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Good in a crisis: The ontological institutionalism of social constructivism[*]

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Abstract This paper seeks to recover and establish the distinct (and distinctly) institutionalist social ontology that underpins social constructivism as an approach to political economic analysis. It views social constructivism as a profoundly normative mode of political inquiry which seeks to discern, interrogate and elucidate the contingency of social, political and economic change – restoring politics (broadly understood) to processes and practices typically seen to be inevitable, necessary and non-negotiable. More controversially, perhaps, it also sees social constructivism, after both Berger and Luckmann and Searle, as ontologically institutionalist. Social constructivism, it is argued, has its origins in the attempt to establish the ontological distinctiveness of institutions as 'social' (as distinct from natural or 'brute') facts. This leads it to a distinct understanding of the relationship between actors and the environment (both natural and social) in which they find themselves and to its characteristic emphasis on the ideational mediation of that relationship. That in turn leads it to a particular type of analytic purchase on political economic realities, reflected in its distinctive emphasis on interpretive ambiguity, the social construction of political and economic imperatives and on disequilbrium. The argument is illustrated and developed further through an elucidation of the implications of such a social constructivism for the analysis of the period of crisis through which we now acknowledge ourselves to be living.

Constructivism, as Jeffrey Checkel (2004: 229) has noted, is 'trendy' – and it is no less trendy today than it when these words were first published well over a decade ago. And, perhaps partly as a consequence, it remains both highly controversial and, judging by the tone their responses, intensely frustrating to its critics (for recent examples of such palpable exasperation see, for instance, Bell 2011, 2012, Marsh 2009). This should not surprise us. For constructivism challenges conventional approaches in some profound ways and yet, at the same time, is notoriously slippery

and difficult to pin down precisely. It means different things to different authors (and sometimes, seemingly, to the same author even in the pages of a single contribution), it covers a multitude of differing (and at times seemingly incommensurate) positions and, even in what are taken to be its defining texts, it often lacks a clearly stated set of core claims. It is also treated, by its advocates, admirers and detractors alike, as a normative theory, an ontology, an epistemology and (if more rarely) a methodology.

In what follows my aim is to attempt to inject some clarity into this confusion. The task is, however, ambitious and fraught with perils. Constructivism is difficult to specify precisely because, in the end, *it does* mean different things to different people – and, to compound the problem, the content of such meanings has itself changed over time. There is no escaping this; nor is there is anything inherently wrong with it – it is just how things are. Inevitably, then, some self-declared constructivists will empathise more closely with the account of constructivism that I offer here than others. And that perhaps makes it important to explain how I have gone about the task of clarifying and articulating as clearly and sympathetically as I can the constructivist position that I here outline and ultimately seek to defend.

Constructivism as ontology

The approach adopted is a simple one: to be a social constructivist I contend, is to emphasise (having, ideally, reflected systematically upon) the process of social construction. As such, the origins and defining analytical features of social constructivism should in principal be traceable to, and identifiable from within, the ontology of social construction on which its name at least would suggest it is ostensibly predicated.

It is, accordingly, with Berger and Luckmann's classic statement of such an ontology, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and its more recent restatement and development by the analytical philosopher John R. Searle (1995, 2005, 2010) that I

begin.[1] In so doing and in keeping with the emphasis in both on ontology, it is perhaps useful to begin with Berger and Luckmann's understanding of reality itself. This, in terms in fact very close to those later used by Searle, they see as "a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition", in that "... we cannot wish them away" (1966: 13).

Two things are immediately interesting, striking even, about this definition. First, it is remarkably close to that typically offered by philosophical realists such as Bhaskar (as, for instance, in Bhaskar 1979; see also Marsh and Furlong 2002; Sayer 2000), but with one difference – the second point. The difference is that realists invariably posit a reality independent of our knowledge or understanding of it whereas constructivists (at least on the basis of this definition) emphasise the independence of reality from human volition. The distinction might seem trivial, but in fact it is extremely important – for it allows constructivists to identify a category of things (like money, marriage and, indeed, the government) that (they contend) exist and draw whatever properties they have from our (collective) knowledge and understanding of them. The ten euro note in my pocket is only a ten euro note (as distinct from a scruffy piece of paper) insofar as it is regarded as such – its value is not intrinsic to it as a piece of paper and is derived principally (if not quite exclusively) from a status bestowed upon it socially. Its materiality, its physical facticity, gives us no clue to its social significance or role. That it is a piece of money (as distinct from merely a piece of paper) is a social and not a physical, natural or, in Searle's terms, a 'brute' fact. This does not make it any less real (a fact that I will rely on when I present it at the bar to settle my tab later), but it does mean that its reality derives in significant part precisely from the knowledge and understanding that I and others have of it (as money). As such, its existence is not (*pace* the realist

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[1] This, I think, is a logical move which can be defended in its own terms. However, it is also reassuring that Berger and Luckmann and, indeed, Searle, though rarely discussed in any detail, are typically cited, in effect, as inspirational philosophical under-labourers by prominent social constructivists in precisely the texts most often regarded as defining of the approach (see, for instance and *inter alia*, Wendt 1992, 1999; Adler 1997; Schmidt 2008).

definition) independent of my and/or others' knowledge of it – though the paper in my pocket would, of course, remain a ten euro note even if I did not know what such a thing were or, indeed, were it to fall into the hands of a toddler. But it would not remain a ten euro note if no one knew what it was.

