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Author(s)	Hosoki, Ralph I.
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World Society Theory and Cultural Globalization: Contrasts with World-Systems Theory and International Relations Constructivism

Ralph I. Hosoki ¹

The post-World War II era has witnessed the emergence of various theories of economic development and globalization. This paper focuses on two macro system-level theories – World-Systems Theory and World Society Theory. First, their characteristics and differences are highlighted to establish how World Society Theory is a cultural theory of (global) social change that views the world through a social constructionist lens, giving primacy to logics of socially constructed cognitive understandings of legitimacy and appropriateness over functionalist and realist logics of actor interest and utility maximization. To this end, constructivism in the field of international relations offers ideas that are complementary to those of World Society Theory. In order to explicate the theoretical purchase of these two perspectives – both individually and jointly – for global and comparative research, the latter half of the paper discusses their similarities and differences. One of the main differences lies in how each perspective views the origin(s) of the cultural norms and cognitive scripts that outline the contours of appropriate actor behavior and identities. From this, both theories make different assumptions about the role of power in norm emergence and institutionalization and the dynamism of norms and institutions over time.

Keywords: World Society Theory, World-Systems Theory, international relations constructivism, cultural globalization

Introduction

The post-World War II era has witnessed the emergence of various theories of economic development and globalization. In tandem with economic developments in the

West and entry into Cold War geopolitics, theories of economic development flourished throughout the first several postwar decades with the emergence of modernization theories (1950s and 1960s) (e.g., Rostow 1960), dependency theory (1960s) (also underdevelopment theory; Frank 1969), and World-Systems Theory (1970s) (Wallerstein 1974a, 1974b, 2004) (Axford 2013; Chirot and Hall 1982; Gwynne 2009; Kiely 2010). In stark contrast and response to these theories, sociological neoinstitutionalism and World Society Theory emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s as a cultural theory of global social change (Boli and Thomas 1999; Jepperson 1991; Meyer 1980; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Shortly after the global-comparative deepening of the sociological neoinstitutionalist research program in the 1980s, constructivism in international relations established itself, in the 1990s, as the field's third theoretical pillar alongside neorealism and neoliberalism (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Wendt 1992). Theories of globalization began to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s around debates of cultural homogenization (Ritzer 1993), cultural imperialism (Said 1993; Tomlinson 1991), cultural hybridization (Pieterse 1995, 2019), cultural heterogenization (Robertson 2001; Van Der Bly 2007), glocalization (Robertson 1992, 1995), and more recently, grobalization (Ritzer 2007).

In the first half of this paper, I focus on two of the aforementioned macro system-level theories – World-Systems Theory and World Society Theory – and highlight their differences and implications for understanding cultural globalization. World Society Theory is a cultural theory that views the world through a social constructionist lens, giving primacy to logics of socially constructed cognitive understandings of legitimacy and appropriateness over functionalist and realist logics of actor interest and utility maximization. Its close social constructionist cognate in political science – international relations (IR) constructivism – similarly focuses on “the role of ideas, norms, knowledge, culture, and argument in politics, stressing in particular the role of collectively held or ‘intersubjective’ ideas and understandings on social life” (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001:392). Although the two theoretical perspectives seem similar in that they both stress the importance of socially constructed meanings in social life, they are neither the same nor interchangeable as they make different subtle yet important assumptions about the origin(s) and content(s) of the cultural norms and cognitive scripts that outline the contours of appropriate actor behavior and identities, resulting in different assertions on

the role of power in norm emergence and institutionalization and the dynamism of norms and institutions over time. The latter half of the paper expounds on these differences to highlight the individual and joint theoretical purchases of these two perspectives. The hope is that some disambiguation will aid scholars in deciding when one might be more useful than the other and when their respective strengths could be married to create a more comprehensive theoretical framework for global and comparative research.

