Constructivism and Agent-Structure Problem: Assessing the Triumph of Civil Rights Movement through the Global Practice of Civil Disobedience

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Abstract: *This literature review explores the agent-structure problem within constructivism and critiques prior theories like realism, liberalism, and structuralism for their limitations in overlooking human complexities. Constructivism, influenced by Structuration Theory, offers a constitutive understanding of the agent-structure relationship, rejecting deterministic views. The empirical example of the Civil Rights Movement highlights how agents and structures co-determined outcomes. In essence, constructivism provides a more comprehensive framework, acknowledging the dynamic interplay between human agency and structural influences, enhancing our understanding of international relations and promoting context-sensitive analyses.*

Keywords: *Constructivism, agent-structure problem, civil rights movement, civil disobedience*

1. Introduction

This literature review will discuss the agent-structure problem as one of the main notions that is not only central in the realm of constructivism paradigm, but also in the prior Great Debates' theories. It will analyze what is the problem of agent-structure problem establishment coming from prior theories; furthermore it will continue to provide the understanding of agent-structure relation through the scope of constructivism. The relevancy of this concept will then be further discussed through an empirical analysis of the Civil Rights Movement that was influenced by the global practice of civil disobedience to prove the leverage of what constructivism has defined into the agent-structure relation. This literature review is composed through an array of building blocks and information originating from (including but not limited to) International Relations journals, books, online articles, and related videos; all excerpted from credible sources.

2. Assessing the Triumph of Civil Rights Movement through the Global Practice of Civil Disobedience

In the prior set of concepts and theories explained through the paradigm of realism, liberalism, and structuralism, we can see that all of their discourses rely on the material basis. For instance, it can be signified by one of the realism basic assumptions that define States as rational actors who will strive for survival and therefore would always amplify their military power. Or that according to liberalism tenet, it is always within States' best interest to conduct cooperation with other actors (be it other nation-states or even NGOs), especially when it comes to gaining more benefit economically. It is believed that States will be better-off if we strengthen the international community interdependence. However, these theories put too much emphasis on the separation of each variable; it sees actors as the subject and international

system as the object or playing field. These theories divide the nature of these variables in different lenses, believing that there is a given and fixed nature for the subjects that will not be dependent to their playing field (Bakry 2017, 112).

There are several problems within this dichotomy, in which one of the main issues is that it cannot provide a down-to-earth approach that is closer to reality. To put this into perspective, we cannot always simply assume that, for the sake of survival, individuals will justify any means to achieve specific ends that they want. For example, it is assumed that in terms of staying alive, humans are taught to fulfill their appetite; therefore they would always make sure to eat three meals a day in whatever circumstances. However, the phenomenon of fasting practiced by Moslems all around the world during Ramadhan denounces this assumption. People who practice fasting are still able to control their appetite from dawn until dusk, regardless which social structure they come from, meaning that there are other variables that also play significant role in making one's decision. Hence, it shows that this assumption displays a very determinist approach, in which individuals are seen as passive objects (Bilad 2011, 77) rather than human beings who hold onto particular identities, beliefs, and interests.

Constructivism comes to resolve the inadequacy that these former rationalist paradigms cannot explain. There are several core tenets that are used in constructivism that differ from rationalism, one of them is that constructivism defines the relation of agent and structures as constitutive. Regarding the agent-structure problem, constructivism believes that agents are purposeful actors who may practice autonomy such as free will for individuals and foreign policy for States, but social structures may also shape the interactions between these actors (Wendt 1987, 338). According to Alexander Wendt who is influenced by the Structuration Theory (Lamsal 2012, 113) from Anthony Giddens (Gibbs 2017), it is unjustifiable to think that structures (in this case, international system) are only shaped by the interactions coming from agents, since it reduces the structure as if it is merely a property of pre- existing agents. On the other hand, it is also not in accordance with reality to think that structures are the ones who shape the agents; it is important to note that human beings are much more complex than organism that could only response to exogenous stimuli from structures. In realm of international relations, Wendt proposed this idea that, in one way or another, agents and structures are mutually implicating entities, creating a relationship that is theoretically inseparable and interdependent (Wendt 1987, 338-340).

Having established the central tenet of agent-structure problem in constructivism, let us analyze one of the empirical significances of it. The Civil Rights Movement is known as one of the most monumental moments not only in the US History, but in the World History as well (Gaines, 2007, 57). It signifies how non-violent civil disobedience is proven to be working in many parts of the world such as the United States of America, Czechoslovakia, and even Egypt. To understand how agent-structure interdependency plays a role in this, we have to take a look on the history of civil disobedience as the driving force of Civil Rights Movement (hereinafter CRM).

It was under the Western philosophical figure, Henry D. Thoreau, who firstly introduced the idea of civil disobedience through his book (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2016). Many years later, Mohandas Gandhi formulated the modern concept of it after corresponding with Leo Tolstoy who supported the idea that Indians had to confront the British Raj imperialism, peacefully. Gandhi's struggle and success with his Satyagraha movement throughout the upcoming years then inspired other countries in pursuing independence and better condition of civil rights. Civil disobedience through nonviolence protests was believed to be able in remaking a better world; it was successful in liberating many parts of the world in the East. Not only in the East, this idea finally reached the West in 1958 when Bayard Rustin taught Martin Luther King Jr. (hereinafter MLK) the tactic of nonviolence protests after learning it in India from Gandhi's colleagues (Muller, 2015). This was one of the milestones during the CRM progress which sought to end racial segregation in the US. The fight which MLK and other African Americans pursued was not only influenced by India's success of Satyagraha, coming from another part of the world, it was also influenced by the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany under Nazi (Burnett, 2019). It created a sense in the people of the US, that what the Southerners (especially the Ku Klux Klan) were doing to the African Americans was equivalent to what Germany (especially Nazi) was doing to Jews. This motivated the White Americans to finally support and stand hand-in-hand with their fellow African Americans in ending the racial segregation and eventually led the signing of Civil Rights Act of 1964 (history.com, 2009), winning the equality before law; the very core essence of the Civil Rights Movement.

This series of global events showed that agents (be it countries such as India and the US as well as individuals such as Gandhi and MLK) and structures (the international system within that period of time) come hand in hand in terms of pursuing the end goal of Civil Rights Movement. It signifies that it's not

until Gandhi started the Salt March that people finally put attention to nonviolent practices, and it's not until the rise of fascism in certain part of world that the international community started to take a look within their own domestic problem and tried to fix it. This indicates that there is no such thing as superiority when it comes to agent-structure relation, they co-determined each other instead.

3. Conclusion

All in all, it can be concluded that constructivism provides wider array and portrayals when explaining a phenomenon in international politics. The provision of agent-structure relation is better explained through this paradigm as it does not bind the variables into particular set of assumptions and given, fixed natures. It lets us comprehend the behavior of agents and direction of structures in spite of the dynamic nature of international politics. In order for us to understand the current event better, it is important for us to always trace back into the history and the ideas that shaped it. The discourses within this dynamic nature of international politics can be comprehended better if we can always put in mind that agent and structures are mutually implicating.

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