholars need different analytical tools, methodologies, and theories to approach the Arab uprisings due to their complexities and ambiguity. Even though social constructivism can offer a better understanding of one part of this event, specifically the proliferation of norms, ideas, democracy, and human rights among Arab societies, it cannot explain the ongoing process of the Arab uprisings, such as the role of external factors.

Accordingly, it is difficult to accurately explain the course of events in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, or Syria without reference to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Russia, or Iran. In this regard, neorealism could be the best approach to fit the context and provide scholars with a clear interpretation of regional and international dynamics and power rivalries in the Middle East and

North Africa regions. In addition, Marxists offer considerable insight when explaining the impact of economic factors in the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings.

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