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Constructivism

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Introduction

This chapter presents a constructivist understanding of world politics. We begin with a discussion of state identity, a fundamental concept of constructivism, and explore the way that identity defines and bounds state actions. To illustrate this concept, we address a number of issues central to the study of world politics: change, governance, and security. Overall, our goal is to present a thickly textured, layered understanding of the international realm based on a notion taken for granted in much of IR theory, *meaning*.

Constructivism is the newest but perhaps the most dynamic of the main theories of international relations. The seminal works inaugurating the constructivist approach to the study of global politics – articles by Alexander Wendt (1987; 1992) and books by Nicholas Onuf (1989) and Friedrich Kratochwil (1989) – are only about two and a half decades old, even though the intellectual traditions on which they draw have long histories in other academic fields. Unlike **liberalism** and **realism** (see Chapters 2 and 3), which have taken their bearings from developments in economic and political theory, constructivism, like Critical Theory (see Chapter 4), is rooted in insights from social theory (e.g. P. Berger and Luckmann 1967; Giddens 1984) and the philosophy of knowledge (Searle 1995; Hacking 1999; Golinski 2005). Perhaps in consequence, constructivism does not predict events, or offer definitive advice on how a state should act in the international arena. Instead, constructivism is best understood as a set of wagers about the way that social life is put together, wagers that centrally revolve around the fundamental importance of meaning to social action: 'people act toward objects, including each other, on the basis of the meanings those objects have for them' (Wendt 1999: 140). Constructivist IR theory is an application of that basic analytical commitment to the study of global politics.

What does constructivism do? Identity and international institutions

So what exactly does constructivist IR theory hold? What are the basic tenets of constructivist IR? This is a very hard question to answer because, as a relatively new theory, there has not been as much time for people to work out in detail what the most central propositions of the constructivist way of doing things are. Important debates about **methodology** remain active among constructivists, and these debates have important implications for precisely *how* one should study the meaningful aspects of global politics (see P. T. Jackson 2010). But there are some substantive points on which most constructivist IR scholars would agree, and those points make for a nice contrast with realism and liberalism.

A core concern of constructivists is **identity**. Contrary to both realists and liberals, constructivists argue that the kinds of goals held by a state or other actor in world politics emerge from the actor's identity, so much constructivist research deals with the way in which states, state leaders and other actors conceptualise themselves and the roles they play and purposes they serve in the world. These public conceptions in turn translate into the sorts of goals and interests that those actors pursue in their foreign policy. Whereas realists look to the objective situation formed by the **balance of power** (or material capabilities) between actors, and liberals look to the subjective calculations

of rational strategy by those actors' leaders, constructivists suggest that processes of meaning-making and identity-shaping necessarily intervene between material factors and strategic decisions.

Another way of saying this is that identity in a constructivist account is **intersubjective**: it doesn't exist 'out there' in the physical world and it doesn't just exist 'in here' inside our heads, but instead exists 'between us,' in the social transactions that people have with each other. A scholar knows that there is an identity in play by noticing that when people deal with each other they do so on the basis of categorical distinctions. Thus, for example, we know there is a Kurdish identity operative in the world because we see Kurds interacting with Kurds and non-Kurds and treating them differently. Intersubjective identity is public, and exercises its effects in observable transactions; at issue here is not belief, but the contours of acceptable action (Laffey and Weldes 1997).

One implication of this notion of identity is that for constructivists identity comes before and forms the basis of interests (Wendt 1992: 398; Ringmar 1996). Because we are a certain kind of people, forming a certain kind of community and holding certain values and ideals, therefore we can and should engage in some courses of action and not others. For instance, take the so-called 'isolationist' US foreign policy discourse that claims 'because we are the paragon of liberty, we should not interfere in the political affairs of the world but should preserve our democratic purity so we can lead by example'. Alternatively, there is the competing claim that 'because we are the most powerful country in the world, we have an obligation to send our troops into different parts of the world where people are experiencing hardship and use our great strength to support them in their struggles for freedom'. These rival narratives, which issue from different self-understandings of US identity, point in very different policy directions, and support different conceptions of US interests. Both these discourses are expressed in US presidential speeches and congressional speeches all the time; they are identity claims, all taking the form, 'because we are *x*, we can or should do *y*.' World politics for a constructivist is all about those kinds of claims, and about struggles between people making different and competing kinds of identity claims.

