

Constructivism and Liberalism:

Approaching Pandemics

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A pandemic can be defined as “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people”.¹ Pandemics are global governance issues, as they are an issue a single country or government is unable to independently resolve.² Instead, countries must work together to tackle these problems. Many different theories propose how the international community should function to tackle global governance issues. This essay will discuss two theories, constructivism and liberalism. Constructivism argues that each country will approach issues differently, as they have different values and ideologies.³ Countries can however work together through their epistemic communities, or communities of experts working together to transmit information and possible solutions.⁴ Liberalism on the other hand gives a specific ideology that it claims to be superior involving free trade, human rights, equality and free markets.⁵ It says countries should work together through global governance institutions.⁶ This essay will argue constructivism is the best method to control epidemics as it allows states to have a more individualized approach, and uses expert communities to drive policy. In comparison, liberalism is an ineffective method to control epidemics as it provides a strict ideology and utilizes inefficient global governance institutions.

Constructivism

Constructivism is an effective theory for addressing global governance issues such as pandemics as it allows for states to have an individualised approach, and it uses epistemic

¹ Heath Kelly, “The classical definition of a pandemic is not elusive.” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 89 (7), (2011): 540, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2471/BLT.11.088815>

² Philip Giurlando, “Lecture 3: Realism and Liberalism,” (Lecture, POST-2230, Trent University. September 29th 2021).

³ John Balis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*. 8th Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 198.

⁴ Philip Giurlando, “Lecture 4: Constructivism,” (Lecture, POST-2230, Trent University. October 4th 2021).

⁵ Giurlando, “Lecture 3: Realism and Liberalism.”

⁶ Giurlando, “Lecture 3: Realism and Liberalism.”

communities to create unified policy.⁷ In addition, there are also several costs and considerations to be taken into account, but their impact can be mitigated. Costs such as inconsistent policies, and brain drain and considerations such as capacities to make policy, and coordinating many groups may make collaboration more complicated. Despite these costs and considerations, constructivism remains the best approach for dealing with collective action problems such as pandemics.

The first reason why constructivism is an effective theory for addressing global governance issues such as pandemics is because it allows for states to have an individualized approach to forming policy. Constructivism states that each country determines its own policies based on the values, identity, and norms of society.⁸ In pandemics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, each country has different capabilities, and different values. Countries such as the United States (US) value freedom over saving the most lives possible, and as such pursued a policy where they attempted to prevent healthcare overload, rather than zero deaths.⁹ In comparison, New Zealand had different values, and pursued a zero cases policy for much of the pandemic.¹⁰ Constructivism allows countries to make different policy decisions based on their societal values. Forcing the US to curb personal freedoms, or New Zealand to allow for more cases and deaths would have likely been met with anger, but allowing them to pursue individualised internal policies the implementation to follow the values and capabilities of the state.

⁷ Giurlando, "Lecture 4: Constructivism."

⁸ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 193.

⁹ Shianne Comben, Anita Forward, and Atanu Sarkar, "COVID-19 Pandemic Responses of Canada and United States in First 6 months: A Comparative Analysis," *The International Journal of Health Planning and Management* (2021): 10, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/hpm.3323>.

¹⁰ Matt Boyd, Osman D Mansoor, Michael G Baker, and Nick Wilson. "Economic Evaluation of Border Closure for a Generic Severe Pandemic Threat Using New Zealand Treasury Methods," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 42, no. 5 (2018): 445, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12818>.

The second reason as to why constructivism is an effective theory for addressing global governance issues such as pandemics is because it utilizes epistemic communities. Epistemic communities are groups of experts that work together to transmit knowledge and create policy.¹¹ These experts are able to transmit information about the problem, and ideas for solutions across borders.¹² Epistemic communities allow for expert-driven policy making, rather than policy-making being driven by government officials who may not have specialized experience.¹³ Epistemic communities not only allow for individual countries to make better policies, but also allow policies to be similar between states as countries will often mimic good policy seen elsewhere.¹⁴ Epistemic communities help to popularize and create successful policies, and having similar policies worldwide promotes cooperation between countries.