If the ten euro note problematizes at least this standard realist notion of reality does the constructivist definition fare any better? Is the facticity of the note in my pocket really independent, as Berger and Luckmann seem to imply, of human volition? Well, in one obvious sense, 'yes' – try as hard as I might I cannot wish the piece of paper in my pocket into a twenty euro note, or a ten pound note when I step off the Eurostar and find myself in a country where the euro is not the acknowledged currency of exchange. In that sense, of course, its reality is independent of my volition; it is what it is (a ten euro note) and I cannot wish it into something else (though I can act on my volition and take it to a bureau de change in the hope that they might do a little better). But that it is a ten euro note (rather than a twenty euro note, a ten dollar bill or just a piece of paper), that it takes the form it does (a piece of paper that fits easily in my pocket) and that it is recognisable as such (to those who know what a ten euro note looks like) is itself a product of human volition – and in that sense, its reality, though clearly distinguishable from my (or any other specific) volition, is intimately (in Berger and Luckmann's terms, 'dialectically') related to human volition more generally. Such is the nature of social facts and the essence of social and political change – and, however, clumsy their definition of reality itself, that is Berger and Luckmann's point.

It is Searle (1995, 2010), however, who takes this furthest. His own definition of reality is very similar to that of Berger and Luckmann. It leads him to differentiate, in effect, between three types of existence or 'facticity': (i) those things that can be said to exist independently of our thought (natural or brute facts); (ii) those things which, on a routine day-to-day basis may exist largely independently of our conscious thought but whose very existence in the first place is a product of human thought and volition and whose specific facticity today bears clear traces of this irredeemably social origin and evolution (many institutional facts and the practices

to which they give rise, such as voting, are of this kind); and (iii) those things (such as a self-fulfilling prophecy or a consensus) whose very facticity is a product and reflection of our thought and which endure only for as long as our thoughts are of a particular kind (the self-fulfilling prophecy is of course shattered by the very realisation that it *is* or *just might be* a self-fulfilling prophecy). Social constructivists, unremarkably perhaps, are more interested in the second and third categories of facticity identified above. For it is only these that can be said to have been socially constructed. Thus, what differentiates their social ontology from others is its emphasis on both the existence of social facts and the distinction between social facts and natural or brute facts – the distinctive facticity of the social, in other words.

The socially constitutive nature of institutional facts

Crucial to this is social constructivism's poorly understood and often overlooked institutionalism. Again, it is Searle who sets this out most clearly, though once more he builds directly and explicitly on Berger and Luckmann in so doing. It is with their account that we should perhaps start. Central to it is the notion of habitualisation. As they suggest, "all human activity is subject to habitualisation. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, *ipso facto*, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern". Such patterning is invariably indicative of the existence of institutions. Indeed, as they go on to explain, institutionalisation occurs whenever there is a "reciprocal typification of habitualised actions" (1966: 71, 72).

This is a crucial observation. For what makes such typification reciprocal is language (and the shared or inter-subjective understandings to which it gives rise). Language is, in effect, the medium in and through which that reciprocity is established and maintained – and, accordingly, the medium in and through which the simultaneously enabling and constraining qualities of institutions are affected (in the regularisation of the practices to which they give rise). As this suggests, institutions are characterised by both historicity and control (their contribution to the regularisation of social practices within a specific domain, locus or setting – an institutional

context). For Berger and Luckmann, such control is intrinsic to institutions. As they put it, institutions achieve a reality that "confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact" (1966: 76). That they do so, and thereby achieve such an effect, is principally through the assignment of roles to actors and the codification (both formally and informally) of such roles through the establishment and reproduction of a series of rules and associated expectations (norms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, contextualised modes of rationality and so forth).[2]

Yet, anticipating later themes in sociological variants of the new institutionalism in particular, Berger and Luckmann perceptively acknowledge that it is not principally through formal rules but through the more informal and tacit management of expectations that institutions come to shape, order and impose a regularity upon social (and, by extension, political) conduct. Such expectations are, of course, ideational – partly inter-subjective (insofar as they are conserved between institutionally-situated subjects), partly subjective (in that they vary from individual to individual, being shaped to a large extent by differential exposure to, and experience of, institutionalised practices). Berger and Luckmann also emphasise one of what might now be seen as the defining principles of what is typically referred to as 'constructivist institutionalism' (Hay 2006), namely that "the institutional order is real only so far as it is realised in performed roles" (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 96). Institutions, in other words, exist only in and through the practices to which they might be seen to give rise; though such practices (for example, specific instances of institutionalised patriarchy) are sadly (at least in this instance) all too real, institutions themselves (patriarchy, in this example) are revealed as analytical

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[2] The use of the term 'codification' here is not intended to imply determinism. Institutions are built out of norms and conventions and those norms and conventions, in so far as they are sustained, may lend a certain order, even predictability, to (institutonalised) social interaction. But they never eliminate the space for contingency. All norms and conventions are ambiguous; all norms and conventions are contestable; and all norms and conventions evolve over time through the daily resolution of ambiguity in the production of behaviour and, over the longer-term, through their contestation and renegotiation.

concepts which help up make sense of such practices. They are, as such, 'as if real' rather than real *per se* (see also Hay 2014; Jessop 2014; Parsons 2015).

This, as I have sought to show, is already a highly distinctive and ontologically nuanced conception of institutions and institutional practice. In terms of the analytical insight it offers arguably it compares very favourably with the more recent outpourings of new institutionalist scholars – many of whose signal contributions to our understanding of social and political life (notably those about historicity and path dependence) it largely anticipates (see also Schmidt 2008). But, once again, it is Searle who takes us furthest – building upon and extending Berger and Luckmann's insight to reveal more fully the implications of social constructivism's ontology of social institutions, indeed its institutional ontology of the social.

