

The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory

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A challenger to the continuing dominance of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism in the study of international relations in the United States, constructivism is regarded with a great deal of skepticism by mainstream scholars.¹ While the reasons for this reception are many, three central ones are the mainstream's miscasting of constructivism as necessarily postmodern and antipositivist; constructivism's own ambivalence about whether it can buy into mainstream social science methods without sacrificing its theoretical distinctiveness; and, related to this ambivalence, constructivism's failure to advance an alternative research program. In this article, I clarify constructivism's claims, outline the differences between "conventional" and "critical" constructivism, and suggest a research agenda that both provides alternative understandings of mainstream interna-

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1. The canonical neorealist work remains Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). The debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism is presented and summarized in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Constructivist challenges can be found in Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Yosef Lapid and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, eds., *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1996).

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tional relations puzzles and offers a few examples of what constructivism can uniquely bring to an understanding of world politics.

Constructivism offers alternative understandings of a number of the central themes in international relations theory, including: the meaning of anarchy and balance of power, the relationship between state identity and interest, an elaboration of power, and the prospects for change in world politics. Constructivism itself should be understood in its *conventional* and *critical* variants, the latter being more closely tied to critical social theory. The conventional constructivist desire to present an alternative to mainstream international relations theory requires a research program. Such a program includes constructivist reconceptualizations of balance-of-threat theory, the security dilemma, neoliberal cooperation theory, and the democratic peace. The constructivist research program has its own puzzles that concentrate on issues of identity in world politics and the theorization of domestic politics and culture in international relations theory.

Conventional Constructivism and Issues in Mainstream International Relations Theory

Since constructivism is best defined in relation to the issues it claims to apprehend, I present its position on several of the most significant themes in international relations theory today.

ACTORS AND STRUCTURES ARE MUTUALLY CONSTITUTED

How much do structures constrain and enable the actions of actors, and how much can actors deviate from the constraints of structure? In world politics, a structure is a set of relatively unchangeable constraints on the behavior of states.² Although these constraints can take the form of systems of material dis/incentives, such as a balance of power or a market, as important from a constructivist perspective is how an action does or does not reproduce both the actor and the structure.³ For example, to the extent that U.S. appeasement in Vietnam was unimaginable because of U.S. identity as a great power,

2. Most important for this article, this is the neorealist conceptualization of international structure. All references to neorealism, unless otherwise noted, are from Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

3. Friedrich Kratochwil suggests that this difference in the understanding of structure is because structuralism entered international relations theory not through sociolinguistics, but through microeconomics. Friedrich V. Kratochwil, "Is the Ship of Culture at Sea or Returning?" in Lapid and Kratochwil, *The Return of Culture and Identity*, p. 211.

military intervention constituted the United States as a great power. Appeasement was an unimaginable act. By engaging in the “enabled” action of intervention, the United States reproduced its own identity of great power, as well as the structure that gave meaning to its action. So, U.S. intervention in Vietnam perpetuated the international intersubjective understanding of great powers as those states that use military power against others.

Meaningful behavior, or action,⁴ is possible only within an intersubjective social context. Actors develop their relations with, and understandings of, others through the media of norms and practices. In the absence of norms, exercises of power, or actions, would be devoid of meaning. Constitutive norms define an identity by specifying the actions that will cause Others to recognize that identity and respond to it appropriately.⁵ Since structure is meaningless without some intersubjective set of norms and practices, anarchy, mainstream international relations theory’s most crucial structural component, is meaningless. Neither anarchy, that is, the absence of any authority above the state, nor the distribution of capabilities, can “socialize” states to the desiderata of the international system’s structure absent some set of meaningful norms and practices.⁶

A story many use in first-year international relations courses to demonstrate the structural extreme, that is, a situation where no agency is imaginable, illustrates the point. The scenario is a fire in a theater where all run for the exits.⁷ But absent knowledge of social practices or constitutive norms, structure, even in this seemingly overdetermined circumstance, is still indeterminate. Even in a theater with just one door, while all run for that exit, who goes first? Are they the strongest or the disabled, the women or the children, the aged or the infirm, or is it just a mad dash? Determining the outcome will require knowing more about the situation than about the distribution of material power or the structure of authority. One will need to know about the culture, norms, institutions, procedures, rules, and social practices that constitute the actors and the structure alike.

4. The critical distinction between action and behavior is made by Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 33–81.

5. Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, “Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security,” in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. 54.

6. David Dessler, “What’s At Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?” *International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 459–460.

7. Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962).

ANARCHY AS AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

Given that anarchy is structural, it must be mutually constituted by actors employing constitutive rules and social practices, implying that anarchy is as indeterminate as Arnold Wolfers's fire. Alexander Wendt has offered a constructivist critique of this fundamental structural pillar of mainstream international relations theory.⁸ But still more fundamentally, this move opens the possibility of thinking of anarchy as having multiple meanings for different actors based on their own communities of intersubjective understandings and practices. And if multiple understandings of anarchy are possible, then one can begin to theorize about different domains and issue areas of international politics that are understood by actors as more, or less, anarchic.

Self-help, the neorealist inference that all states should prefer security independence whenever possible, is a structurally determined behavior of an actor only to the extent that a single particular understanding of anarchy prevails.⁹ If the implications of anarchy are not constant across all relationships and issue areas of international politics, then a continuum of anarchies is possible. Where there are catastrophic consequences for not being able to rely on one's own capacity to enforce an agreement, such as arms control in a world of offensive military advantage, neorealist conceptualizations of anarchy are most apt. But where actors do not worry much about the potential costs of ceding control over outcomes to other states or institutions, such as in the enforcement of trade agreements, this is a realm of world politics where neorealist ideas of anarchy are just imaginary.

IDENTITIES AND INTERESTS IN WORLD POLITICS

Identities are necessary, in international politics and domestic society alike, in order to ensure at least some minimal level of predictability and order.¹⁰ Durable expectations between states require intersubjective identities that are sufficiently stable to ensure predictable patterns of behavior. A world without

8. Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), 391–425.

9. Elizabeth Kier, for example, shows how the same "objective" external structural arrangement of power cannot account for French military strategy between the two world wars. Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and French Military Doctrine before World War II," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, pp. 186–215.

10. The focus on identity does not reflect a lack of appreciation for other elements in the constructivist approach, such as norms, culture, and institutions. Insofar as identities are the most proximate causes of choices, preferences, and action, I concentrate on them, but with the full recognition that identities cannot be understood without a simultaneous account of normative, cultural, and institutional context.

identities is a world of chaos, a world of pervasive and irremediable uncertainty, a world much more dangerous than anarchy. Identities perform three necessary functions in a society: they tell you and others who you are and they tell you who others are.¹¹ In telling you who you are, identities strongly imply a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of action in particular domains, and with respect to particular actors.

The identity of a state implies its preferences and consequent actions.¹² A state understands others according to the identity it attributes to them, while simultaneously reproducing its own identity through daily social practice. The crucial observation here is that the producer of the identity is not in control of what it ultimately means to others; the intersubjective structure is the final arbiter of meaning. For example, during the Cold War, Yugoslavia and other East European countries often understood the Soviet Union as Russia, despite the fact that the Soviet Union was trying hard not to have that identity. Soviet control over its own identity was structurally constrained not only by East European understanding, but also by daily Soviet practice, which of course included conversing with East Europeans in Russian.

Whereas constructivism treats identity as an empirical question to be theorized within a historical context, neorealism assumes that all units in global politics have only one meaningful identity, that of self-interested states. Constructivism stresses that this proposition exempts from theorization the very

11. Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 255. Although there are many accounts of the origin of identity, I offer a cognitive explanation because it has minimal a priori expectations, assuming only that identities are needed to reduce complexity to some manageable level.

