Social constructivism

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MEB401 Teorie bezpečnosti a metodologie / MEB427 Bezpečnost: teorie a koncepty

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Outline

- Constructivism as a social theory
- The construction of social reality (John Searle)

- Discourse
- Frame
- Mini-case study

Constructivism as a social theory

- **Idealism:** social world is primarily created and driven by ideas
- **Interpretativism:** social phenomena do not exist independently of our interpretations of them

- Thus: social world **is being constructed**

- Social constructivism is **not an IR theory**
- It is **a social theory** that provides an explanation or understanding of social organization as such

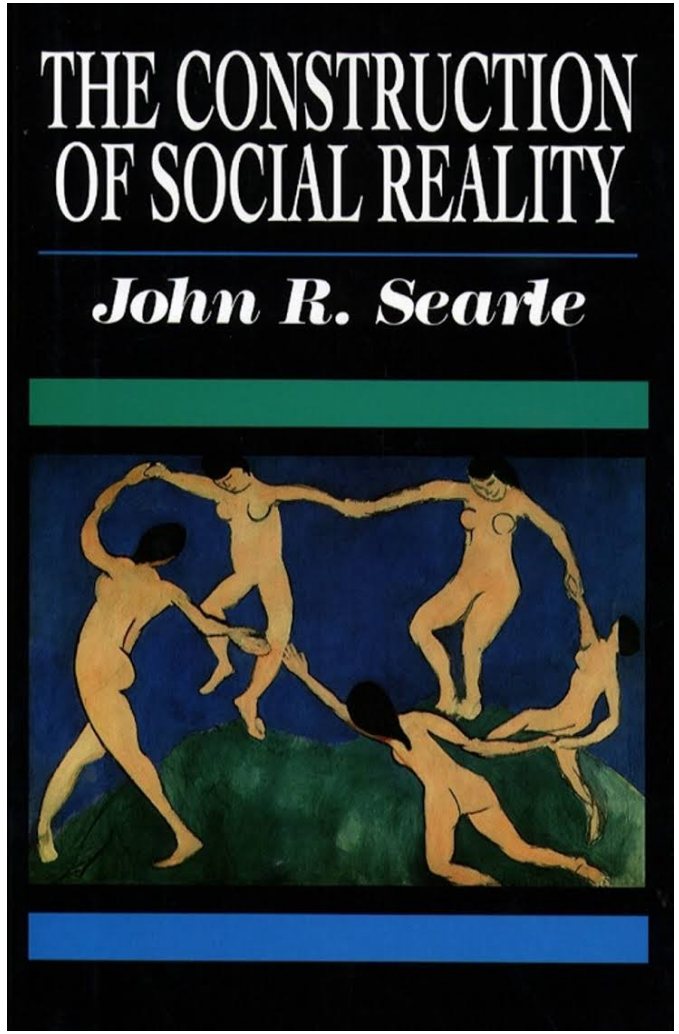
Strong vs. weak constructivism

- Weak constructivism:
  - Allows causal explanations
  - Allows objective knowledge
  - (Differentiates between brute and social facts)

- Strong constructivism:
  - Rejects the concept of causality
  - Rejects the possibility of objective knowledge
  - (There are only social facts)

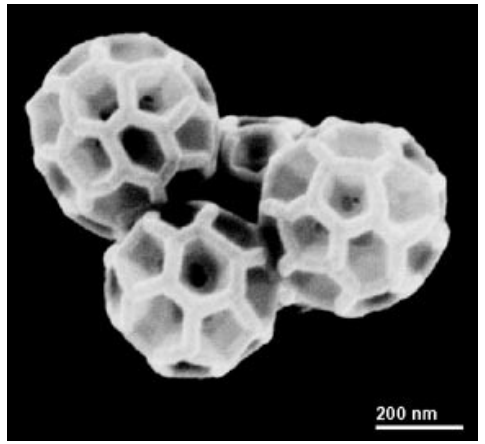
John Searle: The Construction of Social Reality