Though limits of space prevent a full elaboration, three elements of this are particularly noteworthy. The first is the distinction that Searle (1995: 27) draws between *regulative* rules – which regulate pre-existing practices, activities and, indeed, social artefacts (specifying, for instance, the form that a ten euro note must take in order that it be regarded as 'legal tender') – and *constitutive* rules – which are (as the term implies) constitutive of, and which thereby create *de novo*, the very possibility that a piece of paper might serve as a medium of exchange. Crucially, institutions are not just regulative (though they typically rely upon regulative rules for their persistence and reproduction over time) but are genuinely constitutive of the social practices they institutionalise. Accordingly, their existence is itself constitutive of the specific opportunity for social and political interaction that they provide. The institution of money, for instance, is constitutive of the very possibility that I might exchange the piece of paper in my wallet for a pint of beer and some shiny pieces of metal (coins) at the bar. That possibility would not exist in the absence of the institution. Institutions, in short, configure social and political space and are constitutive of the opportunities and constraints which characterise that space. For social constructivists, men and women alike make institutions but not in (institutional) circumstances of their own choosing.

Second, and no less significantly, Searle reaffirms Berger and Luckmann's emphasis on a more dynamic notion of institutional practice rather than the more characteristically new institutionalist focus on institutions *per se* in what he calls the 'primacy of process'. As he very simply puts it, "social objects [social and institutional facts] are always ... constituted by social acts" (1966: 36). Money, in other words, only exists in the exchanges to which it gives rise and their consequences; in the absence of the practices it makes possible, the institution has no meaningful existence. The social is comprised of a series of such practices; but the very condition of existence of these practices is the socially constitutive properties of the institutions out of which they arise and from which they derive their meaning.

Finally, Searle has some very prescient and important things to say about the specificity of institutional (as distinct from merely social) facts (the former are, as he argues, a sub-class of the latter). In addition to the suggestion that institutional facts are constitutive of social space, in that the opportunities they provide serve to structure and configure that space for actors, he argues that all institutional facts derive ultimately from the attempt to deliver some kind of social function. And, as he puts it, "the key element in the move from the collective imposition of function to the creation of institutional facts is the imposition of a collectively recognised status to which a function is attached" (Searle 1995, 41; see also 2005, 2010, 22). This leads him to infer that all institutional facts are essentially of the form "X counts as Y in C" where 'X' is the thing itself, 'Y' the status to which the function is attached, and 'C' the relevant institutional context. An example might help to clarify the point: X (this piece of paper marked with a cross in this way) counts as Y (a vote for this candidate and this party rather than another combination of candidate and party) in C (the context of this particular electoral contest taking place within this particular first-past-the-post single member district electoral system). There is, as Searle himself notes, a certain 'magic' performed here (1995: 45) – as the physical object X, the piece of paper ceremonially deposited in the ballot box, is transformed into a socially and (here, above all) politically meaningful Y (a vote cast in an ostensibly democratic electoral process for one candidate rather than another). In this process

and very many others like it, things (pieces of paper and the like) come first to stand for or signify but ultimately to stand in for or *become* something other than themselves (a certain multiple of a unit of exchange, a vote and so forth).

Indeed, one might extend the logic of Searle's argument to suggest that the extent of the institutional conjuring trick required in cases such as these is at least in part responsible for the highly ritualised and ceremonial character of the process by which, say, votes are cast and counted (see Faucher & Hay 2015).

An important implication of all of this is that institutional facts only exist by virtue of human agreement. As such, they are socially and politically contingent; rather more socially and politically contingent, in fact, than most institutionalists today acknowledge (a point to which we return presently). But this, of course, does not mean that they can simply be willed away. I cannot, having regretted my choice at the ballot box, withdraw and recast by vote in favour of another candidate, just as I cannot wish my ten euro note into a twenty euro note. That notwithstanding, institutions, institutional facts and the institutional practices in and through they are reproduced exhibit an intrinsic contingency which sets them apart from natural or brute facts since the former, quite literally, are contingent upon human agreement in this way. My vote is only a vote insofar as I am deemed to have performed what I am required to have performed in order to vote. I need to get my 'X' right and I need to get it right in the right context, 'C', in order that my piece of paper can become (through the institutional conjuring trick performed in the polling station and at the count afterwards) a vote for the candidate of my choice in this election. And that, crucially for Searle, requires not just inter-subjective agreement (about the constitutive rules that makes an X a Y in this context) but also language – a medium in and through which to express, register and record that agreement (and the rules that make them possible) over time. For, without that, institutions have and can have no historicity. Their path dependence, if you like, is linguistically achieved.

That, in short, is the constructivist perspective on institutions; indeed, that is the constructivist perspective.   Constructivism, as I have sought to show, is an

institutionalism; for what differentiates social life (ontologically) from the realm of nature (at least from a constructivist stance) are institutions and the social constructions in and through which they are instantiated and reproduced. Constructivism, as a social ontology, builds from an understanding of the different facticity of things natural, social and institutional – it is an ontological institutionalism and one which largely predates, just as in different respects it both anticipates and challenges, the new institutionalism.

What is perhaps remarkable is how little appreciated this is. One does not typically think of institutions when one thinks of constructivism. But institutions are central to Berger and Luckmann and they are central to Searle – and, indeed, if one looks for them they are also central to what are invariably taken to be the seminal works of constructivist theory in international relations (see Wendt 1992).[3]

In what follows my aim is to explore a little more thoroughly the still largely unacknowledged implications of constructivism's ontological institutionalism. I might be seen, in the process, to be offering and advancing a constructivist institutionalism (as, to some extent, in Hay 2006). But that would be a misreading. My aim is in fact is a subtly different one – to reveal something of the character of the institutionalism that I see as inherent, intrinsic and already present within social constructivism. I seek to draw attention to and to explore the implications of something that already exists, rather than to make the case for something new.