This is particularly important to the study of IR because identity is not just about Selves; identity is also about Others who are 'not Self', who are outside somewhere, beyond the borders – sometimes quite literally beyond the borders of a state, and sometimes more metaphorically excluded or disenfranchised from a community even though they physically live in its midst. So to say *we* are a certain kind of people is at the same time to say quite immediately that *they* are not, whoever *they* happen to be. A statement like 'because we are *x*' (where '*x*' might be 'free,' 'democratic,' 'capitalist,' etc.) always implies the existence of another group who is not-*x*, and by virtue of not being *x* they have to be treated differently. This quickly becomes politically salient, because particular Others have to be treated differently by particular kinds of Selves. The categorical distinction between Selves and Others affects how interactions between the two groups will unfold.

For example, imagine that there is a group of people who practise a religion that we are not familiar with, and they engage in ritual acts that we find strange – and some adherents of that religion commit an act of political violence. It makes a difference whether we consider those people to be 'heretics', or 'terrorists', or 'primitives', or something else. Characterising them in any particular way raises different kinds of social and political implications. What do you do with heretics? Well, you either burn them or try to convert them. What do you do with terrorists? Well, you don't really

convert them. You don't really burn them for their heresy. In the present day and age you go after them and kill them, or you try to prosecute them as criminals – which is a very different set of options to those available when dealing with heretics. Primitives, what do you do with them? Well, they're primitive; you either cordon them off and let them live in their pristine state of non-modernity, or you help to 'modernise', 'develop', or 'civilise' them. But you wouldn't help to develop terrorists or heretics. How that self–other relationship is configured has certain kinds of implications for action. So when constructivists want to try and understand what's going on in world politics, they first look to the kind of self–other relationships that are in force.

Some of these self–other relationships are relatively durable, because they are codified into rules and **norms** that govern interactions between entities in world politics. Realists and liberals also acknowledge the existence and importance of rules and norms, but treat them very differently: for realists (see Chapter 2), rules and norms reflect the underlying distribution of power at the time that they were instituted, while for liberals (see Chapter 3), rules and norms are instrumental means for various political actors to coordinate their actions for mutual benefit. Rules and norms for both of these perspectives are **regulative** and pertain to behaviour (what is permitted, what is prohibited), whereas for constructivists, rules and norms are also **constitutive** in that they specify not just what an actor can do but, more fundamentally, what kind of actor that actor actually *is* (see Box 7.2). Thus, sovereignty is a constitutive rule of the contemporary global political system that defines who are the legitimate players on the international stage (Reus-Smit 1999; R. Hall 1999). Because constructivists treat rules and norms as codified identity claims and self–other relationships, following rules and adhering to norms – or challenging rules and defying norms – necessarily involves shifts in identity, and these shifts and changes give rise to different courses of action.

BOX 7.1: CASE STUDY

'Anarchy is what states make of it'

Constructivists agree with the general realist picture of international relations as a condition of anarchy (defined in terms of the lack of a **hierarchical** world government), but introduce a conception of anarchy no longer 'emptied of content', as Nicholas Onuf (1989: 185) put it. Instead, they proffer a conception of *thick* anarchy comprising rules, norms and institutions of the kind studied by the English School (see Chapter 17). Onuf (1998: 62–3) argued that, despite appearances, international anarchy is not devoid of rules, norms and institutions; that, in fact, it forms a social arrangement with stable patterns of relations. It is just that this pattern of relations creates a condition where 'no one state or group of states rules over the rest'.

In a path-breaking article, Alexander Wendt (1992) further elaborated this argument by showing how international anarchy is socially constructed through the actions, interactions and self-understandings of states. Anarchy is not some pre-given structure, it is the result of social processes and practices, and is therefore intimately related to an intersubjective worldview held by states about the nature of the international environment (that it is a power-political system of self-help) and of states (that they are egoistic and self-regarding). It is because states internalise these understandings, socialising themselves into modes of behaviour consistent with a power-politics worldview, that anarchy takes the form it does. The key point for constructivists is that 'Self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. *Anarchy is what states make of it*' (Wendt 1992: 395).

