

Chapter 10

Social constructivism

MICHAEL BARNETT

● Introduction	156
● The rise of constructivism	156
● Constructivism	157
● Constructivism and global change	163
● Conclusion	167

Reader's Guide

This chapter provides an overview of constructivist approaches to International Relations (IR) theory. Constructivism explores how the world is made and re-made through action, how the structures of world politics do not merely constrain but also constitute the identities, interests, and practices of the actors of world politics, how these actors unwittingly

or purposefully reproduce these structures, and how human action is responsible for both stability and change in world affairs. Constructivism generates many distinctive insights, including alternative ways of thinking about power, the role of norms for explaining the rise and decline of world orders, and the importance of transnational movements and other non-state actors in the internationalization of global politics.

Introduction

Constructivism rose from rather humble beginnings to become one of the leading schools in International Relations (IR). Twenty-five years ago constructivism did not exist. Today it is widely recognized for its ability to capture important features of global politics, and is viewed as an important theory of international relations. This chapter explores constructivism's origins, its core commitments, and features of its research agenda as it relates to global change. Mainstream International Relations, as covered in **Chapter 8**, assumes that states have enduring interests such as power and wealth, and are constrained in their ability to further those interests because of material forces such as geography, technology, and the distribution of power. Critics counter that social forces such as ideas, knowledge, **norms**, and **rules** also influence states' identities and interests, and the very organization of world politics.

Constructivism is not the only theory of international relations to recognize the importance of international norms and to conceptualize international politics not as a system but as a society. Various

theories that pre-dated constructivism, some of which are included in this volume, made similar claims, including the English School and feminist approaches to world affairs, as discussed in **Chapters 2** and **17**. But constructivists were more attentive to the issues that mattered to neo-realists and neo-liberal institutionalists—how identity, norms, and culture shape patterns of war and peace. Eventually, constructivism developed different wings, with some placing emphasis on structure and others on agency, some on stability and others on transformation.

The concern with the making and re-making of world politics underscores constructivism's strong interest in global change. Although constructivism has investigated various features of global change, this chapter will focus on two: the convergence by states around similar ways for organizing domestic and international life; and how norms become internationalized and institutionalized, influencing what states and non-state actors do and their ideas of what is legitimate behaviour.

The rise of constructivism

Once upon a time, neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism dominated American international relations theory. Neo-realism made several core claims. States are the central actors in world politics, and they are fixated on their security and survival; these interests suffocate any possibility that ideas, norms, or values might shape state behaviour. They pursue these interests in the context of an international system that is defined by: **anarchy** (the absence of a supranational authority); functional non-differentiation of the units (because anarchy creates a **self-help** system, all states must be self-reliant and safeguard their security); and the distribution of power. But because the world has always been an anarchy and states have always been obsessed about their survival, to understand enduring tendencies in world politics all that really matters is the state's position in the international hierarchy and the distribution of power. States are suspicious, misanthropic, and aggressive, not necessarily because they are born that way but because the environment punished anything else (see **Chs 6 and 8**).

Neo-liberalism lightened neo-realism's dark view of international politics by demonstrating that states cooperate all the time on a range of issues in order to improve their lives. Because a primary obstacle to cooperation is the absence of trust between states, states construct international institutions that can perform various trust-enhancing functions, including monitoring and publicizing cheating. As recounted in **Chapter 8**, these camps disagreed on various issues, but they shared a commitment to **individualism** and **materialism**. Individualism is the view that actors have fixed interests and that the structure constrains their behaviour. Although neo-realists and neo-liberals differ because the former believe that the pursuit of security is primary while the latter can envision other goals such as the pursuit of wealth, for empirical and theoretical reasons they both assume that state interests are hard-wired and unmalleable. Materialism is the view that the structure that constrains behaviour is defined by distribution of power, technology, and geography. While neo-realism holds that interests trump ideas and

norms, neo-liberal institutionalism recognizes that states might willingly construct norms and institutions to regulate their behaviour if doing so will enhance their long-term interests. Although both approaches allow for the possibility that ideas and norms can constrain how states pursue their interests, neither contemplates the possibility that ideas and norms might define their interests.

This materialism and individualism came to be challenged by scholars who eventually became associated with constructivism, a term coined by Nicholas Onuf in his important book, *World of Our Making* (1989). It enjoyed a meteoric rise in the 1990s because of two principal factors. First, it demonstrated that the notion of a world without norms and ideas was not only nonsensical, but also that their inclusion was important for understanding the behaviour of states and non-state actors, and why they saw the world and themselves as they did.

The second was the end of the cold war. Although only a handful of scholars had ever imagined that the cold war might end with a whimper and not a bang, neo-realists and neo-liberal institutionalists were especially hard pressed to explain this outcome. Their commitment to individualism and materialism meant that they could not grasp what appeared to reside at the heart of this stunning development: the revolutionary impact of ideas to transform the organization of world politics. Constructivism was tailor-made for understanding what had been unthinkable to most scholars. Nor did these approaches provide insight into what might come next. The USA was enjoying a unipolar moment, but the distribution of power could not determine whether it would aspire to become a global hegemon or work through multilateral institutions. Moreover, the end of

the cold war caused states to debate what is the national interest and how it relates to their national identity—who are ‘we’ and where do ‘we’ belong? Constructivism provided insight into the dissolution and creation of new regional and international orders. The end of the cold war also clipped the prominence of traditional security themes, neo-realism’s comparative advantage, and raised the importance of transnationalism, human rights, and other subjects that played to constructivism’s strengths. Constructivists were speeding past critique to offer genuinely novel and compelling understandings of the world. *The Culture of National Security* (Katzenstein 1996) challenged standard neo-realist claims in a series of critical areas—including alliance patterns, military intervention, arms racing, great power transformation—and demonstrated how identity and norms shape state interests and must be incorporated to generate superior explanations. The growing literature on sovereignty investigated its origins, its spread from the West to the global South, and the historical and regional variation in its meaning. Constructivism was offering a fresh take on the world at a time when the world was in need of new ways of thinking.