12. Dana Eyre and Mark Suchman, for example, find that, controlling for rational strategic need, domestic coalition politics, and superpower manipulation, countries in the third world prefer certain weapons systems over others because of their understanding of what it means to be "modern" in the twentieth century. Dana P. Eyre and Mark C. Suchman, "Status, Norms, and the Proliferation of Conventional Weapons: An Institutional Theory Approach," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, pp. 73–113. Other examples of empirical research that have linked particular identities to particular sets of preferences are "civilized" identities driving attitudes toward weapons of mass destruction; notions of what constitutes "humanitarian" shaping decisions to intervene in other states; the identity of a "normal" state implying particular Soviet foreign policies; and "antimilitarist" identities in Japan and German shaping their post-World War II foreign policies. These arguments can be found in Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear and Chemical Weapons Taboos," pp. 114–152; Martha Finnemore, "Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention," pp. 153–185; Robert Herman, "Identity, Norms, and National Security: The Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution and the End of the Cold War," pp. 271–316; and Thomas U. Berger, "Norms, Identity, and National Security in Germany and Japan," pp. 317–356. All of the above are in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*. On identity and mutual intelligibility, see Roxanne Lynn Doty, "The Bounds of 'Race' in International Relations," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Winter 1993), p. 454.

fundamentals of international political life, the nature and definition of the actors. The neorealist assumption of self-interest presumes to know, a priori, just what is the self being identified. In other words, the state in international politics, across time and space, is assumed to have a single eternal meaning. Constructivism instead assumes that the selves, or identities, of states are a variable; they likely depend on historical, cultural, political, and social context.

Constructivism and neorealism share the assumption that interests imply choices, but neorealism further assumes that states have the same a priori interests. Such a homogenizing assumption is possible only if one denies that interests are the products of the social practices that mutually constitute actors and structures.¹³ Given that interests are the product of identity, that is, having the identity "great power" implies a particular set of interests different from those implied by the identity "European Union member," and that identities are multiple, constructivist logic precludes acceptance of pregiven interests.¹⁴

By making interests a central variable, constructivism explores not only how particular interests come to be, but also why many interests do not. The tautological, and therefore also true, most common, and unsatisfying explanation is that interests are absent where there is no reason for them, where promised gains are too meager. Constructivism, instead, theorizes about the meaning of absent interests. Just as identities and interests are produced through social practices, missing interests are understood by constructivists as produced absences, omissions that are the understandable product of social practices and structure. The social practices that constitute an identity cannot imply interests that are not consistent with the practices and structure that constitute that identity. At the extreme, an actor would not be able to imagine an absent interest, even if presented with it.¹⁵

13. Robert Keohane calls the failure to contextualize interests one of the major weaknesses of mainstream international relations theory. Robert O. Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (December 1988), pp. 390–391.

14. Jeffrey Legro, for example, has shown how the preferences of great powers before and during World War II with respect to the use and nonuse of strategic bombing, and chemical and submarine warfare, are unfathomable without first understanding the identities of the military organizations responsible for shaping those preferences. Jeffrey W. Legro, "Culture and Preferences in the International Cooperation Two-Step," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (March 1996), pp. 118–137.

15. See, for example, Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence," and Kier, "Culture and French Military Doctrine before World War II," p. 203. For a brilliant account of how social structure enables and impedes the construction of identity and interest, see Jane K. Cowan, "Going Out for Coffee? Contesting the Grounds of Gendered Pleasures in Everyday Sociability," in Peter Loizos and Evthymios Papataxiarchis, eds., *Contested Identities: Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 196–197.

The consequences of this treatment of interests and identities work in the same direction as constructivism's account of structure, agency, and anarchy: states are expected to have (1) a far wider array of potential choices of action before them than is assumed by neorealism, and (2) these choices will be constrained by social structures that are mutually created by states and structures via social practices. In other words, states have more agency under constructivism, but that agency is not in any sense unconstrained. To the contrary, choices are rigorously constrained by the webs of understanding of the practices, identities, and interests of other actors that prevail in particular historical contexts.

THE POWER OF PRACTICE

Power is a central theoretical element for both mainstream and constructivist approaches to international relations theory, but their conceptualizations of power are vastly different. Neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism assume that material power, whether military or economic or both, is the single most important source of influence and authority in global politics.¹⁶ Constructivism argues that both material and discursive power are necessary for any understanding of world affairs. I emphasize both because often constructivists are dismissed as unrealistic for believing in the power of knowledge, ideas, culture, ideology, and language, that is, discourse.¹⁷ The notion that ideas are a form of power, that power is more than brute force, and that material and discursive power are related is not new. Michel Foucault's articulation of the power/knowledge nexus, Antonio Gramsci's theory of ideological hegemony, and Max Weber's differentiation of coercion from authority are all precursors to constructivism's position on power in political life.¹⁸ Empirical work exists

16. A rare effort in the mainstream literature to break away from this focus on material power is Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

17. As R.B.J. Walker has clarified, "To suggest that culture and ideology are crucial for the analysis of world politics is not necessarily to take an idealist position. . . . On the contrary, it is important to recognize that ideas, consciousness, culture, and ideology are bound up with more immediately visible kinds of political, military, and economic power." In R.B.J. Walker, "East Wind, West Wind: Civilizations, Hegemonies, and World Orders," in Walker, ed., *Culture, Ideology, and World Order* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), p. 3. See also Onuf, *World of Our Making*, p. 64. Joseph Nye's conceptualization of "soft" power could be usefully read through a constructivist interpretation. See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), esp. pp. 173–201.

18. Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1997*, by Michel Foucault (Brighton, Sussex, U.K.: Harvester Press, 1980); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed., Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International

in both international relations theory and security studies that demonstrates the need to appreciate both the material and the discursive aspects of power.¹⁹ Given that the operation of the material side of power is familiar from the mainstream literature, here I concentrate on the discursive side, the power of practice in constructivism.

The power of social practices lies in their capacity to reproduce the intersubjective meanings that constitute social structures and actors alike. The U.S. military intervention in Vietnam was consistent with a number of U.S. identities: great power, imperialist, enemy, ally, and so on. Others observing the United States not only inferred U.S. identity from its actions in Vietnam, but also reproduced the intersubjective web of meaning about what precisely constituted that identity. To the extent, for example, that a group of countries attributed an imperialist identity to the United States, the meaning of being an imperialist state was reproduced by the U.S. military intervention. In this way, social practices not only reproduce actors through identity, but also reproduce an intersubjective social structure through social practice. A most important power of practice is its capacity to produce predictability and so, order. Social practices greatly reduce uncertainty among actors within a socially structured community, thereby increasing confidence that what actions one takes will be followed by certain consequences and responses from others.²⁰

An actor is not even able to act as its identity until the relevant community of meaning, to paraphrase Karl Deutsch,²¹ acknowledges the legitimacy of that

Publishers, 1992); and Max Weber, *From Max Weber*, ed., Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

19. Price and Tannenwald show that even power as material as nuclear missiles and chemical artillery had to be understood and interpreted before it had any meaning. In Price and Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence." Robert Cox has provided an account of the rise, reproduction, and demise of nineteenth-century British supremacy, and the rise and reproduction of U.S. dominance in the twentieth century through a close reading of the interaction between material and discursive power. Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 126–155.

20. Onuf sees these reproducible patterns of action as the product of "reflexive self-regulation," whereby agents refer to their own and other's past and anticipated actions in deciding how to act. Onuf, *World of Our Making*, p. 62.

21. Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (New York: MIT Press, 1953), pp. 60–80. Deutsch was a constructivist long ahead of his time to the extent that he argued that individuals could not engage in meaningful action absent some community-wide intersubjectivity. Another work constructivist in essence is Robert Jervis's *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970). Applying Erving Goffman's self-presentation theory to international politics, Jervis pointed out that state actions, such as gunboat diplomacy, were meaningless unless situated in a larger intersubjective community of diplomatic practice.

action, by that actor, in that social context. The power of practice is the power to produce intersubjective meaning within a social structure. It is a short step from this authorizing power of practice to an understanding of practice as a way of bounding, or disciplining interpretation, making some interpretations of reality less likely to occur or prevail within a particular community.²² The meanings of actions of members of the community, as well as the actions of Others, become fixed through practice; boundaries of understanding become well known. In this way, the ultimate power of practice is to reproduce and police an intersubjective reality.²³ Social practices, to the extent that they authorize, discipline, and police, have the power to reproduce entire communities, including the international community, as well as the many communities of identity found therein.²⁴

State actions in the foreign policy realm are constrained and empowered by prevailing social practices at home and abroad. Richard Ashley, for example, writes of a foreign policy choice as being a kind of social practice that at once constitutes and empowers the state, defines its socially recognized competence, and secures the boundaries that differentiate the domestic and international economic and political spheres of practice and, with them, the appropriate domains in which specific actors may secure recognition and act competently. Finally, Ashley concludes, foreign policy practice depends on the existence of intersubjective “precedents and shared symbolic materials—in order to impose interpretations upon events, silence alternative interpretations, structure practices, and orchestrate the collective making of history.”²⁵

Although I have necessarily concentrated on articulating how discursive power works in this section, the power to control intersubjective understanding is not the only form of power relevant to a constructivist approach to world politics. Having resources that allow oneself to deploy discursive power—the economic and military wherewithal to sustain institutions neces-

22. See Doty, “The Bounds of Race,” p. 454; and Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 12, No. 32 (Summer 1987), pp. 687–718.

23. See Richard K. Ashley, “Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problématique,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 1988), p. 243, for a discussion of this process.

24. Richard K. Ashley, “The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space: Toward a Critical Social Theory of International Politics,” *Alternatives*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (October–December 1987), p. 409.

25. Richard K. Ashley, “Foreign Policy as Political Performance,” *International Studies Notes* (1988), p. 53.

sary for the formalized reproduction of social practices—is almost always part of the story as well.

CHANGE IN WORLD POLITICS

Constructivism is agnostic about change in world politics.²⁶ It restores much variety and difference to world affairs and points out the practices by which intersubjective order is maintained, but it does not offer any more hope for change in world politics than neorealism. Constructivism's insight that anarchy is what states make of it, for example, implies that there are many different understandings of anarchy in the world, and so state actions should be more varied than only self-help. But this is an observation of already-existing reality, or, more precisely, a set of hypotheses about the same. These different understandings of anarchy are still rooted in social structures, maintained by the power of practice, and quite impervious to change. What constructivism does offer is an account of how and where change may occur.

One aspect of constructivist power is the power to reproduce, discipline, and police. When such power is realized, change in world politics is very hard indeed. These intersubjective structures, however, although difficult to challenge, are not impregnable. Alternative actors with alternative identities, practices, and sufficient material resources are theoretically capable of effecting change. Robert Cox's account of British and American supremacy, for example, perhaps best illustrates the extraordinary staying power of a well-articulated ideological hegemony, but also its possible demise. And Walker rightly observes that constructivism, to the extent that it surfaces diversity, difference, and particularity, opens up at least potential alternatives to the current prevailing structures.²⁷ Constructivism conceives of the politics of identity as a continual contest for control over the power necessary to produce meaning in a social group. So long as there is difference, there is a potential for change.

Thus, contrary to some critics²⁸ who assert that constructivism believes that change in world politics is easy, that "bad" neorealist structures need only be thought away, in fact constructivism appreciates the power of structure, if for no other reason than it assumes that actors reproduce daily their own constraints through ordinary practice. Constructivism's conceptualization of the

26. Critical constructivism denies this vigorously.

27. R.B.J. Walker, "Realism, Change, and International Political Theory," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (March 1987), pp. 76–77.

28. See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Winter 1994/1995), pp. 5–49, esp. 37–47.

relationship between agency and structure grounds its view that social change is both possible and difficult. Neorealism's position that all states are meaningfully identical denies a fair amount of possible change to its theoretical structure.

In sum, neorealism and constructivism share fundamental concerns with the role of structure in world politics, the effects of anarchy on state behavior, the definition of state interests, the nature of power, and the prospects for change. They disagree fundamentally, however, on each concern. Contra neorealism, constructivism assumes that actors and structures mutually constitute each other; anarchy must be interpreted to have meaning; state interests are part of the process of identity construction; power is both material and discursive; and change in world politics is both possible and difficult.

Constructivisms: Conventional and Critical

To the degree that constructivism creates theoretical and epistemological distance between itself and its origins in critical theory, it becomes "conventional" constructivism. Although constructivism shares many of the foundational elements of critical theory, it also resolves some issues by adopting defensible rules of thumb, or conventions, rather than following critical theory all the way up the postmodern critical path.²⁹ I situate constructivism in this way to highlight both its commonalities with traditional international relations theory and its differences with the critical theory with which it is sometimes misleadingly conflated.³⁰ Below I sketch out the relationship between conventional constructivism and critical social theory by identifying both those aspects of critical theory that constructivism has retained and those it has chosen to conventionalize. The result, conventional constructivism, is a collection of principles distilled from critical social theory but without the latter's more consistent theoretical or epistemological follow-through. Both critical and conventional constructivism are on the same side of the barricades in Yosef Lapid's characterization of the battle zone: the fixed, natural, unitary, stable, and

29. Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein differentiate the kind of "sociological" analysis performed in their volume from the "radical constructivist position" of Richard Ashley, David Campbell, R.B.J. Walker, and Cynthia Weber. See Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture," p. 46, notes 41 and 42.

30. As, for example, in Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," wherein constructivism, reflectivism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism are all reduced to "critical theory," p. 37, note 128.

essence-like, on the one (mainstream international relations theory) hand, and the emergent, constructed, contested, interactive, and process-like, on the other (constructivist) one.³¹

Conventional and critical constructivism do share theoretical fundamentals. Both aim to "denaturalize" the social world, that is, to empirically discover and reveal how the institutions and practices and identities that people take as natural, given, or matter of fact, are, in fact, the product of human agency, of social construction.³² Both believe that intersubjective reality and meanings are critical data for understanding the social world.³³ Both insist that all data must be "contextualized," that is, they must be related to, and situated within, the social environment in which they were gathered, in order to understand their meaning.³⁴ Both accept the nexus between power and knowledge, the power of practice in its disciplinary, meaning-producing, mode.³⁵ Both also accept the restoration of agency to human individuals. Finally, both stress the reflexivity of the self and society, that is, the mutual constitution of actor and structure.³⁶

Perhaps where constructivism is most conventional is in the area of methodology and epistemology. The authors of the theoretical introduction to *The Culture of National Security*, for example, vigorously, and perhaps defensively, deny that their authors use "any special interpretivist methodology."³⁷ The authors are careful to stress that they do not depart from "normal science" in this volume, and none of the contributors either deviates from that ground or questions whether it is appropriate.³⁸ This position is anathema to critical theory which, as part of its constitutive epistemology, has a lengthy bill of particulars against positivism.

31. Yosef Lapid, "Culture's Ship: Returns and Departures in International Relations Theory," in Lapid and Kratochwil, *The Return of Culture and Identity*, pp. 3–20.

32. Mark Hoffman, "Critical Theory and the Inter-Paradigm Debate," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer 1987), pp. 233–236.

33. Ashley, "The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space," p. 403.

34. In this respect, both critical and conventional constructivism can be understood as sharing an interpretivist epistemology, more generally. See Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man."