Constructivism as institutionalism – constructivist institutionalism

If constructivism is rightly seen as an institutionalism – and, as I have argued, an institutionalism which predates the turn to institutional analysis in sociology and political science since the 1990s – then what kind of an institutionalism is it? If what

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[3] These typically start by discussing the institutional context in which their chosen privileged actors, states, are embedded. Again, Wendt (1992) provides a classic example.

characterises constructivism is its institutionalism, then what in turn characterises this institutionalism? What, in particular, sets it apart from other institutionalisms?

To answer these questions it is necessary to reflect a little on what might characterise an institutionalism in the most general terms.   Here, again, my argument is a simple one: all institutionalisms are, or can at least be understood as, sociologies in that they are informed by the assumptions they make about the relationship between institutionally-embedded actors on the one hand and the institutional contexts in which they find themselves on the other. Constructivism is certainly no exception in having a deeply socialised conception of the actor; indeed, the standard critique of practically all contemporary institutionalisms is that they have an *overly*-socialised conception of the actor – though the critique itself is a long-standing one (see, for instance, Wrong 1961). In fact what sets constructivism apart as an institutionalism perhaps more than anything is not its socialised but its *politicised* conception of the institutionally-situated actor.   Constructivism is a profoundly *political* sociology in a way that other institutionalisms are not. For it seeks quite consciously and often in contrast to other institutionalisms to identify (often where it might not otherwise be apparent) the political authoring of institutional, institutionalised and institutionalising processes and the difference that actors make to institutional dynamics. It seeks, in other words, to discern and uncover the politics in institutional design, institutional reproduction and institutional change. And it sees politics as intrinsic to institutions precisely because it sees institutions, as we have seen, as conditional and contingent upon human agreement.

As this perhaps suggests, constructivism is characterised too by a distinctive (if nonetheless inclusive) conception of politics and the political – which it associates with contingency rather than fate, indeterminacy rather than predictability and social construction rather than natural necessity. Politics is, in short, the realm of the socially contingent and institutions are, by their very nature, socially contingent and hence irredeemably political (Hay 2007).

This emphasis upon contingency it derives directly from the ontology of institutional (as distinct from natural or brute) facts; and it puts constructivism at odds with other institutionalisms. These tend either to squeeze politics out of institutional analysis or reduce political conduct to rational and/or norm-driven behaviour. In such conceptions politics, far from being open-ended, creative and contingent, is a source of determinacy, predictability and equilibrating dynamics. This constructivists challenge. In so doing they set out a rather different and distinctive understanding of the relationship between institutionally-embedded actors and the institutional environments in which they find themselves and which serve to configure the opportunities and constraints they must negotiate.

For constructivists social and political realities are at least partially constituted by actors through the subjective and inter-subjective understandings they develop to make sense of their experiences and to orient themselves towards their environment – and through the behaviours to which such understandings give rise. Consequently, the ideas actors hold are integral to understanding (and hence explaining) their behaviour. Such a constructivism emphasises the *contingency* of social and political realities which are typically (and in other institutionalisms) seen as materially given, fixed and immutable (as in the 'imperatives' generated by a 'crisis' or by the condition of 'globalisation'). The result is a more political, dynamic and open-ended institutionalism – emphasising sources of *disequilibrium* and *contingency* and the role of political processes in shaping paths of institutional change (Hacking 1999; Hay 2006).

This leads to an institutionalism characterised by six distinguishing features:

1. A focus on the processes of institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation rather than on institutions per se;
2. An understanding of actors' engagement with institutions as mediated ideationally (with institutionally-situated actors orienting themselves towards their institutional environment through a series of subjective and inter-subjective understandings, cognitions and normative dispositions);

3. A characteristic focus on institutional change as politically contingent;

4. An understanding of actors' interests and normative orientations as socially constructed rather than materially given;

5. A rejection of any presupposition of institutional equilibrium and an acute sensitivity to the importance both of moments of crisis and their political constitution (though, probabilistically, these may be infrequent, they are likely to prove enduring in their significance);

6. An inductive approach to process tracing calling for a political anthropology of institutionally-situated action and change.

In the final sections of this paper I look at each of these six tenets of constructivism in a little more detail, illustrating each with respect to our understanding of crises in general and the global financial crisis in particular.

From institutions to institutional practices: a praxiological approach

The first defining tenet of constructivism as an institutionalism is already strongly prefigured in Berger and Luckmann and Searle's common emphasis on the primacy of process in the understanding of institutional facts and institutional practices. Constructivists are typically far less interested in detailing, mapping and describing structurally the form institutions might be seen to take than they are in describing, analysing and elucidating the always on-going process of constitution and reconstitution in and through which institutional practices both reaffirm and, at the same time, contribute to the evolution of institutions and institutional complexes (like patriarchy and the state).

This emphasis on practice and process, rather than structure and institution, derives, arguably, from two sources. The first is a certain perhaps characteristic suspicion on the part of constructivists that institutions and, in particular, institutional complexes (like the state and patriarchy) do not really exist as such – but are, rather, analytical devices (conceptual abstractions, in effect) which we use to help us make sense of the social and political practices that are in fact the real substance of social and

political life. If patriarchy and the state are at best 'as if real' simplifying analytical devices which might help us better to see the connections between real instances of 'patriarchal' oppression or the disparate practices legitimated in the name of state authority, then it is perhaps on such practices themselves that we should focus. Put slightly differently, social processes are real, but structures and agents (and hence institutions and institutionally-situated actors) are abstractions (analytical constructions that are only 'as-if-real'). The task for constructivists is to deploy such constructs to explore the 'real'. This involves a rejection of the kind of institutional reification that follows the detailed (and invariably static) mapping of institutional configurations in favour of a (more dynamic) focus on processes of social construction and their impact in processes of institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation.