Key Points

- International relations theory in the 1980s was dominated by neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism; both theories ascribed to materialism and individualism.
- Various scholars critical of neo-realism and neo-liberalism drew from critical and sociological theory to demonstrate the effects of ideas and norms on world politics.
- The end of the cold war created an intellectual space for scholars to challenge existing theories of international politics.

Constructivism

Before proceeding to detail constructivism’s tenets, a caveat is in order. Constructivism is a social theory and not a substantive theory of international politics. Social theory is broadly concerned with how to conceptualize the relationship between agents and structures; for instance, how should we think about the relationship between states and the structure of international politics? Substantive theory offers specific claims and hypotheses about patterns in world politics; for instance, how do we explain why democratic states tend not to

wage war on one another? In this way, constructivism is best compared with **rational choice**. Rational choice is a social theory that offers a framework for understanding how actors operate with fixed preferences that they attempt to maximize under a set of constraints. It makes no claims about the content of those preferences; they could be wealth or religious salvation. Nor does it assume anything about the content of the constraints; they could be guns or ideas. Rational choice offers no claims about the actual patterns of world politics. For

instance, neo-realism and neo-liberalism subscribe to rational choice, but they arrive at rival claims about patterns of conflict and cooperation in world politics because they make different assumptions about the effects of anarchy. Like rational choice, constructivism is a social theory that is broadly concerned with the relationship between agents and structures, but it is not a substantive theory. Constructivists, for instance, have different arguments regarding the rise of sovereignty and the impact of human rights norms on states. To generate substantive claims, scholars must delineate who are the principal actors, what are their interests and capacities, and what is the content of the normative structures.

Although there are many kinds of constructivism, there is unity within diversity. 'Constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international life' (Ruggie 1998: 856). This focus on human consciousness suggests a commitment to idealism and holism, which, according to Wendt (1999), represent the core of constructivism. **Idealism** demands that we take seriously the role of ideas in world politics. The world is defined by material and ideational forces. But these ideas are not akin to beliefs or psychological states that reside inside our heads. Instead, these ideas are social. Our mental maps are shaped by collectively held ideas such as knowledge, symbols, language, and rules. Idealism does not reject material reality but instead observes that the meaning and construction of that material reality is dependent on ideas and interpretation. The **balance of power** does not objectively exist out there, waiting to be discovered; instead, states debate what is the balance of power, what is its meaning, and how they should respond. Constructivism also accepts some form of **holism** or structuralism. The world is irreducibly social and cannot be decomposed into the properties of already existing actors. The emphasis on holism can make it seem like actors are automatons. But holism allows for agency, recognizing that agents have some autonomy and their interactions help to construct, reproduce, and transform those structures. Although the structure of the cold war seemingly locked the USA and the Soviet Union into a fight to the death, leaders on both sides creatively transformed their relations and, with it, the very structure of global politics.

This commitment to idealism and holism has important implications for how we think about and study world politics. But in order to appreciate its insights, we must learn more about its conceptual vocabulary, and to demonstrate the value of learning this 'second

language', I shall contrast constructivism's vocabulary with that of rational choice. The core observation is the **social construction of reality**. This has a number of related elements. One is the emphasis on the socially constructed nature of actors and their identities and interests. Actors are not born outside of and prior to society, as individualism claims. Instead, actors are produced and created by their cultural environment: nurture, not nature. This points to the importance of identity and the social construction of interests. The American identity shapes national interests. Not all is fair in love, war, or any other social endeavour. For decades, Arab nationalism shaped the identities and interests of Arab states, contained norms that guided how Arab leaders could play the game of Arab politics, and encouraged Arab leaders to draw from the symbols of Arab politics to try to manoeuvre around their Arab rivals and further their own interests. How Arab leaders played out their regional games was structured by the norms of Arab politics. They had very intense rivalries, and as they vied for prestige and status they frequently accused each other of being a traitor to the Arab nation or of harming the cause of Arabism. But rarely did they use military force. Until the late 1970s the idea of relations with Israel was a virtual 'taboo', violated by Egyptian Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem in 1977 and separate peace treaty in 1979. Arab states did not respond through military action but rather by evicting Egypt from the Arab League, and then Sadat paid the ultimate price for his heresy when he was assassinated in 1981. The Arab national identity has shaped Arab national interests and the behaviour deemed legitimate and illegitimate.

Another element is how knowledge—that is, symbols, rules, concepts, and categories—shapes how individuals construct and interpret their world. Reality does not exist out there waiting to be discovered; instead, historically produced and culturally bound knowledge enables individuals to construct and give meaning to reality. In other words, existing categories help us to understand, define, and make sense of the world. There are lots of ways to understand collective violence, and one of the unfortunate features of a bloody twentieth century is that we have more categories to discriminate between forms of violence, from civil war to ethnic cleansing, to crimes against humanity, to genocide.

This constructed reality frequently appears to us an objective reality, which relates to the concept of **social facts**. There are those things whose existence is dependent on human agreement, and those things

whose existence is not. Brute facts such as rocks, flowers, gravity, and oceans exist independently of human agreement, and will continue to exist even if humans disappear or deny their existence. Social facts are dependent on human agreement and are taken for granted. Money, refugees, terrorism, human rights, and sovereignty are social facts. Their existence depends on human agreement, they will only exist so long as that agreement exists, and their existence shapes how we categorize the world and what we do.