35. James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy. A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford, U.K.: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 4.

36. R.B.J. Walker, "World Politics and Western Reason: Universalism, Pluralism, Hegemony," in Walker, *Culture, Ideology, and World Order*, p. 195; and Ashley, "The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space," pp. 409–410.

37. Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture," p. 67.

38. The only, even partial, exceptions are Price and Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence," and Michael N. Barnett, "Institutions, Roles, and Disorder: The Case of the Arab States System," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (September 1993), pp. 271–296.

Conventional constructivism, while expecting to uncover differences, identities, and multiple understandings, still assumes that it can specify a set of conditions under which one can expect to see one identity or another. This is what Mark Hoffman has called “minimal foundationalism, accepting that a contingent universalism is possible and may be necessary.” In contrast, critical theory rejects either the possibility or the desirability of a minimal or contingent foundationalism.³⁹ Ashley chides all noncritical approaches for “anticipating analysis coming to a close.” In allowing for such premature closure, the analyst participates in the normalization or naturalization of what is being observed, and risks hiding the patterns of domination that might be revealed if closure could only be deferred.⁴⁰ To reach an intellectually satisfying point of closure, constructivism adopts positivist conventions about sample characteristics, methods of difference, process tracing, and spuriousness checks. In making this choice, critical theorists argue, constructivism can offer an understanding of social reality but cannot criticize the boundaries of its own understanding, and this is precisely what critical theory is all about.⁴¹

So, for example, Thomas Berger makes claims about Japanese and German national identities that imply a certain outcome for an indefinite period of time to come.⁴² Such a claim requires the presumed nonexistence of relevant unobservables, as well as the assumption that the practices, institutions, norms, and power relations that underlay the production of those identities are somehow fixed or constant. Critical theorists would see this as an illusion of control; none of these factors can be so easily immobilized for either analysis or prediction.

This difference manifests itself as well in how critical and conventional constructivism understand identity. Conventional constructivists wish to discover identities and their associated reproductive social practices, and then offer an account of how those identities imply certain actions. But critical theorists have a different aim. They also wish to surface identities, not to articulate their effects, but to elaborate on how people come to believe in a

39. Mark Hoffman, “Restructuring, Reconstruction, Reinscription, Rearticulation: Four Voices in Critical International Theory,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring 1991), p. 170. David Campbell argues that no identity (or any other theoretical element for that matter) may be allowed to be fixed or final. It must be critically deconstructed as soon as it acquires a meaning. David Campbell, “Violent Performances: Identity, Sovereignty, Responsibility,” in Lapid and Kratochwil, *The Return of Culture and Identity*, pp. 164–166. See also Stephen J. Rosow, “The Forms of Internationalization: Representation of Western Culture on a Global Scale,” *Alternatives*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (July–September 1990), p. 289, for differences on this issue.

40. Ashley, “The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space,” p. 408.

41. Hoffman, “Restructuring, Reconstruction, Reinscription, Rearticulation,” p. 232.

42. Berger, “Norms, Identity, and National Security in Germany and Japan.”

single version of a naturalized truth. In other words, critical theory aims at exploding the myths associated with identity formation, whereas conventional constructivists wish to treat those identities as possible causes of action. Critical theory thus claims an interest in change, and a capacity to foster change, that no conventional constructivist could make.

In addition, and in a related vein, critical theorists self-consciously recognize their own participation in the reproduction, constitution, and fixing of the social entities they observe.⁴³ They realize that the actor and observer can never be separated. Conventional constructivists ignore this injunction, while largely adopting interpretivist understandings of the connectivity of subjects with other subjects in a web of intersubjective meaning. The observer never becomes a subject of the same self-reflective critical inquiry.

Conventional and critical constructivists also split over the origins of identity.⁴⁴ Whereas conventional constructivists accommodate a cognitive account for identity, or offer no account at all, critical constructivists are more likely to see some form of alienation driving the need for identity. As remarked above, conventional constructivism accepts the existence of identities and wants to understand their reproduction and effects, but critical constructivists use critical social theory to specify some understanding of the origin of identity. Tzvetan Todorov and Ashis Nandy, for example, assume that European identities were incomplete (indeed, every self is incomplete without an other) until they encountered peoples in the Americas and India, respectively.⁴⁵ The necessity of difference with an other to produce one's own identity is found in Hegel's bondsman's tale, where the more powerful slaveowner can neither know his own identity nor exercise his superior power until his slave, his other, helps him construct that identity through practice. Perhaps conventional constructivism could accept this assumption: the need for others to construct oneself, but critical constructivism moves beyond this position with the aid of Nietzsche, Freud, and Lacan.⁴⁶ The former allows difference to reign, whereas

43. Cynthia Weber points this out as a very important distinction between her approach to the state and more modernist approaches. Weber similarly separates conventional constructivists from critical theorists. Max Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 3.

44. For a review of this issue see Friedrich Kratochwil, "Is the Ship of Culture at Sea or Returning?" pp. 206–210.

45. The discussion of the work of Todorov and Nandy is in Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, "Knowing Encounters: Beyond Parochialism in International Relations Theory," in Lapid and Kratochwil, *The Return of Culture and Identity*, pp. 65–84.

46. For an account of identity based on these three theorists, see Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

the latter implies either the assimilation of the other, if deemed equal, or his oppression, if inferior.⁴⁷

Critical theory's approach toward identity is rooted in assumptions about power.⁴⁸ Critical theorists see power being exercised in every social exchange, and there is always a dominant actor in that exchange. Unmasking these power relations is a large part of critical theory's substantive agenda; conventional constructivism, on the other hand, remains "analytically neutral" on the issue of power relations. Although conventional constructivists share the idea that power is everywhere, because they believe that social practices reproduce underlying power relations, they are not necessarily interested in interrogating those relations. Critical theory's assumption that all social relations are instances of hierarchy, subordination, or domination ironically appears similar to the expectations of realists and neorealists about world politics.⁴⁹ The different conceptualizations of power imply different theoretical agendas. Whereas conventional constructivism is aimed at the production of new knowledge and insights based on novel understandings, "critical theory analyzes social constraints and cultural understandings from a supreme human interest in enlightenment and emancipation."⁵⁰

Although conventional and critical constructivism share a number of positions—mutual constitution of actors and structures, anarchy as a social construct, power as both material and discursive, and state identities and interests as variables—conventional constructivism does not accept critical theory's ideas about its own role in producing change and maintains a fundamentally different understanding of power.⁵¹

47. Inayatullah and Blaney, "Knowing Encounters," pp. 65–66. For a very useful analysis of how different accounts of identity have made their way through feminist theorizing, see Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

48. My views on the differences separating critical and conventional constructivist positions on power were shaped in conversation with Jim Richter.

49. See Arturo Escobar, "Discourse and Power in Development: Michel Foucault and the Relevance of His Work to the Third World," *Alternatives*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (October–December 1984), esp. pp. 377–378.

50. This is taken from Andrew Linklater, "The Question of the Next Stage in International Relations Theory: A Critical-Theoretical Point of View," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring 1992), p. 91, and is based on his interpretation of Jürgen Habermas. For a view on precisely the point of the emancipatory power of critical theory, see Chris Brown, "Turtles All the Way Down: Anti-Foundationalism, Critical Theory, and International Relations," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer 1994), p. 219.

51. For an alternative account of international relations theory from a critical theory perspective in which conventional constructivism's positions can be found as well, see Richard K. Ashley, "Three Modes of Economism," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (December 1983), pp. 477–491. On the construction of anarchy, in particular, see Ashley, "Untying the Sovereign

A Constructivist Research Agenda

This section aims at moving constructivism from the margins⁵² by articulating a loosely Lakatosian research program for a constructivist study of international relations.⁵³ I present this research agenda in three sections. The first step is to show that constructivism offers competing understandings of some key puzzles from mainstream international relations theory. The second move is to suggest what new and innovative puzzles constructivism promises to raise. The last step is for constructivism to point out its own weaknesses.