Constructivism allows countries to create individualised policy, but still work together through epistemic communities. Despite the benefits of constructivism there are two main costs. The first is that there is no single policy approach to the issue as each country makes their own policies. This issue can be seen today in the similar, but slightly different travel rules between countries. For example, unvaccinated travellers entering Canada are subject to a 14 day quarantine.¹⁵ Whereas in the UK unvaccinated travellers are subject to a 10 day quarantine.¹⁶ While this is not a large difference and likely would not add to the success rate or ability to collaborate between countries, it does add to confusion. The second issue is that epistemic communities may be less effective in countries with less developed academic communities.

¹¹ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 536.

¹² Giurlando, "Lecture 4: Constructivism."

¹³ Giurlando, "Lecture 4: Constructivism."

¹⁴ Giurlando, "Lecture 4: Constructivism."

¹⁵ "COVID-19 vaccinated travellers entering Canada," Travel, Testing and Borders, Accessed November 2nd, 2021, <https://travel.gc.ca/travel-covid/travel-restrictions/covid-vaccinated-travellers-entering-canada>.

¹⁶ "What are the UK's travel rules and what tests do I need for a holiday?" Coronavirus Pandemic. Accessed November 1st, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-52544307>.

Many poorer countries suffer from brain drain, where the educated leave the country.¹⁷ While there still may be brain circulation, where the scholars that have left continue to contribute, this may pose an additional barrier.¹⁸ While this may not be devastating to a country's policy, it would add to their difficulties in forming policy.

There are also several considerations that need to be kept in mind when pursuing a constructivist approach. The first consideration is a moral one. Not all countries have the same capabilities and constructivists must discuss how the international community will aid those with lower capabilities. During a pandemic, healthcare capacity is important, and some countries have a smaller or less effective health care system.¹⁹ One way this could be addressed is through using epistemic communities to share information, and to encourage aid sharing to areas with lower capabilities. The second consideration is a practical one. It is difficult to coordinate international programs with no centralized coordinating organization. This could be addressed through institutional isomorphism which is where organizations that share the same environment, come to resemble each other.²⁰ In pandemics each country will likely develop similar organizations which would have an easier time communicating, as they would understand each other.²¹ While there would be no worldwide organization, these organizations could collaborate to create world-wide programs and policies.

While constructivism does have costs and considerations, these issues are not insurmountable, and through collaboration, these issues can be resolved. Overall, constructivism is an effective method for solving collective action problems such as pandemics, as it allows

¹⁷ Yasmin Y Ortega, Meng-Hsuan Chou, Gunjan Sondhi, and Jue Wang, "Academic 'Centres,' Epistemic Differences and Brain Circulation," *International Migration* 56, no. 5 (2018): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12354>.

¹⁸ Ortega, Chou, Sondhi, and Wang, "Academic 'Centres,' Epistemic Differences and Brain Circulation," 90.

¹⁹ Combden, Forward, and Sarkar, "COVID-19 Pandemic Responses of Canada and United States in First 6 months: A Comparative Analysis," 11.

²⁰ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 201.

²¹ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 201.

countries to have freedom in policymaking, yet provides opportunities to collaborate and form similar policies through epistemic communities.

Liberalism

Liberalism, while an interesting theory, is not a good approach to solving collective action problems such as pandemics as it forces countries to conform to an ideology, which may not be best suited for their current situation, and it emphasizes ineffective global governance institutions. In addition, liberalism has several costs and considerations to be taken into account including causing increased case numbers and anger due to policy inflexibility as well as it being difficult to successfully implement liberal policies. As liberalism has these flaws, it is not a good system for addressing collective action problems such as pandemics.

