constructivism and international relation

pols 427 international relations
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david campbell offers a very similar constructivist approach in his book, *writing security*

before discussing his argument, let’s begin with a little exercise …
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consider the list on the left: what is the **most dangerous** thing?
what is responsible for the **most deaths**?
what makes one thing **more dangerous** than another?

we’ll come back to this list later, but first back to campbell …
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back to campbell …

campbell begins with a simple statement: “On August 2, 1990, Iraq became a danger to the United States”… later, he asks, “how did the Iraqi invasion become the greatest danger to the United States? (just consider your answer for now)
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- Campbell tells us that the designation of Iraq as dangerous—in the 1990s and again in the early 2000s—was not based primarily or even mostly on a set of objective conditions or facts.

- That is, it was not Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, or its use of chemical and biological weapons, or the “evilness” of Saddam Hussein … so, then, why was Iraq a danger?
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because of the meaning we gave to Iraq and its actions

in this respect we can say, “danger is an effect of interpretation”
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it’s important to understand that this view is very different from the views embedded in theories we have considered earlier in the quarter, especially neorealism and marxism ... both of these are committed to an epistemic realism, which in turn, “sanctions two analytic forms”: a narrativizing historiography in which things have a self-evident quality and a logic of explanation in which it is the purpose of analysis to identify those self-evident things
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campbell does not deny that there are “real” dangers in the world (i.e., things that can hurt and kill people); however, “not all risks are equal, and not all risks are interpreted as dangers”

- consider the list we looked at earlier and consider how the determination of “danger” was entirely dependent on our very subjective interpretations of what constitutes a danger
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campbell also tells us that the “role of interpretation in the articulation of danger is not restricted to the process by which some risks come to be considered more dangerous than others. An important function of interpretation is the way that certain modes of representation crystallize around referents marked as dangers”

which is to say … what?
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most simply, campbell argues that we have created certain words, labels, categories, etc. that, by themselves, denote serious danger

... alien, foreign, sick, unstable, socialist, communist, dark, dirty, and so on: all have been pivotal to the articulation of danger in the American experience
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a related, but separate, aspect in the articulation of danger is the articulation of an identity—both for “others” and or outsiders and for oneself

- **key point.** Identities are never preformed, God-given, or inherently stable; instead, they are **socially constructed** and reproduced

  this is **true** for individuals and for larger collective identities, such as **states**
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For states, the articulation of a coherent identity is a difficult, but essential task; maintaining or reproducing cohesive identity over time is equally difficult and essential.

- **Consider this:** What would a state be without an identity? Would a state even be a state? Could it be?
  - For Campbell the answer is … no
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as campbell (abstrusely) puts it, the “paradox inherent to their being renders states in permanent need of reproduction: with no ontological status apart from the many and varied practices that constitute their reality, states are … always in the process of becoming. For a state to end its practices of representation would be to explore its lack of prediscursive foundations; statis would be death.”

got it?
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despite his arcane language, campbell’s point is fairly simple: states exist because their people identify with them; this identification creates legitimacy, allegiance, unity and purpose

people know what their state represents; they know that others must share this sense of identity—if most “americans” suddenly stopped feeling american, the united states would fall apart …
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**the** big question, then, is **how** is state identity constructed and reproduced?

- there are many ways, but one of the **most important** is through the articulation of danger through interstate relations

  - on this point, campbell tells us that interpretations of danger are not necessarily directed toward repelling some objective, external threat, but are **directed inward**, toward the constitution of a state’s identity
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... and this brings us to the concept of security

campbell argues that security is a unceasing project of the state: it is part of a process that help to guarantee the state’s continued success as an impelling identity ... as col. jessup might say:

you want the truth? well here it is: you need men like me because we articulate danger! we make it possible for AMERICA to survive as an idea!
Roxanne Doty presents us with an additional constructivist perspective in her article, “foreign policy as social constructivism.” She also poses a seemingly simple question, “why did the US invade Panama?” (in 1989). We could easily ask this questions of other conflicts or interventions: Vietnam, Grenada, Chile, Cambodia, and so on.
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“why did the US invade _______?”

- there are, of course, many different ways to answer this question; we also can easily surmise what the standard answers might be from “materialist” perspectives such as realism and marxism …

- key point. materialist explanations take for granted that the invasion itself (and only the invasion) needs to be explained
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“why did the US invade ______________?”

- a constructivist (especially a “post-modern” one), by contrast, might ask: **how did the possibility** of an invasion—and not some other course of action—emerge and take shape in the first place?

- a constructivist, in other words, wants to understand the non-material or ideational **foundation** of military actions and other **practices** of international relations
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developing this understanding requires us to address how-possible questions as doty puts it, “when we post a how-possible question … we must inquire into the practices that enable social actors to act, to frame policy as they do, and to wield the capabilities they do. Perforce more critical, this mode of questioning takes us to relations of power—power in its productive aspect that why-questions neglect”
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- but, why do we need to ask how-possible questions in the first place? isn’t it enough to know why an “outcome obtained”?

  short answer: no

  why-questions are incomplete. for example, military power alone can never fully explain a decision; after all, the u.s. doesn’t invade every county to which is military superior, nor does it attack all those with which it has a grievance
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consider other why-questions

- why did the US invade Iraq and Afghanistan and not North Korea and Pakistan?
- why does the US continue to treat Cuba as an irreconcilable enemy, while reconciling with Vietnam, China, and Russia?
- why are some nuclear powers—or wannabe nuclear powers—dangerous, while others are benign?

traditional materialist theories simply cannot adequately answer such questions
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- adequate or complete answers to such questions requires an alternative approach
- doty introduces just such an approach, which she labels the ...
an alternative framework: **discursive practices approach**

this is a complicated and abstract approach, but the **crux** is this …

**language constructs** reality; it “produces” meaning, identities, objects, and possibilities through discourse*

*discourse is defined as a system of statements in which each individual statement makes sense, produces interpretive possibilities by making it virtually impossible to think outside of it
an alternative framework: discursive practices approach

in this view, language itself (and not necessarily individual actors or collective actors) is the center of analysis: language is not merely used by actors, but has a power of its own to produce results that do not necessarily coincide with individual motivations, perceptions, and intentions
an alternative framework: discursive practices approach

what are the basic elements of the discursive practices approach used by doty? she discusses three …

presupposition
(background knowledge)

predication
(attribution of specific qualities)

subject positioning
(relationship of subjects and objects)
an alternative framework: discursive practices approach

“taken together, these textual mechanisms ... produce a ‘world’ by providing positions for various kinds of subjects and endowing them with particular attributes”
an alternative framework: **discursive practices approach**

doty then uses these mechanisms to analyze US policy toward the **Philippines** in the 1950s … she shows us how US counter-insurgency policy was/is fundamentally a product of language

more specifically, she wants to show us how **dominant discourses** about the US, international relations, the Philippines and the Third World created the parameters for US policy, which itself was reflected in a new “counterinsurgency discourse”
an alternative framework: **discursive practices approach**

instead of going through doty’s analysis, let’s apply her framework to a study of a more contemporary event: the ongoing counterinsurgency operation in Iraq