MAINSTREAM PUZZLES, CONSTRUCTIVIST SOLUTIONS

Constructivism can provide alternative accounts of the balance of threat, security dilemmas, neoliberal institutionalist accounts of cooperation under anarchy, and the liberal theory of the democratic peace.

BALANCE OF THREAT. Neorealism tells us that states ally against power. Steven Walt rightly observed that this is empirically wrong. He suggested, instead, that states ally against threats. The attempted fix was to claim that states will balance, not against power, but against particular kinds of power. The latter is the power possessed by a relatively capable, geographically proximate state with offensive military capabilities and perceived hostile intentions.⁵⁴ Whereas geographical proximity and offensive military capacity can be established a priori, perceived intentions threaten tautology. Several constructivist scholars have pointed to balance of threat as one of the mainstream

State," p. 253. In addition, conventional constructivism is more willing to accept the ontological status of the state when theorizing, whereas critical theory demands that the state remain a zone of contestation, and should be understood as such; its autonomous existence should not be accepted. For the former conventional view, see Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), p. 72. For the critical view of the state, see Ashley, "Untying the Sovereign State," pp. 248–251.

52. For the challenge to constructivists to develop a research program or be marginalized, see Keohane, "International Institutions," p. 392. For criticism in a similar vein, see Thomas J. Biersteker, "Critical Reflections on Post-Positivism in International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (September 1989), p. 266.

53. It is a loose adaptation because, while I adopt Lakatosian criteria for what constitutes a progressive and degenerative shift in a research program, I do not adopt his standards of falsificationism or their associated "protective belts" of auxiliary hypotheses. See Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91–196.

54. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 5. By acknowledging that "one cannot determine a priori . . . which sources of threat will be most important in any given case; one can say only that all of them are likely to play a role," Walt does not offer a nontautological means for specifying threat. Quotation on p. 26.

accounts most susceptible to a constructivist alternative.⁵⁵ What is missing here is a theory of threat perception, and this is precisely what a constructivist account of identity offers.

Distribution of power cannot explain the alliance patterns that emerged after World War II; otherwise, the United States would have been balanced against, not the Soviet Union. Instead, the issue must be how France, Britain, Germany, and the United States came to understand Soviet military capabilities and geographical proximity as threatening. The neorealist account would be that the Soviet Union demonstrated by its behavior that it was an objective threat to Western Europe. A constructivist account would be that the state identities of Western Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union, each rooted in domestic sociocultural milieus, produced understandings of one another based on differences in identity and practice. The potential advantage of this approach is that it is more likely to surface differences in how the Soviet threat was constructed in different sites than is the neorealist approach, which accords objective meaning to Soviet conduct.

Let us imagine, for example, that the United States balanced against the Soviet Union because of the latter's communist identity, and what that meant to the United States. If true, it means that other possible Soviet identities, such as an Asian, Stalinist, Russian, or authoritarian threat, were not operative. So what? First, how the United States understood the Soviet threat, as communist, not only explains the anticommunist direction of U.S. actions in the Cold War, but it also tells us that the United States understood itself as the anticommunist protector of a particular set of values both at home and abroad. Second, how the United States constructed the Soviet communist threat needs to be understood in relation to how Western Europeans understood that threat. If, for example, France understood the Soviet threat as a Russian threat, as an instance of superior Russian power in Europe, then France would not readily join in U.S. anticommunist ventures against the Soviet Union. In particular, whereas the United States saw the third world during the Cold War as an arena for battling communism, as in Vietnam, Europeans very rarely understood it in those terms, instead regarding third world states as economic actors or as former colonies.

55. See Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Collective Identity in a Democratic Community: The Case of NATO," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, pp. 361–368; Barnett, "Identity and Alliances," pp. 401–404; Peter J. Katzenstein, "Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, pp. 27–28; Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture," p. 63; and Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," p. 78.

SECURITY DILEMMAS. Security dilemmas are the products of presumed uncertainty.⁵⁶ They are assumed to be commonplace in world politics because states presumably cannot know, with sufficient certainty or confidence, the intentions of others. But as important as the security dilemma is to understanding conflictual relations among states, we do not see much evidence of security dilemmas among many pairs or groups of states: members of the same alliance, members of the same economic institution, perhaps two peaceful states or two neutral states, and so on. In the study of world politics, uncertainty might be best treated as a variable, not a constant. Constructivism can provide an understanding of what happens most of the time in relations between states, namely, nothing threatening at all. By providing meaning, identities reduce uncertainty.⁵⁷

States understand different states differently. Soviet and French nuclear capabilities had different meanings for British decision makers. But of course certainty is not always a source of security. Knowing that another state is an aggressor resolves the security dilemma, but only by replacing it with certain insecurity, an increased confidence that the other state is in fact threatening. As Richard Ashley, bowing generously to Karl Deutsch, pointed out, politics itself is impossible in the absence of "a background of mutual understandings and habitual practices that orients and limits the mutual comprehension of practices, the signification of social action."⁵⁸ Constructivism's empirical mission is to surface the "background" that makes uncertainty a variable to understand, rather than a constant to assume.

NEOLIBERAL COOPERATION. Neoliberalism offers compelling arguments about how states can achieve cooperation among themselves. Simple iterative interaction among states, even when they prefer to exploit one another, may still lead to cooperative outcomes. The conditions minimally necessary for such outcomes include transparency of action, capacity to monitor any noncooperative behavior and punish the same in a predictable fashion, a sufficiently low discount (high appreciation) rate for future gains from the relationship, and an expectation that the relationship will not end in the foreseeable future.⁵⁹

56. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (March 1978), pp. 167–214.

57. I thank Maria Fanis for bringing home to me the importance of thinking about world politics in this way.

58. Ashley, "Three Modes," p. 478; see also Ashley, "The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space," p. 414.

59. Kenneth A. Oye, "Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies," in Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 1–24.

International institutions, whether in the form of regimes, laws, treaties, or organizations, help provide these necessary conditions for cooperation. By having rules about what constitutes a violation of a relationship, institutions help increase the confidence of each state that it will not be exploited and that its own cooperative move will be reciprocated. By establishing formal mechanisms of surveillance, institutions enable states to see what other states are doing, again enhancing confidence that a defection will be seen and a cooperative action will be followed by the same. By creating rules and procedures for surveillance and sanction, all parties can have greater confidence that violations will be punished. By formalizing these relationships, institutions help reduce each state's discount rate for future gains while increasing each state's expectation that the relationship will continue into the future.⁶⁰

Constructivism shares neoliberalism's conclusion that cooperation is possible under anarchy, but offers a very different account of how that outcome emerges. Robert Keohane presents as the heart of neoliberalism two fundamental assumptions: there are potentially beneficial agreements among states that have not been reached, and they are hard to achieve.⁶¹ A constructivist approach might begin by investigating how states understand their interests within a particular issue area. The distribution of identities and interests of the relevant states would then help account for whether cooperation is possible. The assumption of exogenous interests is an obstacle to developing a theory of cooperation.

Sitting down to negotiate a trade agreement among friends (as opposed to adversaries or unknowns) affects a state's willingness to lead with a cooperative move. Perhaps it would no longer understand its interests as the unilateral exploitation of the other state. Instead it might see itself as a partner in pursuit of some value other than narrow strategic interest. In *Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson bracketed a host of situations where cooperation was relatively easy, despite large numbers of players, the absence of a group large enough to provide a public good, but sufficiently small to avert coordination problems (a *k*-group), no hegemonic leadership, and so on. These were situations where communities of identity existed such that the players were not in a noncooperative game in the first place. Too little attention has been paid to this insight.