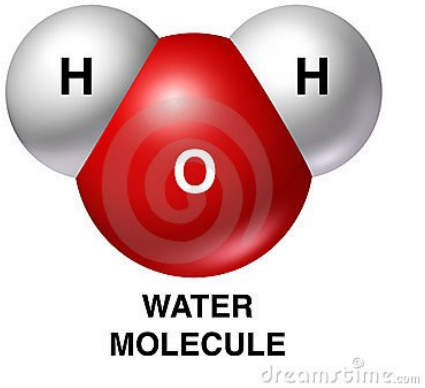
- Brute vs. **social/institutional facts**
- **Function assignment**
- Individual vs. **collective intentionality** (~ subjectivity vs. **intersubjectivity**)
- Regulatory vs. **constitutive rules**



Brute vs. social facts

- **Brute facts:**
  - Mind-independent
  - Independent on other facts





- **Social facts:**
  - Mind-dependent
  - Dependent on social context, i.e. language, actions etc.

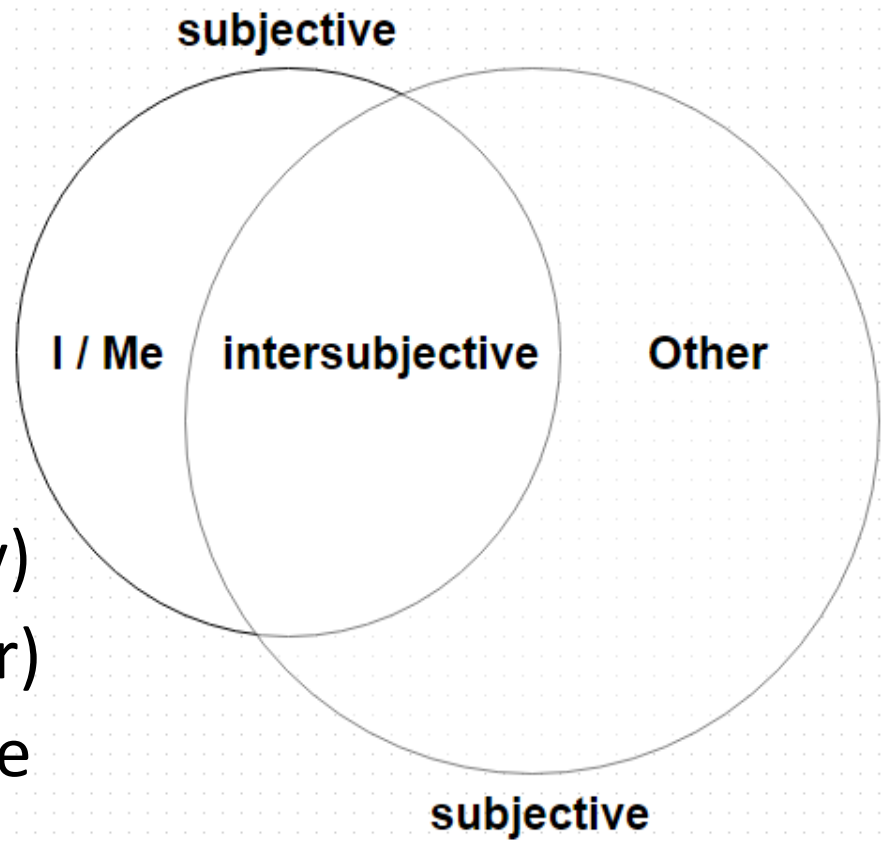
Collective intentionality / intersubjectivity

- The **intersubjectivity** is established through convergence of expectations about self and Others