Second, this analytic and empirical focus on practice and process – on institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation rather than on institutional structure or on institutions as structures – reflects and arises directly out of the constructivist ontology of the social. Social and institutional facts are not made and given, but are constantly being made and remade in and through the practices to which they give rise and out of which (and at the same time) they are constituted and re-constituted. It is these practices that we should study, if only to guard against the characteristic institutionalist danger of reifying as fixed and given institutional realities which, by their very nature, are open-ended, fluid and contingent.

For research on the global financial crisis this would entail a focus on: (i) the pathological/disequilibrating interaction between capitalist institutional configurations and particular growth strategies in the period before the crisis; (ii) the identification and analysis of the institutionalised rationalities in and through which such cumulatively destabilising practices became habitualised; and (iii) the contested politics of crisis definition and response (seen as integral to de- and re-institutionalisation). It might be pointed out here that at least the first part of this does not appear very obviously constructivist – there is not an obvious construction

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in sight and the process of social construction itself is not the principal object of analysis. Whilst this is true, it is to miss the point somewhat. For this focus on process, of which the analysis of 'disequilibration' is a part, is a logical correlate of constructivism's social ontology – which regards only process and practice as real. As such, and as this suggests, social constructivism is in fact quite compatible with a range of quite conventional (and seemingly non-constructivist) approaches to elucidating institutional pathologies and mapping these over time.

Ideational mediation and cognitive filtering

A second core tenet of constructivism is that actors' access to the social, political and, above all, institutional environment in which they find themselves is always and necessarily mediated ideationally. Actors orient themselves to their environment through a veil of ideas – understandings, cognitions and normative dispositions. Some of these are inter-subjective, some subjective.

Within a constructivist ontology actors do not directly encounter institutions, nor are their actions directly motivated by them. Both are mediated ideationally. Actors orient themselves to institutions on the basis of their normative values (their sense of duty and obligation, their sense of what is right, their sense of what is desirable), their perceived interests (both singular and collective, projected over a variety of different time horizons and in different institutional domains) and their understandings of the opportunities and constraints that different institutional contexts afford them (only some of which arise from direct experience). For constructivists, it is an ontological truism that actors' behaviour is informed not by the actual contours of the institutionally-configured terrain in which they find themselves, but by perceptions and hunches (some well-informed, some poorly informed, some accurate, some inaccurate, many untested and some in principal unknowable in advance of the action to which they give rise). Of course, there is a relationship – acquired and filtered by direct and mediated experience – between that institutional context on the one hand and the ideas about the institutional context which actors hold and which motivate and inform their behaviour on the

other. But that relationship is itself complex, dynamic and contingent. Actors learn from their mistakes but the context in which they try to apply that learning is itself evolving (not least through the evolution of other actors' strategies in the light of parallel learning processes). Consequently, actors never have complete information and the information they acquire through their ongoing encounters with the institutional landscape in which they find themselves is partial and, at very best, retrospectively significant (in that it might well have helped them develop a better strategy at the time they acted).

Yet this is perhaps to focus too narrowly on the subjective. Constructivists also emphasise the inter-subjective character of ideas, noting in particular the way in which norms, conventions and paradigms help actors collectively to resolve much if not all of the interpretive ambiguity inherent in social phenomena. Such inter-subjectively held ideas provide, in effect, cognitive templates or filters in and through which collective sense is made of social and political events; and these ideas are frequently embedded institutionally, in the sense that institutional contexts are typically arenas of social interaction in which particular forms of inter-subjective consensus (such as norms, standards, rules, conventions and paradigms) persist and are reproduced.

For research on the global financial crisis this implies a focus on: (i) the ideas (paradigmatic or otherwise) informing economic and related policies in the pre-crisis phase and the (problematic) assumptions about institutions (above all, regulatory institutions) and the determinants of growth on which they were predicated; (ii) the discursive construction of the crisis (as one of debt rather than growth, for instance) and the implications for policy responses and their consequences; and (iii) the possibilities for the contestation of dominant crisis narratives in a context of continued low-or-no growth.

Constructivism thus focuses its analytical attention on the construal and potential re-construal (through contestation) of the crisis as a crisis of a particular kind (a crisis of debt, a crisis of growth, a financial crisis, a state crisis). It emphasises the

contingency of the moment of crisis itself and the political character of the process of interpretive contestation in and through which the ambiguity of the crisis is resolved. It sees that moment of contestation and, above all, the resolution of the interpretive ambiguity as to the nature of the crisis in the consolidation of a dominant crisis narrative as suffused with political power. Success in the narration of the crisis is, for constructivists then, an index of political power. It is likely to have enduring political and economic implications: a politics based on construing the crisis as one of public debt will have very different redistributive consequences from a politics based on construing the crisis as one of growth for instance (Hay 2013).

The politically contingent character of institutions

A third core tenet of constructivism is that institutional change is profoundly and necessarily political and, accordingly, politically contingent. Indeed, perhaps the principal task of a constructivist approach to institutions is to reveal and draw analytic attention to that politics and, in the process, to demonstrate such political contingency, especially where it might not otherwise be clear (as, for instance, when contingent institutional facts are naturalised and presented as non-negotiable).

There are a number of elements to this. Whilst ideas and ideational systems (policy paradigms, norms, conventions, approaches to the construction of perceived interests and so forth) are path dependent, they are both constantly changing (even if only iteratively) and prone to more rapid change (in and through challenge and contestation).