60. The regimes literature is vast. For an early foundational volume that includes theoretical specification, empirical illustration, and some self-critique, see Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983). Elaboration of the market failure logic is in Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

61. Keohane, "International Institutions," p. 386.

A constructivist account of cooperation would reconstruct such intersubjective communities as a matter of course.

When a neoliberal writes of difficulty in reaching an agreement, she usually has one particular problem in mind: uncertainty. Many of the institutional mechanisms described above are aimed at reducing uncertainty among states: provision of transparency; facilitation of iteration; enabling of decomposition; and of course the development of rules, monitoring capabilities, and adjudication procedures. A constructivist would agree that these are all very important, but that a prior issue must be raised: Is it not likely that the level of certainty is a variable associated with identity and practice, and that, *ceteris paribus*, the less certainty one has, the more institutional devices are necessary to produce cooperation, the harder that cooperation will be to achieve, and the more likely it will be to break down?

Neoliberalism has concluded that an important part of ensuring compliance with agreements is the development of reputations for reliability.⁶² One of the most important components of discursive power is the capacity to reproduce order and predictability in understandings and expectations. In this respect, identities are a congealed reputation, that is, the closest one can get in social life to being able to confidently expect the same actions from another actor time after time. Identities subsume reputation; being a particular identity is sufficient to provide necessary diagnostic information about a state's likely actions with respect to other states in particular domains.⁶³

On the other side of the life cycle, neoliberals argue that institutions die when members no longer "have incentives to maintain them."⁶⁴ But one of the more enduring puzzles for neoliberals is why these institutions persist past the

62. On the critical importance of a theory of reputation to account for economic transactions, such as contracts, see David M. Kreps, "Corporate Culture and Economic Theory," in James E. Alt and Kenneth A. Shepsle, eds., *Perspectives on Positive Political Economy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 90–143. Formal game-theoretic work on reputation consistently shows that it should matter, and it does, but only when assumed to do so. Empirical work in international relations has shown that reputations do not work as hypothesized by most international relations theory. See Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); and Jervis, *Logic of Images in International Relations*.

63. For a recognition that "shared focal points," à la Thomas Schelling, have much in common with intersubjective reality and its capacity to promote cooperative solutions to iterative games, see Geoffrey Garrett and Barry R. Weingast, "Ideas, Interests, and Institutions: Constructing the European Community's Internal Market," in Goldstein and Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, pp. 173–206.

64. Keohane, "International Institutions," p. 387.

point that great powers have an apparent interest in sustaining them. Their answers include lags caused by domestic political resistance to adjustment, the stickiness of institutional arrangements, and the transaction costs entailed in the renegotiation of agreements and the establishment of a new order.⁶⁵ An alternative constructivist hypothesis would be that if the identities being reproduced by the social practices constituting that institution have gone beyond the strategic game-playing self-regarding units posited by neoliberals, and have developed an understanding of each other as partners in some common enterprise, then the institution will persist, even if apparent underlying power and interests have shifted.⁶⁶ Duncan Snidal, in his formal representation of what is most likely to happen as a hegemon falters, includes as an untheorized variable "interest in the regime," with the obvious positive relationship between interest in the regime and willingness to expend resources to maintain it after hegemonic decline.⁶⁷ Constructivist research, through exploring the nature of the norms, practices, and identities constituting membership in some institution, can provide some measurable substantive content for that variable.

Although constructivists and neoliberals agree that anarchy does not preclude cooperation among states, how they understand the emergence and reproduction of such cooperation yields very different accounts and research agendas.

THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE. The observation that democratic states have not fought each other is an empirical regularity in search of a theory. Neither structural nor normative accounts fare very well.⁶⁸ The former requires assuming a consistently bellicose executive being constrained by a pacific public and its duly-elected representative institutions—but only when democratic adver-

65. On lags and stickiness, see Stephen D. Krasner, *State Power and the Structure of International Trade*, *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (April 1976), pp. 317–343. On transaction costs, see Keohane, *After Hegemony*.

66. Another constructivist hypothesis offers itself here: institutionalized cooperation will be more likely to endure to the extent that the identities of the members of that institution are understood as common and they are reproduced by a thick array of social practices. This is meant as a continuum, with narrow self-interest being arrayed at one end of the spectrum, neoliberal institutionalization of self-interested cooperation in the middle, community of identity toward the other end, and harmony at the other pole.

67. Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Autumn 1985), esp. pp. 610–611.

68. For a comprehensive review of the most recent literature on the democratic peace, and an empirical test that shows that satisfaction with the status quo (a variable subject to constructivist interpretation) is the single most important factor affecting the use of force, by democracies and authoritarian states alike, see David L. Rousseau, Christopher Gelpi, and Dan Reiter, "Assessing the Dyadic Nature of the Democratic Peace, 1918–1988," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (September 1996), p. 527.

saries are about. The latter has more promise, but its naturalization of certain aspects of liberalism—the market, nonviolent resolution of differences, the franchise, the First Amendment—and its crucial assumption that these norms actually matter to decision makers in democratic states when making choices about war and peace with other democracies, are untenable and untested, respectively.

Constructivism is perfectly suited to the task of testing and fundamentally revising the democratic peace.⁶⁹ Its approach aims at apprehending how the social practices and norms of states construct the identities and interests of the same. Ergo, if democracies do not fight each other, then it must be because of the way they understand each other, their intersubjective accounts of each other, and the socio-international practices that accompany those accounts.⁷⁰ But constructivism could offer a more general account of zones of peace, one not limited to democracies. Different periods of the histories of both Africa and Latin America have been marked by long stretches of little or no warfare between states. These pacific periods are obviously not associated with any “objective” indicators of democracy. By investigating how African and Latin American states constructed themselves and others, it might be possible to understand these neglected zones of “authoritarian peace.”

Constructivist Puzzles

Constructivism offers an account of the politics of identity.⁷¹ It proposes a way of understanding how nationalism, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and sexuality, and other intersubjectively understood communities, are each involved in an account of global politics. Understanding how identities are constructed, what norms and practices accompany their reproduction, and how they construct each other is a major part of the constructivist research program.

69. For a very well developed research design to test constructivist versus mainstream accounts of the democratic peace, see Colin Kahl, “Constructing a Separate Peace: Constructivism, Collective Liberal Identity, and the Democratic Peace,” *Security Studies* (forthcoming).

70. For accounts of the democratic peace that focus on its contextual intersubjective characters, see Ido Oren, “The Subjectivity of the ‘Democratic’ Peace: Changing U.S. Perceptions of Imperial Germany,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 147–184; Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation among Democracies*, p. 30; and Risse-Kappen, “Collective Identity in a Democratic Community,” pp. 366–367.

71. I do not try to compile a comprehensive set of questions for constructivists, but instead merely elaborate general themes for research, themes that do not have a prominent place in mainstream international relations theory.

Although nationalism and ethnicity are receiving more attention in mainstream international relations theory, attention to gender, sexuality, race, and religion have received much less, and certainly none of them is part of either neorealist or neoliberal accounts of how the world works.⁷² Constructivism promises to deal with these issues, not merely because they are topical or heretofore undervalued, but because as varieties of identity, they are central to how constructivism generates understandings of social phenomena. Constructivism assumes, a priori, that identities are potentially part of the constitutive practices of the state, and so, productive of its actions at home and abroad.⁷³

One of the most important by-products of this concern with identity politics is the return of differences among states. The same state is, in effect, many different actors in world politics, and different states behave differently toward other states, based on the identities of each. If true, then we should expect different patterns of behavior across groups of states with different identities and interests.⁷⁴ Although it is tempting to assert that similarity breeds cooperation, it is impossible to make such an a priori claim. Identities have much more meaning for each state than a mere label. Identities offer each state an understanding of other states, its nature, motives, interests, probable actions, attitudes, and role in any given political context.