Constructivists also are concerned with norms and rules. Norms come in two basic varieties. **Regulative rules** regulate already existing activities—rules for the road determine how to drive; the World Trade Organization's rules regulate trade. **Constitutive rules** create the very possibility for these activities. The rules of rugby not only prohibit blocking but also help to define the very game (and distinguish it from American football); after all, if forwards began to block for backs, not only would this be a penalty, but it would change the game itself. The rules of sovereignty not only regulate state practices but also make possible the very idea of a sovereign state. The norms also vary in terms of their institutionalization, that is, how much they are taken for granted. In their famous 'life cycle' perspective, Finnemore and Sikkink identify how normative structures evolve over time. Not all is fair in love, war, or any other social endeavour. But we also know that what counts as playing the game of love or war can vary over time, which means that we should be concerned with their origins and evolution and their corresponding effects. Furthermore, rules are not static, but rather are revised through practice, reflection, and arguments by actors regarding how they should be applied to new situations. Indeed, actors can engage in strategic social construction (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Actors attempt to change the norms that subsequently guide and constitute state identities and interests. Human rights activists, for instance, try to encourage compliance with human rights norms not only by naming and shaming those who violate these norms, but also by encouraging states to identify with these norms because it is the right thing to do.

The social construction of reality and the attempt by actors to shape the normative environment points to the concept of legitimacy. Do we choose only the most efficient action? Do the ends justify the means? Or is certain action just unacceptable? The earlier distinction between constitutive and regulative rules parallels the conceptual distinction between the **logic of**

consequences and the **logic of appropriateness**. The logic of consequences attributes action to the anticipated costs and benefits, mindful that other actors are doing just the same. The logic of appropriateness, however, highlights how actors are rule-following, worrying about whether their actions are legitimate. The two logics are not necessarily distinct or competing. What is viewed as appropriate and legitimate can affect the possible costs of different actions; the more illegitimate a possible course of action appears to be, the higher the potential cost for those who proceed on their own. The USA's decision to go into Iraq without the blessing of the UN Security Council meant that other states viewed the USA's actions as illegitimate, were less willing to support them, and this raised the costs to the USA when it went ahead.

By emphasizing the social construction of reality, we also are questioning what is frequently taken for granted. This points to several issues. One is a concern with the origins of the social constructs that now appear to us as natural and are now part of our social vocabulary. Sovereignty did not always exist; it was a product of historical forces and human interactions that generated new distinctions regarding where political authority resided. The category of weapons of mass destruction is a modern invention. Although individuals have been forced to flee their homes ever since Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden, the political and legal category of 'refugees' is only a century old (see **Case Study 1**).

To understand the origins of these concepts requires attention to the interplay between existing ideas and institutions, the political calculations by leaders who had ulterior motives, and morally minded actors who were attempting to improve humanity. Also of concern are alternative pathways. Although history is path-dependent, there are contingencies, historical accidents, the conjunction of material and ideational forces, and human intervention that can force history to change course. The events of **11 September 2001** and the response by the Bush administration arguably transformed the direction of world politics. This interest in possible and counterfactual worlds works against historical determinism. Alexander Wendt's (1992) claim that 'anarchy is what states make of it' calls attention to how different beliefs and practices will generate divergent patterns and organization of world politics (see **Box 10.1**). A world of Mahatma Gandhis will be very different from a world of Osama bin Ladens.

Case Study 1 Social construction of refugees



© Oxford University Press

Who is a refugee, why does this category matter, and how has it changed? There are many ways to categorize people who leave their homes, including migrants, temporary workers, displaced people, and refugees. Before the twentieth century, 'refugee' as a legal category did not exist, and it was not until the First World War that states recognized people as refugees and gave them rights. Who was a refugee? Although many were displaced by the First World War, Western states limited their compassion to Russians who were fleeing the Bolsheviks (it was easier to accuse a rival state of persecuting its people); only they were entitled to assistance from states and the new refugee agency, the High Commissioner for Refugees. However, the High Commissioner took his mandate and the category and began to apply it to others in Europe who also had fled their country and needed assistance. Although states frequently permitted him to expand into other regions and provide more assistance, states also pushed back and refused to give international recognition or assistance to many in need—most notably when Jews were fleeing Nazi Germany. After the Second World War, and as a consequence of mass displacement, states re-examined who could be called a

refugee and what assistance they could receive. Because Western states were worried about having obligations to millions of people around the world, they defined a refugee as an individual 'outside the country of his origin owing to a well-founded fear of persecution' as a consequence of events that occurred in Europe before 1951. In other words, their definition excluded those outside Europe who were displaced because of war or natural disasters or because of events after 1951. Objecting to this arbitrary definition that excluded so many, the new refugee agency, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, working with aid agencies and permissive states, seized on events outside Europe and argued that there was no principled reason to deny to them what was given to Europeans.

Over time the political meaning of 'refugee' came to include anyone who was forced to flee their home and cross an international border, and eventually states changed the international legal meaning to reflect the new political realities. Now, in the contemporary era, we are likely to call someone a refugee if they are forced to flee their homes because of man-made circumstances and do not worry if they have crossed an international border. To capture these people, we now have a term 'internally displaced people'. One reason why states wanted to differentiate 'statutory' refugees from internally-displaced people is because they have little interest in extending their international legal obligations to millions of people, and do not want to become too involved in the domestic affairs of other states. Still, the concept of refugees has expanded impressively over the last 100 years, and the result is that there are millions of people who are now entitled to forms of assistance that are a matter of life and death.