In a later work, Wendt (1999: ch. 6) elaborated three different logics or cultures of anarchy which he named Hobbesian, **Lockean** and **Kantian**. Each produces a different worldview and different conception of self–other relations (see Table 7.1).

When it comes to the contemporary international system, constructivists agree with realists and liberals that the present order of things is largely, although not exclusively, dominated by sovereign states interacting under conditions of **anarchy**. But anarchy as conceived by constructivists is a different kind of anarchy, because in the social space between states you have international law, state identities, and many other self–other relationships – it is a very complex, busy space (see Box 7.1 and Table 7.1). Constructivist anarchy, therefore, is *thick* anarchy; it is not thin anarchy as in realism, where the absence of a superior government requires states to take care of their own security and balance against each other by building up forces, which can inadvertently lead to conflict spirals, to arms races, and so on. It is not even the liberal notion of anarchy, in which states have the opportunity to strike mutually beneficial deals with each other, busily comparing their utility functions and saying, 'if I ally with you and we make a deal that will make us all richer, that will make us all better off, good!'

The constructivist notion of anarchy is a lot thicker; floating around out there in that intersubjective space there are rules and norms and other things, which states must

Table 7.1 Three cultures of anarchy

Culture of anarchy	Worldview	Self–Other relations	Corresponding IR theories
Hobbesian	Self-help; 'war of all against all'; zero-sum security; survival depends on military power	Enmity Violence between enemies has no limits	Realism
Lockean	Mutual respect of sovereign rights; rules, norms and institutions create social expectations and regulate state behaviour; 'live and let live' system	Rivalry Violence between rivals is self-limiting	English School, liberalism, constructivism
Kantian	Pluralistic security communities; 'thinking like a team'; mutual commitment to peaceful relations; subordination of military power to the rule of law and reasoned argument	Friendship Violence between friends is ruled out	Liberalism, Critical Theory, feminism, theories of global justice, cosmopolitan democracy

internalise in order to make their identity claims stick. Some of these rules and norms are so well-established that constructivists call them 'international institutions', by which they do not necessarily mean formal organisations. Instead, constructivists use the word 'institution' in a more sociological sense, approximately the same way that one might speak of the 'institution' of marriage – a set of socially established expectations for how a particular relationship ought to work. Constructivists claim that one can see such institutions operating at the level of international society as well. One of the prime institutions that constructivists like to point to is the institution of the balance of power, which for a constructivist is a management strategy, or a mechanism by which **great powers** manage the international system (see Chapter 19). It is something for which states and their representatives consciously and deliberately strive. In realism the balance of power is not necessarily a deliberately intended product, it is more of an inevitable consequence of states looking to take care of their own security needs. In constructivism, by contrast, the balance of power is a means or procedure for dealing with various shifts of capabilities: over time, countries get rich, countries get poor, countries develop bigger armies, countries develop smaller armies, so the capacities of states are often in flux. The balance of power is one important way of dealing with this flux.

Balance of power, for constructivists, does not just mean that states should be made roughly equal to each other in terms of their capabilities; it also means that if one state does something and it is somehow going to be infringing another state's power, then that infringed state needs to get some compensation for standing back and allowing another state's power to be augmented. European states have long engaged in this kind of balance of power politics among themselves, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries one of the main things that happened was that various great powers would partition states and annex territories as compensation for events elsewhere in the world, particularly to offset great power expansion through colonisation. Consultation was built into this process too: the idea that great powers need to be consulted before anyone embarks on a course of action likely to unsettle the **status quo** or drastically alter the distribution of material capabilities. The point is that the institution of the balance of power is, for a constructivist, very closely linked to the identity of being a 'great power'. So, for constructivism, great powers have conferred on them certain rights and privileges, including consultation and compensation, which makes them active managers of the international system.

Another international institution in which constructivists are particularly interested is **war**. Realists and liberals are also interested in war, of course, but constructivists approach the topic rather differently. War, if you are a constructivist, is not just the use of deadly force; it is a social institution and, as such, comprises rules, laws and norms. Constructivists would first point to the fact that we have laws that govern war (for example, the Geneva Conventions); we have practices, protocols and codes about how war is supposed to be prosecuted (embodied in national military codes). We also have norms: binding sets of expectations such as, 'do not deliberately target or kill civilians' (see Chapter 15). While these expectations are not always perfectly reflected in political practice, violators of these norms do come in for criticism, and generally provide excuses and rationales for their deviation from the accepted rules of normal behaviour – something they would probably not do if the norm were not well established.