Understanding another state as one identity, rather than another, has consequences for the possible actions of both. For example, Michael Barnett has speculated that the failure of deterrence against Iraq in Kuwait in 1990 is because Saudi Arabia was seen as an "Arab," rather than a "sovereign," state. Iraq's understanding of Saudi Arabia as an Arab state implied that Riyadh would never allow U.S. forces to deploy on Arab territory. If, instead, Iraq had

72. For a critical view of neorealism's belated efforts to capture nationalism, see Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil, "Revisiting the 'National': Toward an Identity Agenda in Neorealism?", in Lapid and Kratochwil, *The Return of Culture and Identity*, pp. 105–126. For a most imaginative critical constructivist treatment of nationalism, see Daniel Deudney, "Ground Identity: Nature, Place, and Space in Nationalism," in *ibid.*, pp. 129–145; see also Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Sovereignty and the Nation: Constructing the Boundaries of National Identity," in Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, eds., *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 121–147.

73. For example, J. Ann Tickner observes that contemporary masculinized Western understandings of themselves lead to feminized portrayals of the South as "emotional and unpredictable. Tickner, "Identity in International Relations Theory: Feminist Perspectives," in Lapid and Kratochwil, *The Return of Culture and Identity*, pp. 147–162.

74. For example, Risse-Kappen, "Collective Identity in a Democratic Community," finds a common identity within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; see also Iver B. Neumann and Jennifer M. Welsh, "The Other in European self-definition," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (October 1991), pp. 327–348, for an exploration of "Christian" and "European" states versus "Islamic" "Asiatic" Turkey.

understood Saudi Arabia as a sovereign state, in a realist world, it would have perhaps expected Saudi balancing against Iraqi actions in Kuwait, including U.S. military intervention, and would have been deterred.⁷⁵ In other words, neorealist predictions of balancing behavior, such as that of Saudi Arabia, rely on a single particular identity being ascribed to that country by Iraq. But if alternative identities are possible, as constructivism suggests, the neorealist world is smaller than alleged.

Or another state may not be seen as another “state” at all, but instead as an ally, friend, enemy, co-guarantor, threat, a democracy, and so on.⁷⁶ Finally, constructivism’s expectation of multiple identities for actors in world politics rests on an openness to local historical context. This receptivity to identities being generated and reproduced empirically, rather than resting on pre-given assumptions, opens up the study of world politics to different units altogether.⁷⁷ Hypothesizing differences among states allows for movement beyond the typical binary characterizations of mainstream international relations: democratic-nondemocratic, great power–non-great power, North-South, and so forth. While these common axes of analysis are certainly relevant, constructivism promises to explain many other meaningful communities of identity throughout world politics.

A third constructivist promise is to return culture and domestic politics to international relations theory. To the extent that constructivism is ontologically agnostic—that is, it does not include or exclude any particular variables as meaningful—it envisions no disciplinary divides between international relations and comparative subfields (or any fields for that matter). Constructivism has no inherent focus on “second image” accounts of world politics. In fact, an appropriate criticism would be that it has remained far too long at the systemic level of analysis.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, constructivism provides a promising

75. Michael N. Barnett, “Institutions, Roles, and Disorder: The Case of the Arab States System,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (September 1993), pp. 271–296.

76. See Risse-Kappen, “Collective Identity in a Democratic Community,” and Michael N. Barnett, “Sovereignty, Nationalism, and Regional Order in the Arab System,” *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 479–510, for examples.

77. Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach, for example, offer a rich variety of “polities,” such as city-states, civilizations, polis, empires, kingdoms, caliphates, each of which had and, in some cases, has and will have, meaningful identities in world politics. Ferguson and Mansbach, “Past as Prelude,” pp. 22–28, and Sujata Chakrabarti Pasic, “Culturing International Relations Theory,” both in Lapid and Kratochwil, *The Return of Culture and Identity*, pp. 85–104.

78. Keohane, in “International Institutions,” p. 392, has made this observation about “reflectivist” scholarship. For similar laments, see Dessler, “What’s At Stake,” p. 471; and Barnett, “Institutions, Roles, and Disorder,” p. 276. Alexander Wendt acknowledges he has “systematically bracketed” domestic factors in Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” p. 423.

approach for uncovering those features of domestic society, culture, and politics that should matter to state identity and state action in global politics. There are many different ways in which a constructivist account can operate at the domestic level. I mention only several here.

Any state identity in world politics is partly the product of the social practices that constitute that identity at home.⁷⁹ In this way, identity politics at home constrain and enable state identity, interests, and actions abroad. Ashis Nandy has written about the close connection between Victorian British generational and gender identities at home and the colonization of India. Victorian Britain drew a very strict line between the sexes and also between generations, differentiating the latter into young and old, productive and unproductive, respectively. British colonial dominance was understood as masculine in relationship to Indian's feminine submission, and Indian culture was understood as infantile and archaic. In these ways Victorian understandings of itself made India comprehensible to Britain in a particular way.⁸⁰ Whereas conventional accounts of colonialism and imperialism rely on disparities in relative material power to explain relations of domination and subordination, constructivists would add that no account of such hierarchical outcomes is complete without exploring how imperial identities are constructed both at home and with respect to the subordinated Other abroad.⁸¹ Even if material power is necessary to produce imperialism, its reproduction cannot be understood without investigating the social practices that accompanied it and the discursive power, especially in the form of related identities, they wielded.

Within the state itself might exist areas of cultural practice, sufficiently empowered through institutionalization and authorization, to exert a constitutive or causative influence on state policy.⁸² The state's assumed need to construct a national identity at home to legitimize the state's extractive authority has effects on state identity abroad. A more critical constructivist account

79. Two works that make the connection between domestic identity construction at home and state identity are Audie Klotz, *Norms in international relations: the struggle against apartheid* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Peter J. Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

80. Inayatullah and Blaney, "Knowing Encounters," pp. 76–80.

81. Compare this, for example, to Richard Cottam's very interesting account of imperial British images of Egypt. The critical difference is that Cottam does not see British constructions of themselves or their society's parts as relevant to an understanding of British images of Egyptians. Richard Cottam, *Foreign Policy Motivation: A General Theory and Case Study* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977).

82. One might say this about the French military between World Wars I and II. See Kier, "Culture and French Military Doctrine before World War II."

might begin by positing the state's need for an Other in world politics, so as to justify its own rule at home.⁸³

A last promise of constructivism concerns not so much research issues as research strategy. Constructivism offers a heterogamous research approach: that is, it readily combines with different fields and disciplines. Constructivism itself is the product of structural linguistics, postmodern political theory, critical theory, cultural and media studies, literary criticism, and no doubt others. Far from claiming primacy as a theory of international politics, constructivism lends itself to collaboration with other approaches, both within political science and outside. Literatures in decision making, political culture, socialization, and experimental cognitive and social psychology would seem to be most promising partners.

CONSTRUCTIVIST PROBLEMS

A constructivist research program, like all others, has unexplained anomalies, but their existence need not necessitate the donning of protective belts of any sort. Conventional constructivism has one large problem that has several parts. Friedrich Kratochwil has observed that no theory of culture can substitute for a theory of politics.⁸⁴ Paul Kowert and Jeffrey Legro have pointed out that there is no causal theory of identity construction offered by any of the authors in the Katzenstein volume.⁸⁵ Both criticisms are as accurate as they are different, and imply different remedies.