World-Systems Theory²

Before Immanuel Wallerstein proposed his World-Systems Theory, modernization and dependency theories dominated sociological explanations of “Third World” development (or underdevelopment) (Evans 1979). To contextualize the intellectual and historical context in which the theory emerged and developed, it is helpful to revisit modernization theory – at least of the structural Rostovian economic variant (Chirot and Hall 1982; Gwynne 2009) drawn upon here – which predates World-Systems Theory as a parsimonious and optimistic outlook on economic development premised on the assumption that all societies have a chance (if they so desire) at modernizing. Rostow’s (1960) take-off model argues that all societies experience similar transitional paths (or “stages of growth”) into modernization from traditional societies. As societies modernize, economic arrangements and institutional structures become increasingly complex, and personal values become increasingly “modern” as individuals embrace science and rationality over more “traditional” values. This line of modernization theory assumes that all societies can, want, and will modernize, and as they modernize, traditional cultures will give way to “modern” cultures, thereby resulting in increasingly more modernized societies with basic similarities. Therefore, as societies modernize, their traditional cultural distinctiveness is gradually replaced by a more universalistic (homogenous) modern culture. For such modernization theorists, cultural homogenization across countries is a functional and inevitable outcome of modernization.

However, modernization theory in general, was largely premised on the ex post facto reflections of the West’s own experiences and is therefore criticized for both being Eurocentric and equating modernization with “Westernization.” Critics therefore contend that the theory cannot adequately explain the variegated economic

developmental trajectories of non-European countries and why poverty still persists at alarming levels in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, etc. The theory also has difficulty explaining why modernized local cultures around the world still retain levels of cultural distinctiveness or hybridized forms of culture that merge the traditional with the “modern.” Modernization theory also assumes that economic development occurs within a domestic vacuum, largely devoid of exogenous influences from other states, international organizations, etc. The theory cannot account for variations in development across countries that may be due to a particular country’s relative geopolitical and historical positionality vis-à-vis other countries. Furthermore, because of its simplistic claim that modernization is possible for all (given the “correct” ingredients and effort), modernization theory sees a society’s failure to modernize as a failure of the society itself. Modernization theory therefore tends to “blame the victim” by essentially linking development failure to the innate and inadequate characteristics of developing country peoples and cultures (Evans 1979). For modernization theorists, the more contact with rich countries and the more emulation that occurs, the higher a country’s chance of success will be in joining the ranks of rich countries.

In reaction to modernization theories, in the early 1970s, Wallerstein proposed an alternative way to think about and explain development: Economic development is not a function of domestic resources, values, motivations, or even the strength of a state’s links with the global core (in fact, links to core countries could be the very reason for underdevelopment); instead, development occurs unevenly throughout the world because the global capitalist system – a system in which a country’s relative structural positioning within the transnational division of labor determines its wealth and power – advantages core capitalist countries over peripheral ones (Evans 1979). A country’s ability to develop is therefore not simply a function of its internal/domestic characteristics (as modernization theorists would argue); it is a function of its relative positioning within the global economic world-system and relationships with other countries. Drawing from a Marxist logic, World-Systems Theory argues that core capitalist countries control the global means of production and therefore have the economic power to exploit peripheral countries, thereby forcing them into underdevelopment in which their development trajectories are heavily circumscribed. For World-Systems theorists, underdevelopment

is not the fault of poor countries. Rather, it is the product of the inherent exploitative nature of the global division of labor. The pathway to development is therefore attainable not by severing or strengthening ties with the core, but by making changes to parts of the inherently hierarchical and unfair economic world-system so that there is “room at the top” for peripheral countries to “squeeze” in. States and individuals may, to a certain degree, be agentic in shaping their own development trajectory, but the world-systems approach also assumes a high degree of structural determinism in which arrangements within the world-system shape the development experiences and possibilities of states (and their people). The world-systems approach therefore takes the world-system as its unit of analysis instead of individual states. The goal for the theory is to understand the larger global economic system and constellations of power arrangements in which states, firms, and localities are inextricably connected in complex webs of production and consumption (i.e., the global division of labor). World-Systems Theory argues that to understand how world-systemic economic systems unfold, one must also look at long-term cycles of capital accumulation and the waxing and waning of hegemonic powers over the *longue durée* (Arrighi 1994).