Norms and violence   Neta C. Crawford

Discourse about norms usually refers to the relationship between dominant behaviours ('the norm') and normative beliefs. From that perspective, the question is: what is the relationship between normative beliefs (ideas of what is good and for what reason) and the ways humans behave and structure their world? This is the analytical question – the positive social science question – which I consider first.

The ancient Roman scholar Cicero said that 'in time of war law is silent'. But when I think about war, I think about all the ways we limit the practice. War rarely goes to the most awful extremes. In every culture, it is almost always the case that the resort to war and the conduct of battle follows rules that limit violence. The question is, why?

There are three possible reasons why wars are limited. The first is the hope for reciprocity: if we restrain ourselves, we hope you will too. If you don't, we won't. We fear reprisal and so should you. The second reason is efficiency and expediency: if we restrain ourselves, we will not waste our energy and multiply our enemies. Absolute destruction vitiates victory in many cases. So, one of Gandhi's arguments for non-violence is expediency: 'Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than power derived from fear of punishment'. The third reason for restraint in war is the simple belief that to behave in certain ways – killing unarmed persons, poisoning, torturing – is simply morally wrong. When others sanction us because we have violated a norm, they do so because of their belief about what behaviours are right and what are beyond the pale. And so, when we make a calculation that it is to our advantage to use force, we might argue that force is necessary, and that certain limits may be disregarded. This is the reasoning behind **international humanitarian law**, also known as the law of war. The norm of military necessity thus trumps the norms of non-combatant immunity. Thus, for instance the Additional Protocol I of the **Geneva Convention** (1977), Article 57, says civilians should be protected but that protection is subject to military advantage. Parties to the treaty should 'refrain from deciding to launch any attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated'. Further, 'an attack shall be cancelled or suspended if it becomes apparent that the objective is not a military one or is subject to special protection or that the attack may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated'.

These Geneva Protocols are an embodiment of the dominant normative beliefs about war and restraint in war. They are deeply ambivalent, reflecting the principled respect for human rights and the idea that war must be limited while at the same time embodying a form of **utilitarian** reasoning that stresses military necessity. The 'humanitarian' law thus sanctions violence. The belief that certain uses of force are wrong is a principled position that should not yield to the utilitarian calculus of military necessity so easily. Limiting the occasions and conduct of war because we desire that others do so, or because we fear reprisal, or because we desire to be

more efficient, is not a principled limit on the use of force. In such a view 'respect' for the other is simply a healthy regard for how the other might now, or in the future, hurt us. The idea of the normality of violence is not challenged or destabilised.

Which brings me to the normative question: What should be the relationship between norms of violence and democratic norms? This is connected to something else Gandhi said about war: 'The science of war leads one to dictatorship, pure and simple. The science of non-violence alone can lead one to pure democracy.' By 'pure democracy', I take Gandhi to mean respectful deliberation and participation by all. It is the opposite of coercion. This is deep democracy, not the Freedom House version of democracy, which is simply the freedom to vote in order choose representatives who then, it is hoped, deliberate and negotiate on your behalf.

So as Gandhi was implying, and as Randall Forsberg stated explicitly in her work on the end of war as an institution, democracy is not simply the sum of the political right to vote and freedoms to associate and speak freely. Democracy is an institutional arrangement and a set of attitudes and beliefs that create the opportunity to deliberate, to argue. And if we are to argue fairly, with some hope of coming to an un-coerced understanding with another, we must renounce violence and the threat of violence. We must listen and be willing to be persuaded. This is what human rights and political rights share – the renunciation of violent means to resolve disputes. Forsberg believed that 'democratic institutions have prompted, or paralleled, a growing rejection of violence as a means of achieving political or economic ends within and between nations'. For Forsberg, it is not an exaggeration to say that democracy and a commitment to non-violence are synonymous: 'commitment to non-violence lies at the core of democratic institutions'. She continues:

Though little recognized, the renunciation of violence as a means to any ends except defense is as much a cornerstone of democratic institutions as its widely recognized counterpart, freedom of expression and other civil liberties. Commitment to non-violence protects and preserves freedom of expression and other civil liberties by precluding intimidation or coercion by violence or the threat of violence. Within democracies, wherever nonviolence is not the rule … other democratic rights and freedoms are lost or severely compromised (cited in Crawford 2009: 117).