  → social facts always exceed individual level

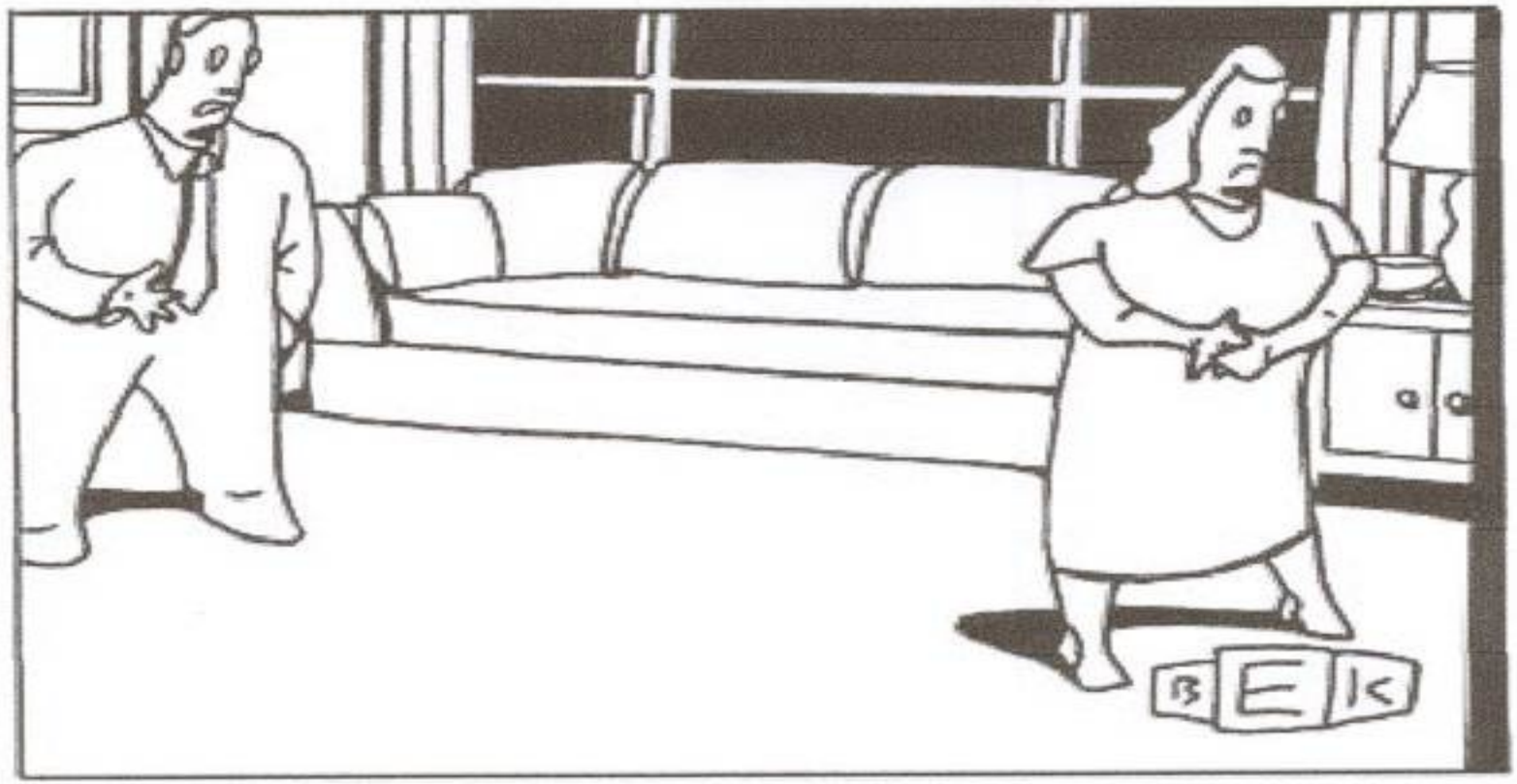
  → social facts are always intersubjective

- **E.g.:** I can really play ice hockey (I) only if
  we have shared understandings (intersubjectivity)
  of my role (Me) as well as of role of others (Other)
  in the game and about what constitutes the game



Levels of Dyadic Intersubjectivity

Bruce Eric Kaplan, *New Yorker* (10/26/1998)



"Of course I care about how you imagined I thought you perceived I wanted you to feel."