The recent world-systems literature suggests that the relational position and role of a state, firm, or locality within the global world-system determines its prospects for development. For example, the global economic system is conceptualized as an agglomeration of overlapping global production networks (GPNs) consisting of transnational corporations (TNCs; which are networks within networks [i.e., each TNC is a network of firms, and each component/node of the TNC network is linked to nodes of other TNC networks and global production networks]), states, and geographic localities (Dicken 2011). On the level of firms, it matters where one is within a TNC network. In both production driven (e.g., capital intensive manufacturing industries like the automobile industry) and demand driven commodity chains (e.g., the textile and garment industries) outsourced producers at the lowest end of the production chain reap the smallest benefits (profits), whereas branded retailers, for example, reap most of the value-added returns associated with the branding of the particular product. At the level of localities, localities that both experience TNC capital injections (e.g., through FDIs) that result in positive net gains, and possess local firms that have not only sufficient

absorptive capacities, but also positive linkages with TNCs that foster the transfer of knowledge and experience, will be stimulated (Bair and Gereffi 2001). At the level of states, it matters where one is positioned within the global division of labor. Core countries with the economic, political, military, and technological means to innovate, design, and produce capital intensive products control bases of production and the global order of trade and financialization. Through regional and multinational agreements and institutions, powerful core countries are able to define the rules of the game (e.g., [free] trade regulations, international property laws/regimes, etc.) (Bair and Gereffi 2001; Chang 2008). Finally, at the regional level, successful arrangements between multiple countries can foster development in the economies of the states involved.

In sum, one's relative position along all of these levels/dimensions – the firm, locality, state, and region – determine economic growth and socioeconomic polarization both within and across states. World-systems theorists contend that it therefore does not suffice to look at development across units of one level of analysis at one particular point in time. Instead, one must consider the interconnections between units within a particular level of analysis as well as the interconnections between multiple levels of analysis over time to fully comprehend the world-systemic forces that shape national and regional development trajectories. Under this logic, the cultures of countries may therefore become increasingly homogenous, not because all countries modernize and acquire a common “modernized culture” (like modernization theory would predict), but because economic power is manifested as cultural imperialism where the cultures and values of core capitalist countries (governments and multinational corporations) are uniformly forced upon and adopted by peripheral countries.

World Society Theory

Emerging independently around the same time as its economics-leaning sociological counterpart, World Society Theory offered an alternative imagery of a world system – one premised on a global culture. World Society Theory is a system-theoretic cultural theory developed by sociological neoinstitutionalists such as John W. Meyer and colleagues at Stanford University in the late 1970s to make sense of similarities in form, behavior, and/or identities across disparate individuals, organizations, and states across

the world (Jepperson 2002). Meyer (1982:266) responds to Wallerstein by suggesting that the world system he envisions is undergirded by a global culture: "Wallerstein relies on an exaggerated notion of capitalist power, and deemphasizes the legitimacy of this power, as progress, in the West. The presence of this wider evolving culture provided a legitimating base for the unusual world Wallerstein writes about." For World Society Theory, the driving force behind the modern global order is a modern world culture of institutionalized norms, models, and cognitive scripts premised on Western Christendom and Enlightenment ideals of progress and justice that are upheld by a sprawling globally institutionalized apparatus of international organizations, instruments, and professionals (i.e., world polity) (Meyer et al. 1997). By virtue of its foundations in scientized, standardized, universalized, and impartial knowledge and expertise, this culture (i.e., globally institutionalized cognitive scripts) is authoritative and it constitutes the actors under its cultural canopy, shaping their ontological realities of proper modern actorhood and privileging rationality and individuality as desirable qualities (Drori 2008).

Because actors enact these global cognitive scripts rather than engage in calculated purposive decisions, they are not true *actors*; instead, they are *agents* acting on behalf of culturally legitimated globally institutionalized scripts of proper modern actorhood (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). In this way, these actors *qua* agents may behave and identify in ways that seem irrational and counter to functionalist and realist logics.