Theory applied



Visit the Online Resource Centre to see real world applications of theoretical perspectives.

Box 10.1 Alexander Wendt on the three cultures of anarchy

'[T]he deep structure of anarchy [is] cultural or ideational rather than material ... [O]nce understood this way, we can see that the logic of anarchy can vary ... [D]ifferent cultures of anarchy are based on different kinds of roles in terms of which states represent Self and Other. [T]here are three roles, enemy, rival, and friend ... that are constituted by, and constitute, three distinct macro-level cultures of international politics, Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian, respectively. These cultures have different rules of engagement, interaction logics, and systemic tendencies ... The logic of the Hobbesian anarchy is well known: "the war of all against all ..." This is the true self-help system ... where actors cannot count on each other for help or even to observe basic-self-restraint ... Survival depends solely on military power ... Security is deeply competitive, a zero-sum affair ... Even if what states really want is security rather than power, their collective beliefs force them to act as if they are power-seeking ...

The Lockean culture has a different logic ... because it is based on a different role structure, rivalry rather than enmity ... Like enemies, rivals are constituted by representations about Self and Other with respect to violence, but these representations are less threatening: unlike enemies, rivals expect each other to act as if they recognize their sovereignty, their life and liberty, as a right, and therefore not to try to conquer or dominate them ... Unlike friends, however, the recognition among rivals does not extend to the right to be free from violence in disputes. The Kantian culture is based on a role structure of friendship ... within which states expect each other to observe two simple rules: (1) disputes will be settled without war or the threat of war (the rule of non-violence); and (2) they will fight as a team if the security of any one is threatened by a third party.'

(Wendt 1999: 43, 279, 251, 298-9)

Constructivists also examine how actors make their activities meaningful. Following Max Weber's (1949: 81) insight that 'we are cultural beings with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude toward the world and to lend it significance', constructivists attempt to recover the **meanings** that actors give to their practices and the objects that they construct. These derive not from private beliefs but rather from **culture**. In contrast to the rationalist presumption that culture, at most, constrains action, constructivists argue that culture informs the meanings that people give to their action. Sometimes constructivists have presumed that such meanings derive from a hardened culture. But because culture is fractured and because society comprises different interpretations of what is meaningful activity, scholars need to consider these cultural fault lines and treat the fixing of meanings as an accomplishment that is the essence of politics. Some of the most important debates in world politics are about how to define particular activities. Development, human rights, security, humanitarian intervention, sovereignty are all important orienting concepts that can have any number of meanings. States and non-state actors have rival interpretations of the meanings of these concepts and will fight to try to have their preferred meaning collectively accepted.

The very fact that these meanings are fixed through politics, and that once these meanings are fixed they have consequences for the ability of people to determine their fates, suggests an alternative way of thinking about **power**. Most international relations theorists treat power as the ability of one state to compel another

state to do what it otherwise would not, and tend to focus on the material technologies, such as military firepower and economic statecraft, which have this persuasive effect. Constructivists have offered two important additions to this view of power. The forces of power go beyond the material; they also can be ideational (Barnett and Duvall 2005). Consider the issue of **legitimacy**. States, including great powers, crave legitimacy, the belief that they are acting according to and pursuing the values of the broader international community. There is a direct relationship between their legitimacy and the costs of a course of action: the greater the legitimacy, the easier time they will have convincing others to cooperate with their policies; the less the legitimacy, the more costly the action. This means, then, that even great powers will frequently feel the need to alter their policies in order to be viewed as legitimate—or bear the consequences. Further evidence of the constraining power of legitimacy is offered by the tactic of 'naming and shaming' by human rights activists. If states did not care about their reputation and the perception that they were acting in a manner consistent with prevailing international standards, then this tactic would have little visible impact; it is only because law-breaking governments want to be perceived as acting in a manner consistent with international norms that they can be taunted into changing their conduct.

Moreover, the effects of power go beyond the ability to change behaviour. Power also includes how knowledge, the fixing of meanings, and the construction of identities allocate differential rewards and capacities. If development is defined as per capita income,

Box 10.2 Charli Carpenter on the effects of gender on the lives of individuals in war-torn societies

'International agencies mandated with the protection of war-affected civilians generally aim to provide protection in a neutral manner, but when necessary they prioritize the protection of the "especially vulnerable." According to professional standards recently articulated by the International Committee for the Red Cross, "special attention by organizations for specific groups should be determined on the basis of an assessment of their needs and vulnerability as well as the risks to which they are exposed." If adult men are most likely to lose their lives directly as a result of the fall of a besieged town, one would expect that, given these standards, such agencies would emphasize protection of civilian men in areas under siege by armed forces. Nonetheless, in places where civilians have been evacuated from besieged areas in an effort to save lives, it is typically women, children, and the elderly who have composed the evacuee population ... While

in principle all civilians are to be protected on the basis of their actions and social roles, in practice only certain categories of population (women, elderly, sick, and disabled) are presumed to be civilians regardless of context ... Thus ... gender is encoded within the parameters of the immunity norm: while in principle the "innocent civilian" may include other groups, such as adult men, the presumption that women and children are innocents, whereas adult men may not be means that "women and children" signifies "civilian" in a way that "unarmed adult male" does not ... Similarly, gender beliefs are embedded in ... the concept of "especially vulnerable populations" ... In this context it never would have occurred to protection agencies to evacuate men and boys first, even if they had had the chance.'

