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**James C. Roberts: Constructing Global Public Goods**

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**Introduction**

*Constructing Global Public Goods* by James C. Roberts can be seen as a continuation of the “dissent” of the 1980s in International Relations (IR).<sup>1</sup> That period was marked by a call for “thinking space” for approaches other than behaviouralist or empiricist-(neo)positivist ways.<sup>2</sup> As a result, IR was enriched by postmodern and poststructuralist voices and for example by feminist and constructivist research.

Yet, those voices of dissent were not always heard by all, or they were ignored. As Roberts argues in his book, rational choice theorists have generally neither embraced nor been interested in listening to such arguments. They have not cared, as is implied by Roberts’ argument, that for example constructivism became the third pillar of IR already during the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they have continued to ignore the arguments put forward by constructivist theorists and to assume that “preferences are exogenous and rigidly stable”.<sup>4</sup>

Roberts tries to do something different. His aim is to bring social constructivism to rational choice theory. He is trying to show – presumably mainly to a North American reader – that constructivism has a good deal to offer. As it stands, such projects are needed. Despite Walt’s claim of constructivism being the third IR pillar, thus implying that it at least ought to play a central role in the study of international relations, constructivism and constructivists seem to be marginalized still at least in North America, and this trend seems unchanging.<sup>5</sup>

Roberts’ project underlines that rational choice theories and theorists should pay careful attention to actors’ understandings of utility. Such understandings should not simply be assumed, a common practice among rational choice theories, with the questionable proof of correct assumptions being what the actor did. Instead, Roberts argues in a constructivist vein, actors have socially constructed identities, and it matters which actors with their identities

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<sup>1</sup> One could also say in International Politics or in International Studies.

<sup>2</sup> Jim George and David Campbell, ‘Patterns of Dissent and the Celebration of Difference: Critical Social Theory and International Relations’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1990).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen M. Walt, ‘International Relations: One World, Many Theories’, *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 110 (1998). Note, though, that there is no unified “Constructivism”. See Hannes Peltonen, ‘A Tale of Two Cognitions: The Evolution of Social Constructivism in International Relations’, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2017). Nik Hynek and Andrea Teti, ‘Saving Identity from Postmodernism? The Normalization of Constructivism in International Relations’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Roberts, *Constructing* p.4.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Brent J. Steele, Harry Gould, and Oliver Kessler (eds.), *Tactical Constructivism as Methods: Expression and Reflection* (New York: Routledge, 2019). See also Ayse Zarakol, ‘Tripping Constructivism’, *PS, Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2017). Jelena Subotic, ‘Constructivism as Professional Practice in the US Academy’, *PS, Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2017). Nicholas Onuf, ‘The Bigger Story’, *PS, Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2017).

happen to be in a particular context. For Roberts, simply assuming that an actor, like a state, wishes to maximize its utilities ignores how “utilities are derived from the agent’s socially constructed identities”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, to (rationally) explain an actor’s choice for instance regarding a given global public good requires one to understand that actor’s relevant identities.

### **The book**

Roberts wants us to examine which actor is in a given historical choice situation. An actor’s utilities “can be interpreted by examining the social situation of choice. They can then be modelled to determine the effect of the agent’s utilities on its preferences for different outcomes of the public good decision”.<sup>7</sup> In other words, instead of assuming that actors are rational, and that rationality must mean certain things, thereby enabling one to basically ignore the actual actors in question and more or less start with formal models, Roberts wants to reverse this procedure. One should begin with the actual actors in order to understand what rationality means for them within the actual situation in which they find themselves,<sup>8</sup> and only then one can proceed to formal modelling.

Roberts illustrates his suggested procedure in four chapters, each focusing on a global public good. He argues well in each chapter why each case constitutes a global public good, even though it may not be obvious to everyone when it comes to the global monetary system (ch. 4), military intervention (ch. 5), an individual actor’s participation in providing collective security (ch. 6), or human rights (ch. 7).

Perhaps the most illustrative case study, and perhaps easiest for his argument, is the one focusing on the United States’ leadership and changing identity regarding the global monetary system. By examining different historical contexts, Roberts argues that rationality with regard to the global public good of monetary stability meant different things for the United States at different times. Moreover, Roberts can model this with *different* games for the periods 1945-1958, 1958-1961, 1961-1971, and 1971 onward. Roberts’ overall message is that the process of providing such a global public good as monetary stability “should not be viewed monolithically as a Prisoner’s Dilemma that always devolves into mutual defection. The process can be much more nuanced”.<sup>9</sup> For example, “as U.S. preferences for providing monetary stabilization shifted, the interactive dynamics between the United States and the rest of the countries in the system changed, leading to different behaviors ... and ultimately to the United States stepping away from its identity as a monetary leader”.<sup>10</sup>

### **Critique**

Identities matter, and it matters which actor is in a particular decision context. Yet, actors have more than one identity, and thus a few questions arise regarding Roberts’ overall approach.