Second, all social and political events and institutional settings are interpretively ambiguous – they can sustain a variety of competing narratives and discourses which might in turn inform very different policy sets or responses (see for instance Benford & Snow 2000, Craig 2014). In other words, any specific contextual setting or condition can sustain a variety of different and competing narratives. In principle, each is capable of informing a different policy response (deficit reduction might be a logical response to a crisis of debt but it is most unlikely to be seen as an obvious or

logical solution to a crisis of growth). Consequently, policy responses are contingent upon their ideational and political processing. The implication of this, sadly ignored in more mainstream perspectives, is that all policy responses are contingent and conditional upon the political/ideational filters in and through which they are generated.

For research on the global financial crisis this implies a focus: (i) on the politics of paradigmatic consolidation and contestation; (ii) on the inherent interpretive ambiguity and contestability of the moment of crisis itself; and (iii) on crisis construction and policy responses to crisis as a resolution (however partial and temporary) of such interpretive ambiguity.

The core insight here is that any inter-subjective consensus on the ways things appear (a crisis, a crisis of a particular kind) is itself politically contingent and not given materially. Paradigms are lenses in and through which sense-making takes place and interpretive ambiguities are resolved (or, at least, narrowed); change the paradigm and the process of sense-making changes too. And what is true of paradigms is also true of crisis narratives. These make sense of pathologies by rendering them 'symptomatic' of a crisis (Hay 1996). In the process they resolve the interpretive ambiguity of the pathology or symptom itself; change the crisis narrative and the pathology is recast – to become either a symptom of a different crisis or no longer symptomatic of crisis at all.

Relativising political motivation: beyond self-interest

Crucially from a genuinely constructivist perspective,[4] actors' interests are not and cannot be thought to be given materially or, indeed, contextually. Though they invariably draw on a variety of inter-subjective (and hence social) constructions (and, as such, are far from normatively neutral) they are also highly subjective and simply

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[4] I emphasise this only because it strikes me that much ostensibly constructivist work violates this tenet.

cannot be assumed to be conserved between actors of a given 'type' (capitalists, bankers, the working class, public servants and so forth). Relatedly, constructivism cannot afford to, and does not, assume that actors' behaviour is motivated solely by considerations of self-interest – and that actors act the way they do by virtue of a necessarily instrumental disposition towards the environment in which they find themselves.

Thus, from a constructivist perspective, the invariably linked notions of interests as materially given and conduct as narrowly instrumental are simplifying distortions. Indeed, they are typically part of an analytical rather than a genuine ontology in that they are chosen less for their ontological credibility than for the analytic convenience they afford. For such assumptions make possible, where otherwise it would not be, a deductive mode of reasoning that allows us, in effect, to predict the content of actors' behaviour given who they are and where they are located (a working class voter in a first-past-the-post electoral system, an elite civil servant in a publicly funded bureaucracy and so forth). Such assumptions (though they come in a variety of different forms) dominate institutionalism. Yet the point is that they are starkly incompatible with constructivism.

Their appeal is that they serve to render actors' behaviour predictable given the context in which it arises. But this is to deny agency, contingency and, in the process, the very politics which constructivism seeks to identify and interrogate.

For constructivists, by contrast, interests are perhaps best seen as idealised perceptions and projections (of credible future scenarios from which one might perceive oneself, and those whose well-being one values, to benefit). They are deeply normative (one's perceived interests depend on those things one loves, respects, values and admires and those one do not). They are also, invariably, compound (one can have different interests in different things), contradictory (one can have different interests in the same thing – think of the trade-off between gratification and well-being or self-esteem, for instance), ambiguous (one can, and often does, struggle to discern one's interests), contested (quite what one takes

one's interests to be will vary from one day to the next even in the same context), contingent (for all of the above reasons and more besides) and political (in that what one takes one's interests to be is likely to influence the causes one fights for and those about which one remains less animated).

For research on the global financial crisis this implies the need for a political anthropology of interest identification, construction and re-construction in the context of the crisis (and the experiences to which it has given rise). More prospectively, it also entails and a focus on what Mark Blyth (2002) has usefully termed the rendering 'actionable' of shared perceived interests (especially in and so far as these have been recast in the light of the crisis and the understandings of it that have emerged).

Yet, from a *genuinely* constructivist perspective (the adjective is, once again, significant), even that is inadequate. Acknowledging that actors' interests are not materially or contextually given (such that all similarly located actors are assumed to have the same interests and, if rational, to go about acting on them in the same way) is not enough. For constructivists it is no less problematic to assume that actors' behaviour is narrowly instrumental. There can be, and are, multiple motivations for actors' behaviour, only some of which are instrumental. To reduce all motivational dispositions to base instrumental ones is rather reducing the cast of the Mr Men to Mr Greedy and Mr Mean. The politics of institutional change, even (perhaps particularly) in moments of crisis, is not just a story of *homo oeconomicus* ... It is just as much a story of Mr Creature of Habit, Madame Altruiste, Monsieur Dutiful, Professor Je Ne Sais Quoi and many, many others …

Consequently, the proposed political anthropology of interest constitution and re-constitution in the context of the crisis needs to be extended to include, at minimum, a political anthropology of *interest salience*. This would examine the extent to which the politicisation of the crisis has, or has not, encouraged actors to mobilise and act politically on the basis of their perceived self-interest relative to

other potential motivational dispositions (such as empathy towards others or a sense of collective duty). That can only be established empirically and inductively.