(Carpenter 2003: 662, 671, 673-4)

then some actors, namely states, and some activities, namely industrialization, are privileged; however, if development is defined as basic needs met, then other actors, namely peasants and women, gain voice, and other activities, namely small-scale agricultural initiatives and cottage industries, are visible. International humanitarian law tends to assume that ‘combatants’ are men and ‘civilians’ are women, children, and the elderly; consequently, as the discussion of the Bosnian civil war illustrates, men and women might be differentially protected by the laws of war (see Box 10.2).

Although there is tremendous debate among constructivists over whether and how they are committed to social science, there is some common ground. To begin with, they reject the unity of science thesis—that the methods of the natural sciences are appropriate for understanding the social world. Instead, they argue that the objects of the natural world and the social world are different in one crucial respect: in the social world the subject knows herself, through reflection on her actions, as a subject not simply of experience but of intentional action as well. Humans reflect on their experiences and use these experiences to inform their reasons for their behaviour. Atoms do not. What necessitates a human science, therefore, is the need to understand how individuals give significance and meaning to their actions. Only then will we be able to explain human action. Consequently, the human sciences require methods that can capture the interpretations that actors bring to their activities. Max Weber, a founding figure of this approach, advocated that scholars employ *verstehen* to recreate how people understand and interpret the world. To do so, scholars need to exhibit empathy, to locate the practice within the collectivity so that one knows how this practice or activity counts, and to unify these individual experiences into objectively, though time-bound, explanations (Ruggie 1998: 860).

Most constructivists remain committed to causality and explanation, but insist on a definition of causality and explanation that is frequently accepted by many IR scholars. A highly popular view of causality is that independent and dependent variables are unrelated and that a cause exists when the movement of one variable precedes and is responsible for the movement of another. Constructivists, though, add that structures can have a causal impact because they make possible certain kinds of behaviour, and thus generate certain tendencies in the international system. Sovereignty does not cause states with certain capacities; instead, it produces them and invests them with capacities that

make possible certain kinds of behaviours. Being a sovereign state, after all, means that states have certain rights and privileges that other actors in world politics do not. States are permitted to use violence (though within defined limits) while non-state actors that use violence are, by definition, terrorists. Knowing something about the structure, therefore, does important causal work. Constructivists also are committed to explanatory theory, but reject the idea that explanation requires the discovery of timeless laws. In fact, it is virtually impossible to find such laws in international politics. The reason for their absence is not because of some odd characteristic of international politics: this elusiveness exists for all the human sciences. As Karl Popper observed, the search for timeless laws in the human sciences will be forever elusive because of the ability of humans to accumulate knowledge of their activities, to reflect on their practices and acquire new knowledge, and to change their practices as a consequence. Accordingly, constructivists reject the search for laws in favour of contingent generalizations (Price and Reus-Smit 1998). Because of their interest in uncovering meaning and discovering contingent generalizations, constructivists have used a grab-bag of methods, including statistical models, game theory, rich case studies, and ethnography.

Key Points

- Constructivists are concerned with human consciousness and knowledge, treat ideas as structural factors that influence how actors interpret the world, consider the dynamic relationship between ideas and material forces as a consequence of how actors interpret their material reality, and are interested in how agents produce structures and how structures produce agents.
- Regulative and constitutive norms shape what actors do, but only constitutive norms shape the identity and actors of states and what counts as legitimate behaviour.
- Although the meanings that actors bring to their activities are shaped by the underlying culture, meanings are not always fixed and the fixing of meaning is a central feature of politics.
- Social construction denaturalizes what is taken for granted, asks questions about the origins of what is now accepted as a fact of life, and considers the alternative pathways that might have produced, and can produce, alternative worlds.
- Power is not only the ability of one actor to get another actor to do what they would not do otherwise, but also the production of identities, interests, and meanings that limit the ability of actors to control their fate.

Constructivism and global change

Constructivism's focus on how the world hangs together, how normative structures construct the identities and interests of actors, and how actors are rule-following, might seem ideal for explaining why things stay the same but useless for explaining why things change. This is hardly true. Constructivism claims that what exists might not have existed, and need not—inviting us to think of alternative worlds and the conditions that make them more or less possible. Indeed, constructivism scolded neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism for their failure to explain contemporary global transformations. The **Peace of Westphalia** helped to establish sovereignty and the norm of non-interference, but in recent decades various processes have worked against the principle of non-interference and suggested how state sovereignty is conditional on how states treat their populations—best known as a responsibility to protect. **World orders** are created and sustained not only by great power preferences but also by changing understandings of what constitutes a legitimate international order. Until the Second World War, the idea of a world organized around **empires** was hardly illegitimate; now it is. One of today's most pressing and impressive issues concerning global change is the 'end of history' and the apparent homogenization of world politics—that is, the tendency of states to organize their domestic and international lives in similar ways, and the growing acceptance of certain international norms for defining the good life and how to get there. In the rest of this section, I explore three concepts that figure centrally in such discussions—diffusion, socialization, and the internationalization and **institutionalization** of norms.

A central theme in any discussion of global change is diffusion. Stories about **diffusion** concern how particular models, practices, norms, strategies, or beliefs spread within a population. Constructivists have highlighted two important issues. One is **institutional isomorphism**, which observes that those organizations that share the same environment will, over time, resemble each other. In other words, if once there was a diversity of models within the population, over time that diversity yields to conformity and convergence around a single model. There used to be various ways to organize state structures, economic activity, free trade agreements, and on and on. But now the world is organized around the **nation-state**, states favour democratic

forms of governance and market economies, and most international organizations have a multilateral form. It is possible that the reason for this convergence is that states now realize that some institutions are just superior to others. An additional possibility is that states look alike because they want acceptance, legitimacy, and status. For instance, one explanation for the recent wave of democratization and elections is that states now accept that democratic elections are a more efficient and superior way to organize politics; it also could be, though, that lots of states have decided to turn democratic and run elections not because they were persuaded that it would be more efficient, but rather because they wanted to be viewed as part of the 'modern world' and receive the benefits associated with being a legitimate state.