The first reason why liberalism is an ineffective theory for addressing global governance issues such as pandemics is it forces countries to conform to an ideology and create liberal policies. Liberalism advocates for free trade, human rights, equality, personal freedom and free markets.²² It is also an assimilationist policy and believes its ideology is superior.²³ Thus, it does not leave room for other countries to create different policies based on their values. States would no longer have nimble policy-making to adapt to rapidly changing situations, and situations unique to their country. Instead, they would be forced to keep their markets open to international trade and maintain personal freedoms which may further spread disease as countries would not be able to close their borders, or have lockdowns.²⁴ This is a moral consideration of liberalism as by preventing lockdown additional deaths may occur. In addition, this is also a practical consideration, as countries may be pressured to implement policies that their systems do not have

²² Giurlando, "Lecture 3: Realism and Liberalism."

²³ Giurlando, "Lecture 3: Realism and Liberalism."

²⁴ Balis, Smith and Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*, 107.

the capacity to handle. For example, countries may be forced to keep markets open, but this may cause an unbearable burden on the healthcare system. As liberalism has a defined ideology and assimilates others into this ideology, it would not allow countries to pursue individualized policies which may be more effective.

The second reason why liberalism is an ineffective theory for addressing global governance issues such as pandemics is it relies on ineffective global governance institutions. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, these institutions have been criticized. One of these, the World Health Organization (WHO), has made two major errors during the pandemic. The first is at the beginning they encouraged countries to not close their borders.²⁵ This was liberal advice, as it encouraged free markets and free trade. However, this is widely believed now to have been a mistake, as leaving borders open allowed for uncontrolled community spread within countries, overloading healthcare systems resulting in many deaths.²⁶ The second error made by the WHO was the failure of COVAX. COVAX was created to provide vaccines for countries unable to procure them on their own, to equalize vaccination rates across the world.²⁷ However, this has not happened as those in rich countries like Canada have most of their populations vaccinated, whereas Africa, which is typically poorer, has only partially vaccinated 8.5% of its population.²⁸ COVAX promised equality but has vastly failed to deliver. This is an additional cost of liberalism, as states may become frustrated with the ineffective organizations that they are

²⁵ Matt Boyd, Michael G. Baker, Osman D. Mansoor, Giorgi Kvizhinadze, and Nick Wilson, "Protecting an island nation from extreme pandemic threats: Proof-of-concept around border closure as an intervention," *PLoS ONE* 12, no. 6 (2017): 2, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A495706069/AONE?u=ocul_thomas&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=5aca5b2a.

²⁶ Boyd, Baker, Mansoor, Kvizhinadze, and Wilson, "Protecting an island nation from extreme pandemic threats," 10.

²⁷ Lisa M Herzog, Ole F Norheim, Ezekiel J Emanuel, and Matthew S McCoy, "Covax Must Go Beyond Proportional Allocation of Covid Vaccines to Ensure Fair and Equitable Access," *The BMJ* 372 (2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m4853>.

²⁸ "Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World." *The New York Times*. Accessed November 1st, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html>.

pressured to use. A practical consideration is that these systems, even if they did work, would have to have all countries signed on to them to be effective. As not all countries are willing to be involved or contribute, these systems would not achieve their goals, even if structured properly. This demonstrates that even if international organizations exist, it does not mean they give good advice or are able to successfully implement policies.

The ineffectiveness of liberalism, its high costs, and practical and moral considerations demonstrate liberalism is not a good plan for addressing collective action problems such as pandemics. Liberalism would force countries to take on ineffective policies and would force them to be involved with ineffective global organizations. The high costs, considerations, and ineffectiveness of liberalism means it should not be the policy used to address the pandemic and other collective action issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, constructivism is the best theory for approaching collective action problems such as pandemics. Constructivism allows for a nimble and individualized policy response, as well as expert-driven collaboration through epistemic communities. In comparison, liberalism is not a good theory for approaching pandemics. It forces countries to conform to an ideology from which to create policy, and it relies on ineffective global governance institutions. While constructivism is not a perfect solution and has considerations and costs that need to be taken into account, it is an effective solution for countries to create policy within. Pandemics are not an issue easily fixed, but through countries working together and supporting each other, progress can be made on a solution, and the destructive nature of pandemics can be limited.

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