The renunciation of a decision to use force is the first step to deep democracy. And deliberative democracy brings to politics a quality that Aristotle (2009: 142), in *The Nicomachean ethics*, called friendship:

Friendship seems too to hold states together, and lawgivers to care more for it than for justice; for concord seems to be something like friendship, and this they aim at most of all, … and when men are friends they have no need of justice; while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality.

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We also have various kinds of institutions like the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross/Crescent), which has the very odd right and ability to drive onto active battlefields and tend the wounded – this is strange because most countries respect the ICRC and permit them to do this, and to inspect prisoner-of-war camps and the like. So the institution of war includes this **humanitarian** practice to which many states adhere, that you can actually let the ICRC into the middle of a war zone, where they cannot be harmed or targeted by belligerents. Further, each side lets the ICRC tend to the enemy's wounded soldiers, not just their own. This may not make a lot of sense to a realist or to a liberal; but a constructivist would say this *does* make sense precisely because war is a social institution, it is not just something people engage in with no limits. War itself is regulated and has social meaning attached to it. Of course, the fact we have war crimes and courts for prosecuting such crimes is evidence of the ethical and normative boundaries within which war is supposed to be conducted, and reflects the social character of this international institution.

These points about war and the balance of power all add up to the idea that the international institutions that exist 'out there' in world politics provide sets of standards to which states can be held accountable. Think for a moment about an example closer to home, the speed limit on a major highway. On most highways in the US, for example, the speed limit is 65 miles per hour. While this does not guarantee that everybody drives under the speed limit, it does give the police the authority to penalise drivers who come breezing through at 90 miles per hour. Likewise, international institutions provide standards and expectations, not guarantees of specific rule-governed behaviour. Realist sceptics will sometimes say an international law is not really worth much, because in the absence of anyone enforcing it hierarchically, states can violate it any time they choose. International lawyers, most of whom are constructivists in practice, would say that is equivalent to saying there is no such thing as a law against murder because murders are still committed. Of course murders are still committed; that is not the point. The point is that the law establishes a certain set of expectations and standards by prohibiting murder. So when people do violate laws, they risk prosecution. The sceptic may ask: who punishes states when they violate international laws and norms? International lawyers and constructivists would retort by saying that often states mete out punishment to violators of international law among themselves. States, sometimes multilaterally, sometimes unilaterally, decide to intervene in order to provide some redress. In other cases, the enforcement mechanism may be a transnational social movement, which is able to use the socially established expectation of correct conduct as a way to shame a state and its leaders into changing their course of action (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The chief point in all this, for constructivists, is that international anarchy is a thickly textured social environment comprising normative principles, standards and expectations, the purposes ascribed to state identities, and the cultural components of legitimacy.

Constructivism's understanding of change in the international system

One of the principal implications of this constructivist account of global politics involves the way that we understand *change*. For constructivists, stability is not presumed in a way that it tends to be for either realist or liberals. An international system – indeed,

any relatively stable system of social action – requires effort to sustain, effort that is *joint* inasmuch as it relies on the coordinated activity of multiple actors. Instead of starting out by taking for granted that there just is this given, naturally-existing thing called the international system, and that our primary task is to figure out how it works and how we should live in it (as explanatory and normative theorists do respectively), constructivists emphasise the social effort that goes into making and maintaining the present international system. On the one hand this means things could have been different, it means we did not have to have the kind of organisation of world politics that we have right now; but it also means that things still could be different in the future because there is nothing natural or necessary about the way in which we presently organise world politics. World politics could actually be organised in a radically different way in the future. There is a lot at stake in this idea that these social arrangements (including international systems) are produced by social action rather than being natural or brute facts (see Box 7.2).