Furthermore, these institutionalized cognitive scripts of proper modern actorhood are ideals that are too lofty for any individual, organization, or state to fully realize (Meyer 2009). Though these actors *qua* agents strive to realize these ideals because doing so is not only deemed desirable but also "natural," they often fail. A state may, in good faith or matter-of-factly, commit to improving the human rights conditions of a vulnerable social group within its sovereign territory by ratifying a relevant international convention and vowing accordingly to harmonize its domestic laws, only to fail to uphold such commitments due to lack of resources, domestic political inertia, and/or public interest. Such decoupling between policy and practice becomes visible and increasingly problematized by the growing number of disinterested agents (e.g., concerned citizens who advocate selflessly for others) who are constitutive of and empowered by global cognitive scripts of proper actorhood that espouse ideals of justice and equality. These

agents look out for the general public's collective interests and essentially serve as watchdogs for government accountability (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). As these agents mobilize to effect policy change, they also bring about larger social changes (Meyer 2010).

If disparate agents exist under the same cultural canopy of globally institutionalized cognitive scripts, are constitutive of that culture, and accordingly enact what is deemed to be a shared understanding of modern actorhood, it is easy to explain why they might display isomorphic tendencies in behavior and identities. Unlike World-Systems Theory's imagery of a hegemonic culture steamrolling over local cultures resulting in cultural homogeneity that reflects the interests of the core (countries), World Society Theory envisions an uneven and gradual diffusion of modern world cultural cognitive models that inform agents of proper actorhood. These cognitive models are not coerced upon agents and are enacted to the extent that they are deemed legitimate and realizable. The result is overarching isomorphism punctuated with decoupled and contradictory realities.

Synthesis and Critiques

Both system-level theories may be useful (on various levels and degrees) for explaining cultural homogenization across countries, but only World Society Theory focuses on culture as the driving force of change towards homogenization. World-Systems Theory's primary focus is on explaining how global economic relations are tied to global inequalities, and cultural homogeneity is a byproduct. Below, I discuss the limitations of World-Systems Theory vis-à-vis World Society Theory and set up the latter for subsequent discussions on its limitations and strengths.

Emerging in reaction to modernization theory, World-Systems Theory provides a corrective in which explanations for economic development are couched in the context of a country's relational and structural position to other countries within the inherently unfair global capitalist system of production. Utilizing relational network approaches and extensive data across long periods of time, World-Systems Theory provides a structured and systematic framework that improves upon older conceptualizations of criteria for development. Empirical evidence has shown that countries do not develop in a linear and universalistic fashion and that the world is much more complex.

World-Systems Theory, however, is not without its weaknesses. Empirical studies abound in which World-Systems Theory predictions on inequality have been incorrect. For example, the theory does not assume a country can “move up the ladder” from periphery to core as long as the core-periphery exploitation relationship exists. However, South Korea and many of the newly industrialized countries in Asia have demonstrated staggering levels of development and movement up the ladder on the core-periphery continuum. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the dependency logic of the global capitalist system causes inequality and poverty, or if poverty itself has caused peripheral countries to become dependent on core countries. Finally, World-Systems Theory has difficulty in explaining cross-national cultural homogeneity in areas that do not directly serve the interests of the core capitalist countries. For example, adherence to global norms on human rights and environmental protection may necessitate government efforts that run counter to narrowly defined state economic and political interests, yet not only peripheral countries, but also core countries have ratified international treaties on these issues and have even harmonized their domestic laws. On the organizational level, multinational corporations adhere to corporate social responsibility norms – sometimes at the expense of increased profit – and have adopted more humane and environmentally friendly business models and operations. As a relationist approach, World-Systems Theory offers a powerful explanation for general homogeneity *within* the core or periphery and differences *between* the core and periphery, but it has difficulty in explaining patterns of similarity that span the entire world system.