First, while Roberts tries not to simply assume an actor’s preferences without a historical and a contextual examination, his method is rather straightforward. He examines for example the United States and its historical behaviour regarding global monetary stability and then expresses this behaviour in different periods in formal terms (different models). While he is probably right in the interpretations in his case studies, at a more general level this raises the issue of history not being “out there,” ready to be examined without interpretation, a point understood well by historians and constructivists. This, then, should lead one to also consider

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<sup>6</sup> Roberts *op. cit.* p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> This is similar to a part of Kratochwil’s argument in what is considered to be one of the fundamental books of IR constructivism. Roberts does not discuss or connect with it. See Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, *op. cit.* p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

the role of the interpreter, namely the researcher as part of her research. This is, unfortunately, a silence in the book.

Second, Roberts would agree that an actor has multiple identities, but the story is more complicated both due to my point above and otherwise. Not only is there a difficulty in determining or understanding exactly which one of an actor's identities "guided" that actor's decision-making – or whether multiple identities affected the decision – but one also needs to consider that also the researcher has multiple identities guiding her interpretations of an interpreting subject with multiple identities. This is another silence in the book.

Third, Roberts determines which one of an actor's identities mattered through a historical analysis, but the way he does it might qualify in two ways for the same criticism he levies on the "usual" rational choice theory: "rational choice theory simply provides a description of the choice process, revealing nothing about the causes of decisions".<sup>11</sup> One way his argument might qualify for this criticism concerns causation. While Roberts' case studies are nuanced, and while he gives reasons (not causes, as far as I can tell) for an actor's decisions, his focus on identities do not reveal causes. Identities do not "cause" anything, at least not in the way causation is usually understood. It may be that my identity X makes it understandable, reasonable, or expected that I decide Y – or act in a particular way – in context C. That one of my identities "caused" me to decide something, or to act in a particular way, seems like a stretch. Or one would have needed to also show that we can ignore rather complicated questions about agency and free will, or at least considered that practical, not ideal, decisions must be made in highly complex situations with links to other decisions and issues and under time pressure.

The second way the criticism might fit concerns description. Putting aside any questions about any missing details in Roberts' case studies, one wonders about the exact value added by the formal modelling. Roberts explicitly says that qualitative methods are used "to interpret the social construction of agents' desires and beliefs—preferences—regarding outcomes of decisions",<sup>12</sup> and that these "preferences are then used in logical models to represent possible explanations".<sup>13</sup> Thus, these "models ... represent decision processes. They are not deterministic and are not meant to predict outcomes".<sup>14</sup> One cannot accuse Roberts of not doing what he promises, but the formal model, as a representation of an interpretation of a decision that has already been made, seems like another description, just in a different language. By having first shown what happened and having already given reasons for it, saying it another time but with a formal model, constructed to show that outcome, seems to summarize things in a 2x2 figure, but that figure is still a simplified description of what happened (and what might have happened but did not). Moreover, given that the book does not aim to predict, the models seem to be used only to formally model something we already know otherwise.

My final question relates to the quite common way to talk about actors' identities. To his credit, Roberts emphasises contextuality, but he seems to be focused on which identity an actor has in a given context. Yet, the interplay between identities and contexts might be more complex than an actor "having" an identity, which is expressed in a particular context. Could it be that identities are not "things" we walk around with, but instead might identities be "potentialities" that come about (or not) only contextually?<sup>15</sup> If so, perhaps Roberts has not gone far enough with the interplay between identities and contextuality.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> If I walk into a bank with cash in my hand, I am potentially a customer, but if instead I have a gun in my hand, I am potentially a bank robber.

## Summary

*Constructing Global Public Goods* provides a needed addition to a discussion on how rational choice theory can benefit from social constructivist insights. It is easily accessible and likely to benefit students of rational choice, because it does what it promises, namely “that rational choice models become much more robust representations of reality when theorists engage in thick rationality”.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, a deeper understanding of social constructivism would highlight how such representations are actually *presentations* of reality. For instance, Nicholas Onuf, an inspiration for Roberts, has had more to say about this than is currently in this book. Moreover, the book’s understanding of social constructivism would benefit from the points raised by the so-called third generation constructivists,<sup>17</sup> or by going back to Kratochwil’s argument about rules, norms and decisions, how they intertwine and intermingle, and how they enable actors and the interpretation of action.<sup>18</sup> Or better, one could look at Kratochwil’s latest book on *praxis*, or “the branch of knowledge concerned with acting and making choices”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. forum edited by Oliver Kessler and Brent J. Steele, ‘Introduction: ‘Constructing IR: The Third Generation’’, *European Review of International Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2016).

<sup>18</sup> Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions*.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Kratochwil, *Practice Praxis: On Acting and Knowing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 393.