Constructivists argue that stability in social systems is produced by everyday practices, everyday behaviours, and everyday ways of acting and interacting (Adler and Pouliot 2011). So a constructivist, thinking about a university, for instance, might say that universities are not natural or brute facts, that they are not given in the nature of things. The fact that there continues to be a university in a particular place day after day is a social or institutional fact, and that takes work to sustain. There are many things that people do to maintain the university, not just in the physical sense of disposing of waste and maintaining buildings and facilities, but in the cultural or social sense: there have to be ways of administering people using the categories of 'student,' 'professor' and 'staff'; there have to be organisational means of dividing bodies of knowledge into distinct disciplines; in fact, there have to be all kinds of little ways in which in the daily life of you and everyone else at the university ends up reproducing its existence in this particular social arrangement, because there is nothing natural about it. If all the people were to disappear, there would be no university. The university, as an institutional fact, would not exist independently of social actions and intersubjective understandings. For instance, you cannot just walk into the library and take home a book; you have to show your ID card and check it out. That is one of those everyday practices that re-inscribes the university, that reproduces the university's organisational existence at the same time as it reproduces your identity as a student. There are also joint understandings and formal rules about borrowing and returning books. Those are the sorts of everyday practices and activities that create the effect of a stable university.

BOX 7.2: TERMINOLOGY

John R. Searle on facts and rules

Brute and institutional facts:

'[W]e need to distinguish between *brute facts* such as the fact that the sun is ninety-three million miles from the earth and *institutional* facts such as the fact that Clinton is president. Brute facts exist independently of any human institutions; institutional facts can exist only within human institutions. Brute facts require the institution of language in order that we can state the facts, but the brute facts themselves exist quite independently of language or of any other human institution' (1995: 27).

Regulative and constitutive rules:

'Some rules regulate antecedently existing activities. For example, the rule "drive on the right-hand side of the road" regulates driving; but driving can exist prior to the existence of that rule. However, some rules do not merely regulate, they also create the very possibility of certain activities. Thus the rules of chess do not regulate an antecedently existing activity … Rather, the rules of chess create the very possibility of playing chess' (1995: 27–8).

Constructivists would say the same thing happens in world politics writ large. A case from a few years ago illustrates the point: Augusto Pinochet (1915–2006) was a dictator in Chile who, like many dictators, managed to secure for himself sovereign immunity before leaving office in 1990. This immunity meant he was not prosecutable within Chile for any of his alleged crimes against the people, many of which were extremely well-documented. Since he gave himself immunity he did not have to worry about these things. In 1998 Pinochet travelled to Britain for a medical procedure, whereupon he was arrested. Spain – which often likes to think of itself as having certain special responsibilities for Latin American affairs, as part of a general identity-claim recurrent in Spanish foreign policy – had asked Britain to extradite Pinochet to Spain so it could put him on trial for numerous violations of domestic law and international law and crimes against humanity (Roht-Arriaza 2006). Spain's extradition request raised the question of what **sovereignty** means, because if the principle of sovereignty grants sovereigns the right to exercise authority and power without external interference, and to confer immunity on former heads of state, then Pinochet should not have been subject to prosecution, in Chile at least. But here we have a situation in which people were challenging this understanding of sovereignty, advancing a contrary identity-claim with different implications for social action. Essentially, the Spanish claim was that human rights law trumps sovereign immunity, because people are human beings before they are citizens and heads of states (see Chapter 32). Thus we have an identity contest: which set of expectations, and which set of identities, should dominate? To whom are obligations owed: sovereign states, or 'humanity'?

In the end, Britain's courts concluded that while they had the right to extradite Pinochet, they would decline extradition because Pinochet was a frail, sick old man; they extended mercy to the accused war criminal. What is interesting about this decision is that it re-inscribed certain understandings about international politics in everyday practice. By claiming it had the right to extradite Pinochet, Britain was affecting a small but important shift in the limits of sovereignty or the capacity of sovereign actors to do things: because if Britain does possess that right, as it claimed, then sovereign states do not have the ability to immunise former dictators from indictment under international law. But even if the British court had decided something else – for example, if it had judged that Britain had no right to extradite Pinochet – it *also* would have re-inscribed a certain understanding of sovereignty in everyday practice. Either way, state identities are being reproduced or re-inscribed.