How do things diffuse? Why are they accepted in new places? One factor is coercion. Colonialism and great power imposition figured centrally in the spread of capitalism. Another factor is strategic competition. Heated rivals are likely to adopt similar weapons systems to try to stay even on the military battlefield. States also will adopt similar ideas and organizations for at least four other reasons. Formal and informal pressures can cause states to adopt similar ideas because doing so will bring them resources they need. States want resources, and to attract these resources they will adopt and reform their institutions to signal to various communities that they are part of the club and are utilizing 'modern' techniques. In other words, they value these new institutions not because they truly believe that they are superior, but rather because they are symbols that will attract resources. Eastern European countries seeking entry into the European Union adopted various reforms not only because they believed that they are superior but also because they are the price of admission.

Also, during periods of uncertainty, when states are unsure of how to address existing challenges, they are likely to adopt those models that are perceived as successful or legitimate. Political candidates in newly democratizing countries reorganize their party and campaign organizations in order to increase their prospects of electoral victory. To that end, they draw from models of success, largely from the American context, not necessarily because they have evidence that the American campaign model is truly better, but rather

because it appears modern, sophisticated, and superior. Furthermore, frequently states adopt particular models because of their symbolic standing. Many Third World governments have acquired very expensive weapons systems that have very little military value because they convey to others that they are sophisticates and are a part of the 'club'. Iran's nuclear ambitions might owe to its desire for regional dominance, but it could also be that it wants to own this ultimate status symbol. Finally, professional associations and expert communities also diffuse organizational models. Most associations have established techniques, codes of conduct, and methodologies for determining how to confront challenges in their area of expertise. They learn these techniques through informal interactions and in formal settings such as in universities. Once these standards are established, they become the 'industry standard' and the accepted way of addressing problems in an area. Part of the job of professional associations and expert networks is to communicate these standards to others; doing so makes them agents of diffusion. Economists, lawyers, military officials, arms control experts, and others diffuse practices, standards, and models through networks and associations. If the American way of campaigning is becoming increasingly accepted around the world, it is in part due to a new class of professional campaign consultants that have converged around a set of accepted techniques and are ready to peddle their wares to willing customers.

In their discussion of changing identities and interests, constructivists have also employed the concept of **socialization**. How can we explain how states change so that they come to identify with the identities, interests, and manners of the existing members of the club, and, accordingly, change their behaviour so that it is consistent with those of the group? According to Alistair Iain Johnston (2008), the place to look is the intimate relations between states within international institutions and organizations. Specifically, he explores the possibility that China changed its security policies over the last two decades because of socialization processes contained in various multilateral forums. Furthermore, he argues that socialization can be produced by several mechanisms: by mimicking, when state officials face tremendous uncertainty and decide that the best way to proceed is to adopt the practices that seem to have served others well; social influence, when state officials aspire to status within the existing group and are sensitive to signs of approval and disapproval; and persuasion, when state officials are convinced by the superiority of new ways of thinking about the world. Consistent with

the earlier comment that we should look for ways in which constructivism and rational choice are both competing and complementary explanations of state behaviour, Johnston argues that some paths to socialization are closer to what rationalists have in mind, especially as they emphasize the costs and benefits of action, and some are closer to what constructivists have in mind, especially as they emphasize the desire to be accepted by the broader community and to show the ability to learn.

Discussions of diffusion and socialization also draw attention to the internationalization of norms. Norms are standards of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity. Norms of humanitarianism, **citizenship**, military intervention, human rights, trade, arms control, and the environment not only regulate what states do, they can also be connected to their identities and are thus expressive of how they define themselves and their interests. Norms constrain behaviour because actors are worried about costs and because of a sense of self. 'Civilized' states are expected to avoid settling their differences through violence, not because war might not pay but rather because it violates how 'civilized' states are expected to act. Human rights activists aspire to reduce human rights violations not only by 'naming and shaming' those who violate these rights but also by persuading potential violators that the observation of human rights is tied to their identity as a modern, responsible state. The domestic debates on the USA's treatment of 'enemy combatants' concerned not only whether torture worked but also whether it is a legitimate practice for civilized states.

These expectations of what constitutes proper behaviour can diffuse across the population to the point that they are taken for granted. Norms, therefore, do not simply erupt but rather evolve through a political process. A central issue, therefore, is the internationalization and institutionalization of norms, or what is now called the **life cycle of norms** (see **Box 10.3**).

Although many international norms have a taken-for-granted quality, they have to come from somewhere, and their path to acceptance is nearly always rough and rocky. Although most states now recognize that prisoners of war have certain rights and cannot be subjected to summary executions on the battlefield, this was not always the case. These rights originated with the emergence of international humanitarian law in the late nineteenth century, and then slowly spread and became increasingly accepted over the next several decades in response to considerable debate regarding how to minimize the horrors of war. Now most states

Box 10.3 Finnemore and Sikkink on the three stages of the life cycle of norms**Norm emergence**

'This stage is typified by persuasion by norm entrepreneurs [who] attempt to convince a critical mass of states ... to embrace new norms. Norm entrepreneurs call attention to issues or even "create" issues by using language that names, interprets, and dramatizes them.' Norm entrepreneurs attempt to establish 'frames ... that resonate with broader public understandings and are adopted as new ways of talking about and understanding issues'. Norm entrepreneurs need a launching pad to promote their norms, and will frequently work from non-governmental organizations and with international organizations and states. 'In most cases for an emergent norm to reach a threshold and move toward the second stage, it must become institutionalized in specific sets of international rules and organizations ... After norm entrepreneurs have persuaded a critical mass of states to become norm leaders and adopt new norms ... the norm reaches a critical threshold or tipping point.'