Challenging the assumption of self-equilibrating institutions

A fifth core tenet of constructivism emerges almost naturally out of the others. From a constructivist perspective there can be no guarantees, and hence should be no expectation, of institutional equilibrium (not even of dynamic equilibrium). If institutions are understood as contingent upon the social constructions out of which they arise and in and through which they continue to exist and they are also understood as disciplining of actors' conduct and practice in an almost Foucauldian way, then they are certainly likely to give rise to path dependent evolutionary tendencies. But there is absolutely no reason to assume that such path dependencies should prove cumulatively stabilising over time rather than cumulatively destabilising. That is something, it seems, the global financial crisis has taught us; but it should not be news to constructivists.

The inflation of a financial asset bubble through the institutionalised 'irrational exuberance' of market actors is a good example of such a cumulatively destabilising path dependency (see, for instance, Schiller 2000). But the key point is that constructivism is perhaps particularly sensitive and attuned to such disequilibrating dynamics, to moments of crisis and, above all, to their political constitution (and the politics of their constitution). Though, historically, these may be infrequent, their enduring significance trumps their scarcity and warrants close scrutiny.

Yet there is another, more theoretical, reason for constructivism's characteristic focus on crises and disequilibrium (Hay 1996; Blyth 2002, 2013; Widmaier et al. 2007). It is disarmingly simple. For, from a constructivist perspective the distinction between equilibrium and disequilibrium is itself an analytical rather than an ontological one. To assume that systems exhibiting path dependence are in dynamic equilibrium is, again, merely a simplifying analytical convenience (and hence a distortion). There is no logical reason to presume that path dependencies are

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indicative of self-equilibrating tendencies and, as the global financial crisis reminds us all to well, path dependencies are just as likely to be cumulatively destabilising as they are to be self-stabilising (certainly over any significant span of time).

But here a further constructivist insight kicks in. For constructivists, interested as they have always been in moments of crisis, are typically strongly aware of the enduring historical significance of those conjunctures in which 'it all goes wrong' and is all seen to go wrong. Accordingly, their approach to institutional process tracing has arguably always been one that has sought to identify potentially disequilibrating path dependencies and the ideational preconditions of their reproduction over time (such as equilibrium assumptions in prevailing economic orthodoxies). This gives constructivist approaches something of an advantage, particularly now, over most conventional approaches to institutional change which have tended to be built on the basis of more or less stylised equilibrium assumptions. Constructivism, in short, is good in a crisis.

For research on the global financial crisis this implies a focus on the ideational and institutional sources of disequilibrium, their interaction, the conditions under which path dependencies can become catastrophic and the resources available for the narration of economic pathologies as constitutive of crisis. But perhaps the key point here is the constructivist take on what happens when 'it all goes wrong' and what it means for 'it all to go wrong' in the first place. In most conventional accounts of crisis, this is understood in narrowly (often exclusively) material terms. Things go wrong empirically, substantively and objectively (the usual synonyms for materiality in realist social science) even if it is conceded that it is through our identification and construction, after the fact, of what has gone wrong that responses are made and political and economic implications generated.

For constructivists, things are not so simple (particularly when the 'things' in question are those 'things' that might be thought to go 'wrong'). There are three elements to this.

First, the 'things' that might go wrong in the first place are social not natural or brute facts and, as such, are arguably not material at all. Indeed, it is the very distinction between the ideational and the material itself that constructivists reject. From such a perspective, a recession, for instance, is a labelling convention that we attach to what is, in effect, quite a complex set of social constructions (on the broader significance of conventions in the understanding of moments of crisis see, especially, Nelson & Katzenstein 2014). Those social constructions, of course, have referents, in the sense that economic output (and hence also sustained reductions in economic output) are linked to (trends in) the production of commodities by employees in places of work (and many other things besides). But commodities, employees and places of work are social facts too – and hence products of some process of social construction just as much as they are 'material'. In short, there is no material bottom line to be found, however far back we trace the antecedents of the moment of crisis that we might be interested in interrogating. We can usefully differentiate – and we should – between the things we think go wrong (the referent) and our discursive construal of them. But we fool ourselves if we think of that distinction in terms of a simple material/ideational dualism. Put slightly more provocatively, whilst the facts of the matter place limits on credible crisis narratives, the relevant facts here are social facts and social facts are social constructs. As this suggests, whilst there may well be a bottom line, it is not material.

Second, for constructivists, the relationship between crisis referent and crisis narrative is dynamic and iterative. All crises are constructions. Moreover, it is the construction of the (real) events themselves as symptomatic of a wider crisis that makes a crisis what it is ('a crisis') and that is integral to how the crisis is lived, experienced and responded to. This is as true of the global financial crisis as it is of any other crisis. Put simply, the construction of the events in real time *as symptomatic of a crisis* and symptomatic of a crisis *of a particular kind* (a crisis of public debt, say) shapes the unfolding of those events over time as it does, crucially, the responses to which they give rise. All crises are lived though highly particular (and, in principle if not always in practice, contestable) constructions of what is going on at the time. Those constructions are not retrospective rationalisations offered

after the fact, but are simultaneous with the events that they serve to dramatise. Consequently, the question for analysts of crisis, particularly those interested in their enduring significance, is not just the accuracy of such constructions (the relationship between the narrative and the referents of the narrative) – important though this undoubtedly is. For the construction comes to have a life of its own. Put simply, how the events were understood at the time is crucial to how they were responded to and, consequently, to how those events came to unfold and, in so doing, acquire their historic significance.

Finally, that a sustained recession is likely to prompt a sense of crisis in a highly predictable way is not a product of any bottom line material determinism. It is, instead, simply indicative of the highly entrenched and deeply institutionalised character of the social conventions in and through which we judge economic performance and hence economic failure. When things go wrong they go wrong because they challenge conventional conceptions of normality – violating codified norms which govern our expectations. These norms and the ontological security they provide are social constructs, albeit typically highly institutionalised social constructions.