World Society Theory fills this important lacuna in (cultural) globalization theorization by providing an explanation for the global convergence or isomorphism between entities that are fundamentally different (see DiMaggio and Powell [1983] for more on isomorphism, and Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan [1997] for an example). However, in focusing on global culture as the explanatory variable for cultural homogenization, World Society Theory presents an overall structuralist argument that (deliberately) downplays the agency and interests of actors. It is therefore important to clarify theoretical assumptions and delineate the theory’s strengths/uniqueness and limitations/blind spots. Below, I attempt to do this by drawing on similarities and contrasts with its close cognate in political science, IR constructivism. I begin with a brief introduction of the IR

constructivist perspective.

IR Constructivism

International Relations (IR) constructivism emerged in the 1990s in reaction to IR neorealism and neoliberalism (Checkel 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001). Neorealism assumes that states are unitary and utility-maximizing rational actors with material-based interests (e.g., inherent desire for power or survival) that within an anarchic world of states, are asserted through military and political power (e.g., hard power) (Waltz 1979). Neoliberalism (i.e., complex interdependence and variants of IR institutionalism) contends that although states are the primary actors, international organizations such as INGOs and IGOs also play an important role in influencing state behavior and interests as well as the relationships between states. Neoliberalism considers states as rational actors that can be willing to cooperate with other states and non-state actors to realize their interests (Keohane and Nye 2001; Nye 2004).

Constructivism emerged in response to these perspectives, arguing for the primacy of ideas and social interaction in constructing state identities and therefore state action. Within the constructivist perspective of international relations, there are multiple types of constructivisms ranging from thin-constructivist approaches that lean closer to realism and thick-constructivist approaches that have considerable overlap with sociological neoinstitutionalism in their emphases on social interaction and the role of norms in influencing and constructing state interests and identity (Wendt 1999).

Unlike neorealists and neoliberals who treat interests as “a given” by the structure of the state system, relegating state identities and interests to immutable characteristics, constructivists contend that meaning is contested and negotiated through social interaction, and it is through this *process* that states’ interests may shift as identities shift, and that the dynamics of anarchy (and the state system) may be altered (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996). For constructivists, because identities and interests are malleable, they should be treated as dependent variables – not independent variables – that can be explained by social interaction. Wendt (1992:395) famously stated, “Anarchy is what states make of it,” emphasizing that there is nothing inherent about anarchy that presupposes power politics and self-help, or aggressive and mistrustful behavior that stems from narrowly defined self-interests to ensure national security. Rather, we could

imagine an anarchic world in which states acquire more cooperative identities (and are therefore less risk averse, insecure, and threatening with less aggressive and predatory interests) through processes of social interaction in which intersubjective and relational definitions of the “other” as “foe” are redefined or reconstructed as “friend.” If through social interactions and the expectations produced by responses in such interactions, a state comes to think of other states as inherently cooperative, then that realization may alter its perception of its role (vis-à-vis other states) within the international community, thereby resulting in shifts in interests and behavior that reflect its existence in a more pacifist world. Therefore, according to Wendt (1992:397), it is “collective meanings that constitute the structures which organize our actions.” Created through interactions, these institutions (e.g., *norms* such as sovereignty, self-help, etc.), or structures of identities and interests, are “collective knowledge” – something that exists over and above the actors that constitute it and can have coercive force over actors as an objective “social fact” that encourages certain behaviors over others. But because these institutions are constructed by actors themselves, institutions and actors are mutually constitutive and malleable (Wendt 1992). In this way, constructivism gives primacy to structure, but at the same time, leaves room for agency via communicative practices (and a la Foucault and Habermas, within these discourses, power) on the part of its constituent actors (Risse 2007:136-139). Interests and identities are therefore ontologically conceived as endogenous to the state system, and through the practices or processes of social interaction, they may be altered by what actors do. Constructivism therefore paints a relatively dynamic picture of the state system.