Function assignment

- The **function of a given object is not inherent**, it is assigned to the object by its use

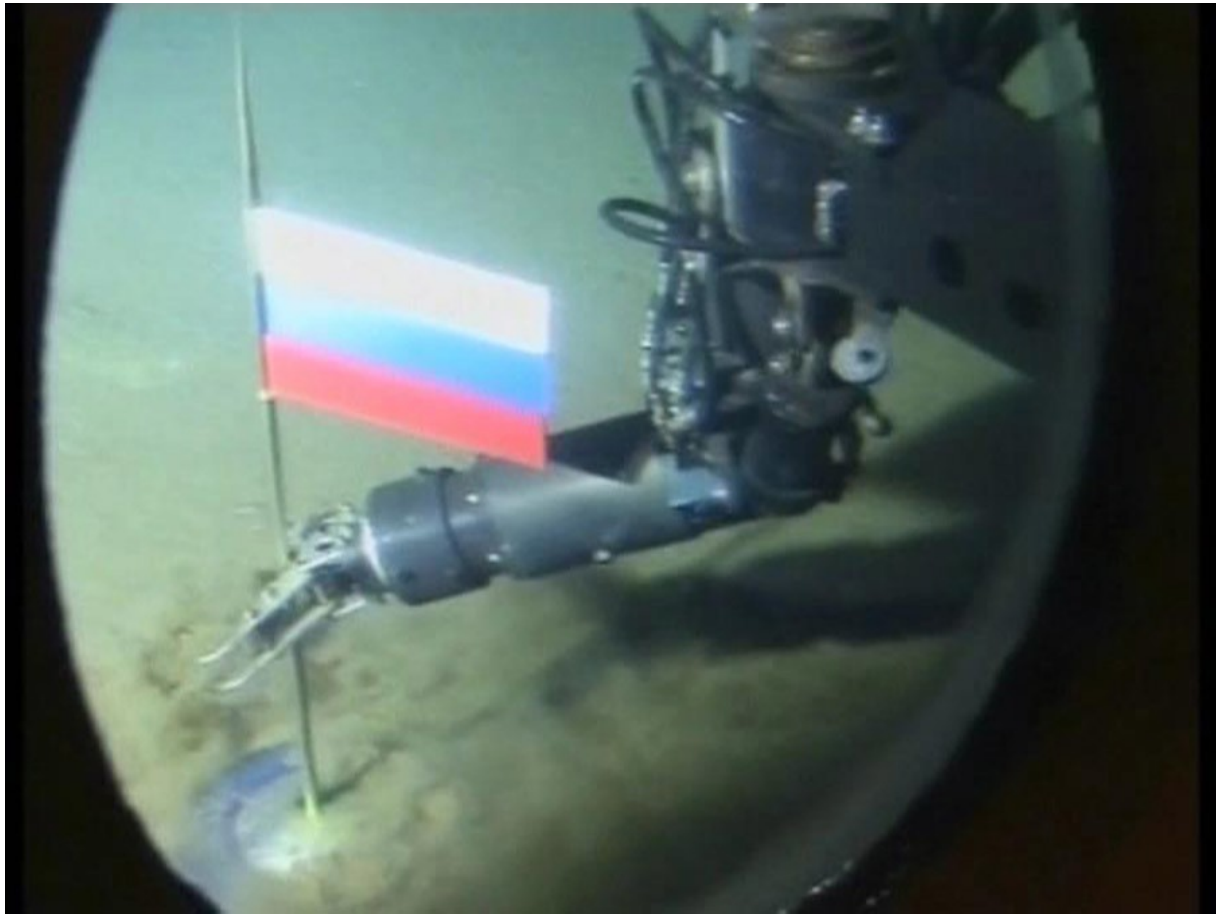
- A parallel with Wittgenstein's "tool theory of meaning"

- **General form** of a status function:

  X counts as Y in context of Z

- **E.g.:** boots (X) count as goal posts (Y) while playing ice hockey at a pond (Z)

백두의 혁명정신



Regulatory vs. constitutive rules

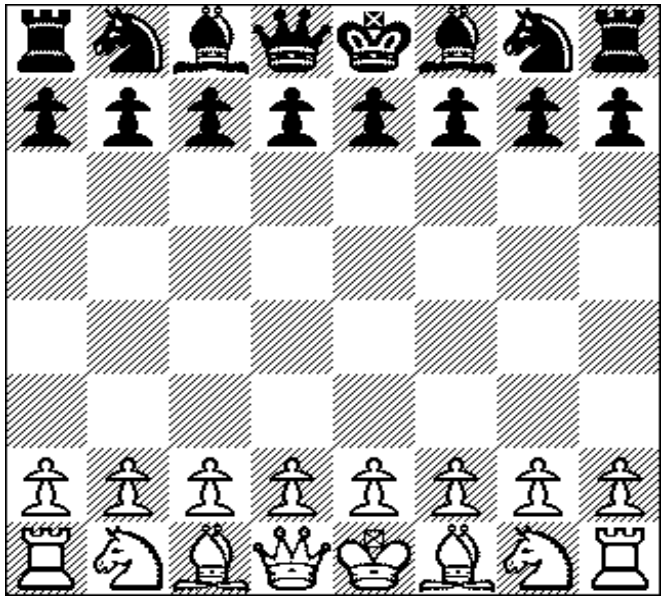
- **Regulatory rules** govern existing activities