Constructivists would argue that it is exactly these kinds of moments, these kinds of everyday decisions, that produce the greater social aggregates that we actually end up seeing in the world. Thus we have to investigate how those things happen in order to figure out what is going on in world politics. One of the ways constructivists like to do this is by pointing out that if you take these kinds of everyday practices seriously, you very quickly run into state and national identity as an important source of the reasons why states do things. Group identity pertains to who and what a people are, but also therefore what kinds of actions they can legitimately perform that are consistent with their identity. The logic goes like this: because we are a *certain* kind of people we will do *certain* kinds of things. For constructivists, this is not just a result of material factors, certainly not just the result of genetic factors or any other supposedly natural traits. A group of people will not act in a particular way just because they possess some set of common ethnic characteristics, and not just because they happen to live together.

Rather, what is of interest is how notions of commonality are deployed in practice, and what kinds of political effects they produce (Neumann 1999).

States, their populations, and their leaders can also be socialised; they can be taught, in effect, to adhere to certain kinds of norms. They can be placed in particular positions from which they conclude certain things and act accordingly. Constructivists suggest that it is sometimes possible to '**alter-cast**' another actor by starting to treat that actor the way that you would actually like them to be, whereupon the actor starts responding accordingly because you haven't given them many other choices. For example, treating the Soviet Union as if it were no longer the evil **Communist** empire but in fact an insolvent country looking for friendship and financial assistance might actually help to *produce* that situation because it structures certain types of behaviour around that new notion. Constructivists see this kind of socialisation operating throughout world politics, sometimes informally through **alter-casting**, sometimes through more formalised procedures. For example, when a country joins the European Union (EU), it has to take on a whole series of regulations called the *acqui communitaire*, which is a thick document of all the European Union laws and regulations which must be incorporated into their domestic legal structure. That is a relatively formal kind of process where, by virtue of signing up to rules which they are compelled to follow, states are socialised into new self-understandings and behaviours. In either case, the same basic process is at work, which is that actors take on and internalise various expectations that they find floating around in the intersubjective social environment, and incorporate them into their own senses of self, redefining their purposes and relations to other states accordingly.

Constructivists also argue that identity can change from the inside, after certain shifts in domestic political balances. This is not just about domestic pressure groups, and not just about the interests that they have; it is about how different domestic groups within a political entity like a state have very different visions about what the state's identity actually *is*. Because, to reiterate, state identity is not naturally given, it takes sustained work, joint effort and social practice in order to continue to exist. When new governments are formed, they may appeal to different identity narratives and envision different interests while implementing their foreign and domestic policies; this inevitably leads to the articulation of different conceptions of the state's 'moral purpose' (Reus-Smit 1999; Devetak and True 2006). This suggests not only that domestic political change can have an impact on fundamental self-images and self-understandings about a state's identity and role in international relations, but that such self-images and self-understandings are perennially open to contestation and challenge. It is not simply the state's preferences that are in flux during a change in domestic political rule, but the very meaning of what the state is and how it should behave.

Identity and governance

Identity change is particularly important to constructivists because a lot of things are anchored in how an actor thinks of itself. In some instances, identity change can produce global governance. This is the notion that states involved in international arrangements are not simply participating in instrumental bargaining, but that successful international organisations actually rest on shared principles and norms that states have incorporated into their own identities. The end result is what some have called 'governance without government' (Rosenau and Czempiel 1992): international organisations like the World

Bank and the World Trade Organization actually have authority, not just control. They're not just ways of coordinating actions between states, but they actually have their own authority as a result of the fact that the shared norms on which they rest are incorporated into the self-conceptions of all the various participating parties.

For instance, think about the United Nations (UN), which has the ability to create something as a **peacekeeping** mission that was not a peacekeeping mission before. Yesterday they were just armed forces in a foreign country, today they form part of a UN mission because a vote was taken and all of a sudden the situation changes dramatically; the armed forces now wear blue helmets, fly the UN flag, requisition UN vehicles and uphold UN resolutions. Less symbolically, the kinds of things that you can legitimately do in that combat zone are now different, because the *status* of a UN peacekeeping mission is different to the status of armed forces in a foreign country. Constructivists would say that this change is possible because it is accepted that the UN has the authority to change the status of armed forces from belligerents to peacekeepers.