Similarities and Differences and Strengths and Weaknesses

Both World Society theorists and IR constructivists agree that institutions (defined in World Society Theory as global norms, scripts, and cognitive models) or norms (defined in IR constructivism as “standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” [Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:891]) influence state behavior, and that structure and actors (e.g., states) are mutually constitutive. However, for World Society theorists, agents *enact* global norms and scripts, but for constructivists, actors *strategically negotiate* global norms. This fundamental difference speaks to the two approaches’

diverging views on the level of agency actors are assumed to have.

One explanation for this divergence – despite the many areas in which the two overlap – stems from how each perspective explains the origin(s) of the cultural norms and cognitive scripts that outline the contours of appropriate behavior. World Society Theory conceives of a world culture of institutionalized cultural scripts of proper modern actorhood that can be traced back to its Western and Enlightenment roots. Although historically contingent, in contrast to perspectives based on logics of cultural imperialism, this world culture does not reflect the narrow interests of any particular state or individual; instead, it is conceived as an outgrowth of history that informs the legitimacy of rationalized and individualized behavior, identities, and ontological realities of actors in the modern era. Actors – including states – under this cultural canopy, are constitutive of these scripts, and enact them. They may exercise choice in doing so, but the range of choices they can draw from, and how they choose to choose lies within the possibilities that ontologically exist in the modern world culture. Therefore, actors may effect change on existing cultural scripts to institutionalize new ones, but these efforts are understood to be couched within a broader world cultural context.

As such, in her introduction to and comparative critique of sociological neoinstitutionalism (including World Society Theory), Finnemore (1996:326-328) claims that sociological neoinstitutionalism is a system-level theoretic framework that endogenizes historical change and substantively specifies the content of a global social structure (i.e., world culture), allowing the perspective to generate testable hypotheses. She contrasts this to IR constructivist research on norms and culture that tends to be “structured around specific issue-areas and therefore argues that particular norms matter in particular issue-areas,” and adds that “constructivists have not made an integrated argument about how the various norms in different areas fit together” (Finnemore 1996:327).

This difference points to why IR constructivist scholars are generally more willing to view actors as exercising agency through communicative practices that are not power-neutral in content or engagement (Risse 2007:139) and normative contestations over “competing values and understandings of what is good, desirable, and appropriate in our collective communal life” (Finnemore 1996:342). Instead of exercising choice within and

under the ontological confines of a world culture, actors choose and negotiate as entities that are constitutive of a larger social structure that is constantly reified in reflection of the intersubjective understandings borne of negotiated (non-power-neutral) interactions between actors. Therefore, norms in specific issue areas emerge through the efforts of influential individuals, spillover effects from related norms, and world events or exogenous shocks that legitimate new values. Though some of these explanations are environmental and exogenous to norm entrepreneurs themselves, constructivists argue that actors can not only change existing norms, but also create and legitimate new ones. This subtle, yet crucial distinction guides theorists in each respective approach to make 1) different assumptions and considerations about the role of power in norm emergence and institutionalization; and 2) different assumptions about the dynamism of norms and institutions over time.

World Society Theory deliberately downplays the role of power in its explanations of the spread and diffusion of world culture because the primary carriers of world culture are powerless entities such as international organizations (INGOs, IGOs, etc.) or disinterested others whose authority (not power) derives from professionalization and expertise (Meyer 2010). The world polity is therefore considered to be a stateless democratic global polity that defines, legitimates, and maintains global norms, scripts, and cognitive models on appropriate behavior that are rooted in fundamental modern principles of justice, progress, rationality, and individualism. Disinterested others may set agendas to influence state behavior, but not only do they not use coercive force, they act without self-interest for the collective good of humanity (Meyer et al. 1997).