  → activities do not depend on them

- **Constitutive rules** not only regulate, but also create/constitute given activities

  → activities do depend on (are made of) them

- Any **examples** of constitutive rules in international politics?



Social construction

Sovereignty as a social construction

Sovereignty as a social construction

Discourse

- Discourse: **an institutionalized use of language** and other meaning systems (images, gestures etc.)

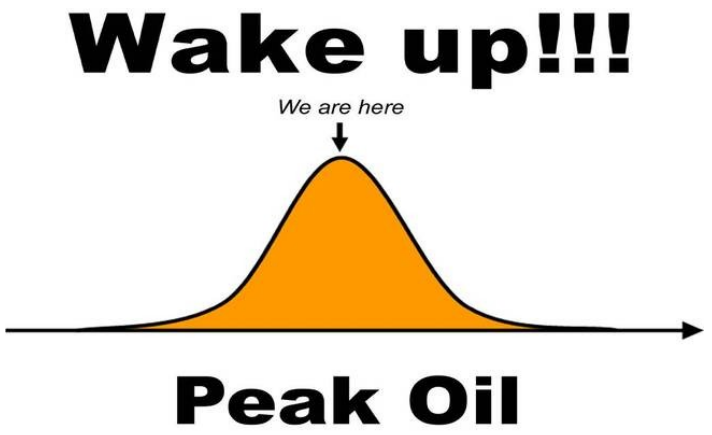
- Discourse provides, more or less, **coherent account of some issue**

- It shapes how we speak and think about the issue

  → **power is exerted and maintained through discursive operations**

- We are embedded in **a plurality of overlapping discourses**

Malthusian discourse



Frame / framing

- Frame: **a shared interpretative scheme** through which actors understand and promote certain version of reality

- Actors – via framing – **strategically** emphasize or suppress certain aspects of a given issue

- The purpose of framing: **promote own interpretation of the issue → make it hegemonic** (critically unquestioned)