Norm cascade

'The second stage is characterized more by a dynamic of imitation as the norm leaders attempt to socialize other states to

become norm followers. The exact motivation for this second stage where the norm "cascades" through the rest of the population (in this case, states) may vary, but ... a combination of pressure for conformity, desire to enhance international legitimation, and the desire of state leaders to enhance their self-esteem facilitate norm cascades.' These processes can be likened to socialization. 'To the degree that states and state elites fashion a political self or identity in relation to the international community, the concept of socialization suggests that the cumulative effect of many countries in a region adopting new norms' is akin to peer pressure.

Norm internalization

The third stage is 'norm internalization ... Norms acquire a taken-for-granted quality and are no longer a matter of ... debate' and thus are automatically honoured. 'For example, few people today discuss whether women should be allowed to vote, whether slavery is useful, or whether medical personnel should be granted immunity during war.'

(Adapted from Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 894-905)

accept that prisoners of war have rights, even if those rights are not fully observed. Several decades ago many scholars and jurists objected to the very idea of humanitarian intervention because it violated sovereignty's principle of non-interference and allowed great powers to try to become sheep in wolves' clothing. Over the last fifteen years, though, there has been a growing acceptance of humanitarian intervention and a 'responsibility to protect'—when states are unable or unwilling to protect their citizens, then the international community inherits that responsibility. This revolutionary concept emerged through fits and starts, in response to tragedies such as Rwanda and propelled by various states and humanitarian organizations.

Among the various consequences of institutional isomorphism and the internationalization of norms, three are noteworthy. There used to be a myriad of ways to organize human activities, but that diversity has slowly but impressively yielded to conformity. Yet just because states look alike does not mean that they act alike. After all, many states gravitate towards particular models not because they really think that the model is better but in order to improve their legitimacy. These states, then, can be expected to act in ways that are inconsistent with the expectations of the model. For instance, if governments adopt democratic forms of governance and elections solely for symbolic reasons, then we should expect

the presence of democratic institutions to exist alongside authoritarian and illiberal practices. There is also a deepening sense of an 'international community'. The internationalization of norms suggests that actors are increasingly accepting standards of behaviour because they are connected to a sense of self that is tied to the international community. These norms, in other words, are bound up with the values of that community. To the extent that these values are shared, it becomes possible to speak of an international community. A third consequence is the presence of power even within an international community. Whose vision of international community is being constructed? Diffusion rarely goes from the Third World to the West; instead, it travels from the West to the Third World. The international society of states began as a European society and then expanded outward; the internationalization of this society and its norms shaped the identities and foreign policy practices of new members. In other words, the convergence on similar models, the internationalization of norms, and the possible emergence of an international community should not be mistaken for a world without power and hierarchy. In general, the constructivist concern with international diffusion and the internationalization of norms touches centrally on global change because of the interest in a world in motion and transformation (see **Box 10.4**).

Box 10.4 Key concepts of constructivism

Agent-structure problem: the problem is how to think about the relationship between agents and structures. One view is that agents are born with already formed identities and interests and then treat other actors and the broad structure that their interactions produce as a constraint on their interests. But this suggests that actors are pre-social to the extent that there is little interest in their identities or possibility that they might change their interests through their interactions with others. Another view is to treat the structure not as a constraint but rather as constituting the actors themselves. Yet this might treat agents as cultural dupes because they are nothing more than artefacts of that structure. The proposed solution to the agent-structure problem is to try and find a way to understand how agents and structures constitute each other.

Constructivism: an approach to international politics that concerns itself with the centrality of ideas and human consciousness; stresses a holistic and idealist view of structures; and how the structure constructs the actors' identities and interests, how their interaction is organized and constrained by that structure, and how their very interaction serves to either reproduce or transform that structure.

Holism: the view that structures cannot be decomposed into the individual units and their interactions because structures are more than the sum of their parts and are irreducibly social. The effects of structures, moreover, go beyond merely constraining the actors but also construct them.

Idealism: although often associated with the claim that it is possible to create a world of peace, idealism as a social theory argues that the most fundamental feature of society is social consciousness. Ideas shape how we see ourselves and our interests, the knowledge that we use to categorize and understand the world, the beliefs we have of others, and the possible and impossible solutions to challenges and threats. Idealism does not disregard material forces such as technology, but instead claims that the meanings and consequences of these material forces are not given by nature but rather driven by human interpretations.

Identity: the understanding of the self in relationship to an 'other'. Identities are social and thus are always formed in

relationship to others. Constructivists generally hold that identities shape interests; we cannot know what we want unless we know who we are. Because identities are social and are produced through interactions, they can change.

Individualism: the view that structures can be reduced to the aggregation of individuals and their interactions. International relations theories that subscribe to individualism assume the nature of the units and their interests, usually states and the pursuit of power or wealth, and then examine how the broad structure, usually the distribution of power, constrains how states can act and generates certain patterns in international politics. Individualism stands in contrast to holism.

Materialism: the view that material forces, including technology, are the bedrock of society. For International Relations scholars, this leads to forms of technological determinism or the distribution of military power for understanding the state's foreign policy and patterns of international politics.