This differs fundamentally from constructivist conceptions of norm entrepreneurs (Sunstein 1996:909) who are *strategic* actors of socialization who persuade and aim to produce cognitive dissonance among norm violators (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 904). Sometimes norm entrepreneurs may even use material levers to strategically achieve desired ends (Payne 2001). The constructivist imagery is that at any given time, there are competing norms that norm entrepreneurs must either delegitimize (or “inappropriate”) or downplay in favor of their own claims (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:897). These assumptions lead to a conceptualization of norm entrepreneurs as agentic rational actors with interests (though these interests are not natural or *a priori*

and are constructed from social interaction). Constructivism therefore leaves room to theorize how the effects of structure on actors are not all-encompassing but tempered by the ability of norm entrepreneurs to purposively change the structural environment in which they are embedded.

Additionally, although both theories are relatively static theories because they both assume that through institutionalization, norms become taken-for-granted and take up a “natural” existence, they diverge in the degree to which institutions/norms are believed to be capable of dynamism and change. Because of its intentional bracketing of agency, World Society Theory does not leave much room for actor-initiated normative change. Additionally, as mentioned above, because of its system-level theoretic framework that places the origins and authority of world culture in institutionalized Western Enlightenment principles, the theory tends to see world culture as something that is relatively stable and path dependent. This is a strength if one’s goal is to make predictions, but focusing on equilibrium draws attention away from understanding why disequilibria, contradictions, and shifts in norms occur over time and geographic space. Constructivism focuses more narrowly on specific issue areas and their norms – including the norms’ lifecycles traced from emergence to internalization (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Within theorizations of such lifecycle processes, specific conditions under which certain ideas get institutionalized and diffused and others do not are elaborated, extending our understanding of the dynamics of norm emergence, contestation, and change.

In sum, World Society Theory draws its strengths and weaknesses from its bracketing of agency (Finnemore 1996). Bracketing agency allows one to focus on culture and structure to “denaturalize” what other theories (e.g., neorealism, neoliberalism, World-Systems Theory, etc.) take for granted as natural and real (e.g., the state, sovereignty, rationality, individualism, etc.). But doing so, to the extreme that World Society Theory does, poses the threat of precluding efforts to examine how socially constructed actors define, negotiate, and exercise identities and interests within the confines of an imagined modern world culture to affect larger structural and cultural change. At the expense of lacking a system-level theoretic framework, constructivism – with its structure–actor dialectic built into the theory itself – provides helpful conceptual, analytical, and

methodological tools to address these concerns. Despite the commonalities in their main thrusts, the two theoretical perspectives and their respective disciplines (sociology and political science) have unfortunately managed to talk past each other. Both World Society Theory and constructivism are not inherently incompatible, and much work needs to be done to marry their strengths.

Conclusion

World-Systems Theory and World Society Theory are two powerful sociological macro system-level theories that help inform our understandings of the modern globalized world. The former focuses on the global capitalist system of production and economic relations, and offers a structural and realist explanation for 1) the inequalities and differentiation across states located at different structural positions within the world-system; and 2) the tendency for cultural homogenization in the image of the core. In contrast, the latter conceives of a world steeped in a modern world culture of institutionalized cognitive scripts, and offers an institutional phenomenological explanation for both the overarching similarities observed across all actors and the contradictory decoupled characteristics, behaviors, and identities these same actors simultaneously possess. World-Systems Theory does not directly problematize culture, whereas World Society Theory deliberately brackets agency, interests, and power – all crucial elements of the global capitalist world-system – to pull back the curtain on the workings of institutionalized cultural scripts on agent behavior and identities. The two theories are not opposites, but rather problematize different sides of the same proverbial coin of global social relations and change. IR constructivism – which compared to World Society Theory, lies a bit more towards the realist end of the realist-phenomenological theoretical spectrum – may offer insights into how the theoretical strengths and logics of both macro system-level theories can be married into a coherent framework to help further more nuanced and rigorous global and comparative research.

¹ Assistant Professor, Sophia University (Tokyo, Japan); rhosoki@sophia.ac.jp

² See Wallerstein (1991:191) on his disambiguation between his usage of “world-systems” and A. G. Frank’s “world system.” Wallerstein’s (1974:347) original

definition of the world-system is a “multicultural territorial division of labor in which the production and exchange of basic goods and raw materials is necessary for the everyday life of its inhabitants.”

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