Kratochwil's statement reinforces the point that constructivism is an approach, not a theory. And if it is a theory, it is a theory of process, not substantive outcome. In order to achieve the latter, constructivism must adopt some theory of politics to make it work. Critical theory is far more advanced in this regard than conventional constructivism, but it comes at a price, a price that one may or may not be willing to pay, depending on empirical, theoretical, and/or aesthetic interests. I have described how differently critical and conventional constructivism treat the origins of identity and the nature of power.

83. This is done by David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) and Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

84. Kratochwil, "Is the Ship of Culture at Sea or Returning?" p. 206.

85. Paul Kowert and Jeffrey Legro, "Norms, Identity, and Their Limits: A Theoretical Reprise," in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. 469. For other critical reviews of constructivism and world politics, see Jeffrey T. Checkel, "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (January 1998), pp. 324-348, and Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1997), pp. 319-363.

It is here that critical theory finds its animating theory of politics. By assuming that the identities of the Self and Other are inextricably bound up in a relationship of power, and that the state is a dominating instrument, critical theorists can offer theoretically informed accounts of the politics of identity: at least along the dimensions specified, that of hierarchy, subordination, domination, emancipation, and state-society struggle.

The price paid for such theories of politics, however, is an ironic one that naturalizes certain "realities," privileging social relations of dominance and hierarchy. Of course, critical theory asserts its ultimate openness to variation and change, but the point here is that its theory of politics, a priori, is more closed than that of its conventional version, which stands accused of theoretical underspecification. The problem of underspecification exists because conventional constructivism, as a theory of process, does not specify the existence, let alone the precise nature or value, of its main causal/constitutive elements: identities, norms, practices, and social structures. Instead, constructivism specifies how these elements are theoretically situated vis-à-vis each other, providing an understanding of a process and an outcome, but no a priori prediction per se. The advantages of such an approach are in the nonpareil richness of its elaboration of causal/constitutive mechanisms in any given social context and its openness (and not just in the last instance, as in critical theory) to the discovery of other substantive theoretical elements at work. The cost here, however, is the absence of a causal theory of identity.

The dilemma is that the more conventional constructivism moves to furnish such a causal theory, the more it loses the possibility of maintaining the ontological openness that its interpretivist methods afford. But the dilemma is a continuum, not a binary opposition. Conventional constructivists can and do specify their theoretical elements in advance in practice. Just to take one example, not a single author in the Katzenstein volume assessed gender, class, or race in any of their analyses. This observation (not criticism) is intended to underline how conventional constructivists already bound their a priori theoretical domains according to empirical interest and theoretical priors. Moreover, conventional constructivists can make predictions, if they choose. Their only constraint is just how durable they believe the social structures to be that they have demonstrated are constraining the reproduction of identities, interests, norms, and practices, in some social context. For example, when Risse-Kappen argues that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members regard each other as liberal allies, rather than as realist states balancing against a threat, he is making a prediction: if NATO members see each other as liberal allies, NATO will persist beyond the point where the threat disappears.

One obstacle to the development of a causal model of identity is conventional constructivism's silence on the issue of intentionality. Critical theorists confidently declare their indifference to the issue: establishing causality is an illusory goal. Kowert and Legro point out the failure of any author in the Katzenstein volume to establish more than a correlative relationship between an identity and an outcome. In fact, the authors do far more than that: they control for alternative explanations and they show the connection between norms and interests and outcomes. But what is missing is the decision based on the identity. Here again, constructivist heterogamy allows for an attempted fix. The answer may lie in trying to marry constructivist process to psychological process. Kowert and Legro discuss the possibility in terms of the experimental social psychological work of Marilyn Brewer and Jonathan Turner.⁸⁶ To the extent it is possible to establish a causal link between a particular identity, such as Japanese antimilitarism, and an interest in opposing Japanese military expenditures (or between belief in a norm, such as humanitarian interventionism, and an action to fulfill that norm), it might be attainable through ongoing work on the connection between identity and behavior in social psychology.

The last problem with constructivism is really not so much a problem as it is an advantage. Constructivism's theory of process and commitment to interpretivist thick description place extraordinary demands on the researcher to gather mountains of elaborate empirical data. To reconstruct the operation of identity politics, even in a limited domain for a short period, requires thousands of pages of reading, months of interviews and archival research, and a host of less conventional activities, such as riding public transportation, standing in lines, and going to bars and cafés to participate in local practices. (The latter need not be so onerous.) The point here is that the evidence necessary to develop an understanding of, say, a national identity, its relation to domestic identities, the practices that constitute both, implied interests of each, and the overall social structure is necessarily vast and varied. Constructivism is no shortcut.

The Constructivist Promise

The assumptions that underlay constructivism account for its different understanding of world politics. Since actors and structures are mutually constructed, state behavior in the face of different distributions of power or

86. *Ibid.*, p. 479.

anarchy is unknowable absent a reconstruction of the intersubjective meaning of these structures and actors. Since actors have multiple identities, and these identities imply different interests, the a priori and exogenous attribution of identical interests to states is invalid. Since power is both material and discursive, patterned behavior over time should be understood as a result of material or economic power working in concert with ideological structures, social practices, institutionalized norms, and intersubjective webs of meaning. The greatest power of all is that which disciplines actors to naturally imagine only those actions that reproduce the underlying arrangements of power—material and discursive. Since constructivist social structures are both enduring and mutable, change in world politics is considered both difficult and possible.

A conventional constructivist recasting of mainstream international relations puzzles is based on the implications of its assumptions. Since what constitutes a threat can never be stated as an a priori, primordial constant, it should be approached as a social construction of an Other, and theorized at that level. Since identities, norms, and social practices reduce uncertainty, the security dilemma should not be the starting point for analyzing relations among states. Since states are already situated in multiple social contexts, any account of (non)cooperation among them should begin by exploring how their understandings of each other generate their relevant interests. Since communities of identity are expected to exist, patterns of behavior that spur scholars to consider a liberal peace should instead provoke us to consider zones of peace more generally.

A conventional constructivist account of politics operates between mainstream international relations and critical theory. Conventional constructivism rejects the mainstream presumption that world politics is so homogenous that universally valid generalizations can be expected to come of theorizing about it. It denies the critical constructivist position that world politics is so heterogeneous that we should presume to look for only the unique and the differentiating. Contrary to both these two approaches, conventional constructivism presumes we should be looking for communities of intersubjectivity in world politics, domains within which actors share understandings of themselves and each other, yielding predictable and replicable patterns of action within a specific context.

Mainstream international relations theory treats world politics as an integrated whole, undifferentiated by either time or territory. Critical theory regards world politics as an array of fragments that can never add up to a whole, and regards efforts to construct such a whole as a political move to impose

some kind of rationalistic, naturalized order on irrepressible difference. Conventional constructivism, on the other hand, regards the world as a complicated and vast array of different domains, the apprehension of all of which could never yield a fully coherent picture of international politics. The failure to account for any one of them, however, will guarantee a theoretically unsatisfying understanding of the world. In effect, the promise of constructivism is to restore a kind of partial order and predictability to world politics that derives not from imposed homogeneity, but from an appreciation of difference.

Corrections:

In Alexei G. Arbatov, "Military Reform in Russia: Dilemmas, Obstacles, and Prospects," Vol. 22, No. 4 (Spring 1998): p. 86 line 13 should read "The *quantity* of military personnel . . . must be sacrificed for higher *quality* arms"; p. 90 line 17 should read "Numerical Balance"; p. 92 line 3 should read "reinforcement advantages and interdiction capabilities against Russian reinforcements"; p. 106 line 10 should read "has never been preprogrammed into"; p. 109 line 11 should read "to find its force levels and structure on a priority basis"; p. 130 line 1 should read "down to a level of 1.2 million by 1999"; and p. 130 line 25 should read "are not carried out."