Normative structure: international relations theory traditionally defines structure in material terms, such as the distribution of power, and then treats structure as a constraint on actors. In contrast to a materialist structure, a normative structure includes the collectively held ideas such as knowledge, rules, beliefs, and norms that not only constrain actors—they also construct categories of meaning, constitute their identities and interests, and define standards of appropriate conduct. Critical here is the concept of a norm, a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity. Actors adhere to norms not only because of benefits and costs for doing so, but also because they are related to a sense of self.

Rational choice: an approach that emphasizes how actors attempt to maximize their interests, and how they attempt to select the most efficient means to achieve those interests, and endeavours to explain collective outcomes by virtue of the attempt by actors to maximize their preferences under a set of constraints. Deriving largely from economic theorizing, the rational choice approach to politics and international politics has been immensely influential and applied to a range of issues.

Key Points

- The recognition that the world is socially constructed means that constructivists can investigate global change and transformation.
- A key issue in any study of global change is diffusion, captured by the concern with institutional isomorphism and the life cycle of norms.
- Although diffusion sometimes occurs because of the view that the model is superior, frequently actors adopt a model either because of external pressures or because of its symbolic legitimacy.
- Institutional isomorphism and the internationalization of norms raise issues of growing homogeneity in world politics, a deepening international community, and socialization processes.

Conclusion

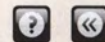
This chapter surveyed the global-historical, intellectual, and disciplinary forces that made constructivism a particularly attractive way of thinking about international politics, whose continuities and transformations it invites students to imagine. It explores why the world is organized the way it is, considers the different factors that shape the durable forms of world politics, and seeks alternative worlds. In doing so, it challenges received wisdoms and opens up new lines of enquiry. Although many in the discipline treated as strange the claim that ideas can shape how the world works, in fact what is strange is a view of a world devoid of ideas. After all, is it even possible to imagine such a world? What would it look like? Is it even possible to imagine a world driven only by materialist forces? What would it look like?

Constructivism challenged the discipline's mainstream on its own terms and on issues that were at the heart of its research agenda. Its success has sometimes led to the false impression that constructivism is a substantive theory and not the social theory that it is. As such, it is both much more and much less than meets the eye. It is much less because it is not properly a theory that can be viewed as a rival to many of the theories in this volume. It offers no predictions about enduring

regularities or tendencies in world politics. Instead, it suggests how to investigate them. Consequently, it is much more than meets the eye because it offers alternative ways of thinking about a range of concepts and issues, including power, alliance formation, war termination, military intervention, the liberal peace, and international organizations.

What of the future of constructivism? It depends on which version of constructivism we are discussing. Constructivists generally accept certain commitments, including idealism, holism, and an interest in the relationship between agents and structures. They also accept certain basic claims, such as the social construction of reality, the existence and importance of social facts, the constitution of actors' identities, interests, and subjectivities, and the importance of recovering the meaning that actors give to their activities. But they also exhibit tremendous differences. Although sometimes these disagreements can appear to derive from academic posturing, the search for status, and the narcissism of minor differences, in fact there also can be much at stake, as suggested in Chapter 11. These differences will exist as long as constructivism exists. This is healthy because it will guard against complacency and enrich our understanding of the world.

Questions



- 1 What were the silences of neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism?
- 2 What is the core of constructivism?
- 3 Do you find constructivism a useful approach for thinking about world politics?
- 4 Do you agree that we should try to understand how actors make meaningful their behaviour in world politics? Or is it enough to examine behaviour?
- 5 How are meanings fixed in world politics?
- 6 What sort of relationship can exist between rational choice and constructivism?
- 7 What do you think are the core issues for the study of global change, and how does constructivism help you address those issues? Alternatively, how does a constructivist framework help you identify new issues that you had not previously considered?
- 8 Does it make sense to think about states being socialized, as if they were individuals?
- 9 How does the concept of diffusion help you understand why and how the world has changed?
- 10 Does the internationalization and institutionalization of norms imply some notion of progress?

Further Reading



Adler, E. (2003), 'Constructivism', in W. Carlneas, B. Simmons, and T. Risse (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage). Reviews the origins and fundamentals of constructivism and its relationship to existing theories of international politics.

Barnett, M. (1998), *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press). Examines how Arab leaders played the game of Arab politics and, in doing so, transformed the very nature of Arab politics. An example of how constructivists might think about how strategic action is shaped by a normative structure.

Fearon, J., and Wendt, A. (2003), 'Rationalism vs. Constructivism', in W. Carlneas, B. Simmons, and T. Risse (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage). Surveys how rational choice and constructivism overlap.

Finnemore, M., and Sikkink, K. (1999), 'International Norms and Political Change', in P. Katzenstein et al. (eds), *Explorations and Controversies in World Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

— — — (2001), 'Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4(1): 391–416. An insightful account of constructivism's insights.

Hollis, M., and Smith, S. (1990), *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press). An exceptionally clear exposition of the contrast between a conception of world politics driven by self-interested action and a conception informed by rules and interpretive methods.

Johnston, A. I. (2008), *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). A terrific introduction to the alternative ways to think about the socialization of states.

Katzenstein, P. (ed.) (1996), *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press). Explores how identities and norms shape state interests in a range of security areas.

Price, R. (ed.) (2008), *Moral Limit and Possibility in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Constructivist scholars gather to consider the relationship between ethics and various outcomes in world affairs.

Wendt, A. (1999), *A Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). The 'bible' of modern constructivism.

Online Resource Centre



Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to access more learning resources on this chapter topic at www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/baylis6e/