Constructivism as a political anthropology of institutional and ideational change

Finally, and perhaps unremarkably, all of this leads constructivists towards a distinctive set of methodological choices. Methodologically, constructivism entails an inductive approach to 'process tracing' in the form of a political anthropology of institutional change (on process tracing more generally, see Trampusch & Palier 2016). Since institutional change is contingent and there is neither the presumption of institutional equilibrium nor that exhibited path dependence can be taken as an index of equilibrium, institutional dynamics have to be studied empirically and cannot be derived deductively or modelled (without very significant potential distortion) prospectively.

This entails a methodology of process tracing, yet one in which the constitution, identification and renegotiation of interests are the subject of analysis not a presumption (as in most historical institutionalism).

For research on the global financial crisis this implies a genealogy of institutional and ideational pathology prior to the crisis and a process tracing account of crisis narration and of the mobilisation of constituencies of shared interest in and through the process of crisis definition and blame attribution (see for instance, Stanley 2014).

Conclusions

In the preceding account I have sought to show that constructivism's ontology of social and political life is profoundly institutional. It is institutions which characterise social as distinct from natural reality and it is institutions which configure the very social and political terrain we inhabit. Institutions are what set us apart from the natural world; they are, in a way, our defining achievement and they are, crucially, the product of social construction. Though rarely understood as such, that makes constructivism a profoundly institutionalist mode of thinking.

I conclude by reflecting briefly on three sets of implications which follow more or less directly from this and yet which are at best implicit in the analysis I have developed. The first concerns the relationship between constructivism and interpretivism. The second concerns the distinctly political character of constructivism's institutionalism. The third is the question of political power. I take each in turn.

Given the ostensible similarities between social constructivism and interpretivism (Bevir & Rhodes 2012) it would surely be remiss to conclude without having offered at least some reflection on the relationship between the two, as I see it. It is tempting, given the preceding account, to think perhaps of constructivism as *interpretivism's institutionalism*. But that won't quite do. For although interpretivism and constructivism come at many of the same questions and issues,

they do so from rather different directions and from rather different starting points. Constructivism, as I have sought to show, is an ontology; interpretivism, by contrast, is largely epistemological in its animating problematic. And that lends each a rather different analytic structure. Constructivism, most clearly in Berger and Luckmann and Searle but more generally, I would contend, starts with and builds its analysis from the question of the nature of the social. Indeed, it is in seeking to establish the ontological distinctiveness of the social that it reveals the socially conditioning and social constitutive nature of institutions. Its institutionalism follows logically from this. In an almost parallel way, it is interpretivism's positing of the (epistemological) question of the conditions of establishing knowledge and understanding that leads it to the inherently perspectival and interpretive character of all social understanding. It is but a short and very logical step to the historicising of such understanding in cultural traditions. As this suggests, the concept of tradition in interpretivism and that of institution in constructivism play almost entirely analogous roles (see, especially, Bevir and Rhodes 2012, Bevir, Rhodes & Weller 2013). That, in turn, suggests the potential synergies between these cognate perspectives (see, for more detail, Hay 2011). These are complementary and potentially compatible approaches; but they are not, in the end, part of the same endeavour – and it is important, if we are to understand the rather different forms that they take, to understand that.

The second issue can be dealt with rather more quickly. In considering the specificity of social constructivism I have tended to focus on it as a profoundly *social* mode of analysis and one that issues from, as it develops out of, an (institutional) ontology of the social. But it is also profoundly *political* in a rather distinctive – and in fact surprisingly normative – way. For, as a mode of analysis it is characterised by one thing more than any other: its aim to identify and reveal the politics in processes that might otherwise be seen as natural or necessary (see also Hacking 1999). Its aim, in other words, is to reveal the contingency and hence the politics inherent in and intrinsic to any and all social processes, particularly those that we have come to see as natural, necessary or non-negotiable and thereby non-contingent and apolitical. To argue that something is socially constructed is, in the end and above

all, to argue that it can (and perhaps should) be different from how it is and/or how it is perceived to be.[5] It is, in short, to argue for politics and to politicise the social.

If social constructivism is politicising in this way, then it is also concerned, profoundly, with questions of political power. The preceding analysis has not focused principally on the concept of power (though it has touched upon it at various points). But it could easily be recast in such terms. For crisis and crisis construal is suffused with power. Constructivists, of course, have a distinctive take on power – which they see less as a product or reflection of material resources nor as a simple capacity to act in a manner consistent with a set of materially-given interests. Power, for constructivists, is about *the capacity to resolve interpretive ambiguity authoritatively* – and that capacity is arguably nowhere more present and nowhere more important that in the moment of crisis. For in such a context, the powerful are those who prove able (often in the face of considerable opposition) to resolve the ambiguities in the symptoms they seek to narrate by reading them as collectively constitutive ('symptomatic') of a crisis and of a crisis of a particular kind. In so doing they seek, and succeed in projecting authoritatively, a framing of the context that shapes how others will in turn interact and orient themselves to the crisis scenario in which they now acknowledge themselves to be. The capacity, in other words, to project inter-subjectively one's subjective interpretation of context is the key to political power.

Such a view severs the simple link between material interest and power in more conventional realist understandings. Actors do not have, for constructivists, a materially-given interest – since their interest is itself always inherently ambiguous interpretively. The powerful may well be those who get to project what they perceive to be their interest *as if it were* the general interest. But, as the grim history of the global financial crisis attests, acting in accordance with what one

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[5] For constructivists, of course (and rather to the irritation, I suspect, of their detractors), how things are perceived to be in part of how they are.

perceives to be one's own self interest guarantees neither a collective public good nor even an individual private good.

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