Framing: climate change

Framing: climate change

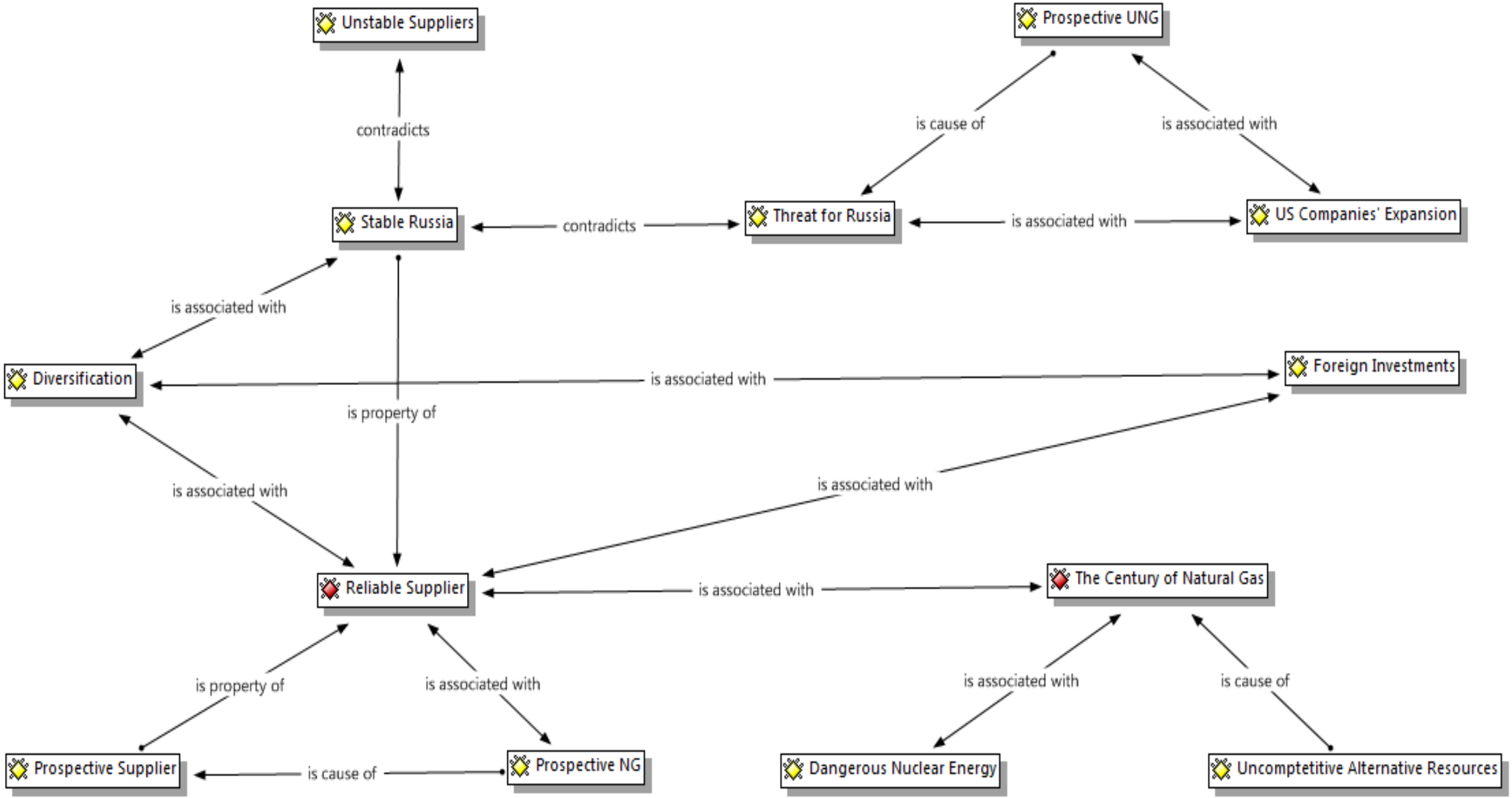
(Contra)framing: climate change

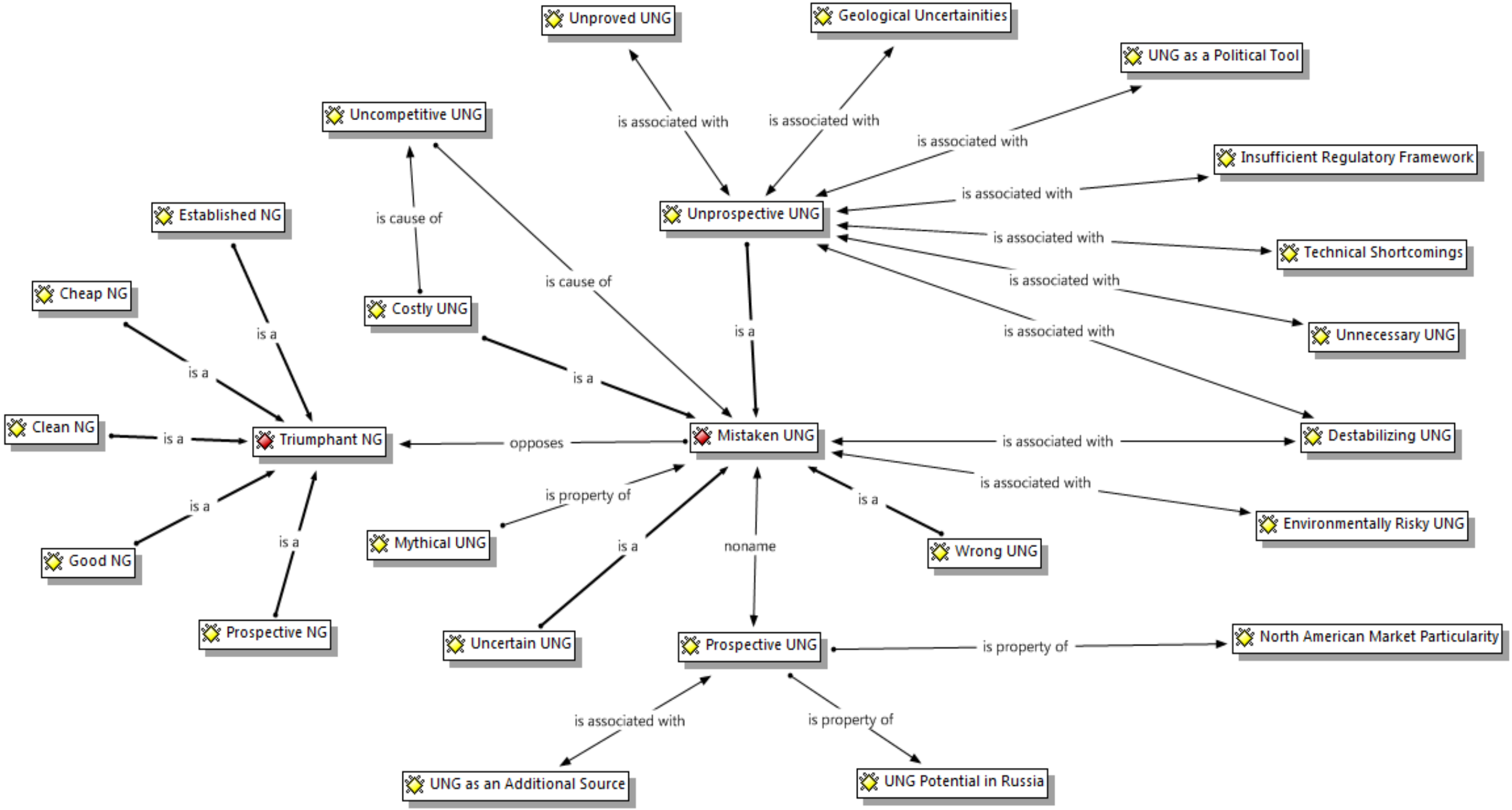
Constructivist analysis: mini-case

- Framing of unconventional natural gas resources (UNG) in Russian foreign policy in 2009 - 2011

- **RQ:** how is the meaning of UNG constructed? Through which frames it is promoted?

- For details: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301421514002171


Unstable Suppliers
contradicts
Stable Russia
contradicts
Threat for Russia
Prospective UNG
is cause of
is associated with
is associated with
US Companies' Expansion
is associated with
Diversification
is associated with
Foreign Investments
is property of
is associated with
is associated with
Reliable Supplier
is associated with
The Century of Natural Gas
is property of
is associated with
is associated with
is cause of
Prospective Supplier
is cause of
Prospective NG
Dangerous Nuclear Energy
Uncomptetitive Alternative Resources


Unproved UNG
Geological Uncertainities
UNG as a Political Tool
Uncompetitive UNG
is associated with
is associated with
is associated with
Insufficient Regulatory Framework
Established NG
is cause of
Unprospective UNG
is associated with
Technical Shortcomings
is associated with
Cheap NG
Costly UNG
is cause of
is a
is associated with
Unnecessary UNG
is a
is a
is a
Clean NG
is a
Triumphant NG
opposes
Mistaken UNG
is associated with
Destabilizing UNG
is associated with
is property of
is a
Environmentally Risky UNG
is a
is a
Mythical UNG
is a
noname
Wrong UNG
Good NG
is a
Prospective NG
Uncertain UNG
Prospective UNG
is property of
North American Market Particularity
is associated with
is property of
UNG as an Additional Source
UNG Potential in Russia

Concluding remarks

- Constructivism **challenges materialism and essentialism**
- Every institution is **historically and socially conditioned**
  → **subversive potential**
- Constructivism **links the use of language with power relationships**
  → **emancipatory potential**
- Constructivism accepted as a (mainly) ontological framework by many post-rationalist approaches (critical approaches, post-structuralism, to some extent New materialism)