Consider, as another example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF). One of the things the IMF is authorised to do is decide which countries are credit-worthy and how credit-worthy they are. Constructivists would say that is not just a technical decision, but a political and perhaps a cultural decision. Declaring that a state has strong economic health, and is a place one can lend money to (or not), is a shift in that state's public identity – a shift with real consequences in terms of the flow of capital. There is always room for discretion, so these calculations are never simple technical calculations; they always involve, at least implicitly, inferences about future action based on a putative grasp of what kind of state actor is being evaluated. Such inferences may shape judgments about whether a particular potential loan recipient is 'trustworthy' or is 'genuinely committed' to a program of privatisation and will not simply abandon it as soon as it gets an IMF loan. Such determinations and declarations are not made by other sovereign states, but by global economic institutions (GEIs) that command the authority to make those determinations (see Chapter 24).

If you want to go one step further in terms of what GEIs are actually capable of, consider Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). An SDR is effectively an IOU that the IMF writes to a particular country. So, when a country comes to the IMF and says, 'we have problems, we can't pay back our debts,' the IMF might elect to extend to that country SDRs instead of money. The country might then use the SDRs as a way of paying back their debt to other countries. In effect, the IMF is inventing its own currency. Despite the fact we live in a 'world of states', the expanding complex of rules is giving rise to a system of governance without government, where international organisations are actually tremendously important actors with power derived from their normative underpinnings. So powerful are these global economic institutions that they are now capable of launching the equivalent of a new currency.

Global governance is not limited to inter-state organisations, but also encompasses numerous **non-state actors** of various kinds (see Chapter 22). For example, global movements like Amnesty International (AI) form part of the overall system of global governance to the extent that AI is able to issue reports on human rights abuses that the global public is as attentive to as anxious state leaders are; thus non-governmental organisations (NGOs) help to regulate what countries can and cannot legitimately do. That, say constructivists, is only possible because those NGOs have actually acquired

some authority or have succeeded in embedding the ideals and norms they champion in that intersubjective space between states. In this specific case AI's authority to make certain claims about human rights has helped to set the standard for what good human rights practice actually is, regardless of the fact that it commands almost no military, financial or other more traditional instruments of power. State leaders may make excuses, they may deny the charges, but the authority of AI is such that there are very few complete rejections of its reports or its standards, and international public opinion looks to AI as authoritative and trustworthy. This in turn rests on issues of identity, and the way that AI (aligned and allied with other non-governmental organisations) has managed to become an important voice in the general process whereby state identities are articulated, and state leaders are held accountable for their actions in terms of those identities.

International conflict and security communities

One especially noteworthy development that constructivists think happens sometimes in international politics is that a number of states identify with each other so strongly that they no longer seriously consider war among themselves as a real possibility (Wæver 1998). Constructivists think that under certain circumstances states can form a **security community** in which individual states have an extremely positive identification with each other – a very specific kind of self–other relationship in which the former Other becomes an extension of the Self. States in a security community regard all of the other states in the community as Selves rather than Others, sharing deeply-held common values, interests and commitments. Disputes within such security communities are resolved peacefully. In fact, states are expected to work together to ensure that vital interests are secured as smoothly and efficiently as possible through close coordination of activities, whether these activities relate to international trade and commerce, international development, or some other sort of collaboration to solve a persistent problem such as the proper management of fish populations that continually migrate between various states' territorial waters. These matters should be resolved peacefully inside the security community, because the states involved share common interests and commitments which in time may come to constitute a common identity (for example, the EU).

Part of the reason that constructivists are so interested in the formation of security communities is because they can dramatically change the context in which states interact. In other words, they can modify and ameliorate the condition of interstate anarchy. When a friend says something that annoys you, you are more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt and think they probably had a bad day and ask them for an explanation. But if a total stranger says exactly the same thing your reaction is likely to be quite different, perhaps provoking an angry or even aggressive response. Being in a community with someone changes how you react to their behaviour. You treat your friends differently than you treat other people, because human beings work and think in bounded categories as we try to figure out what is going on in the world and react appropriately. The key point here is that being in a security community changes the context of interstate interaction: disputes are likely to be resolved peacefully when they arise. Outside such security communities, however, there is always a risk that, in the absence of friendly understanding, the dispute may intensify into something not containable by peaceful methods.

Constructivists, like Critical Theorists (see Chapter 4), have argued for many years that one way to create community at the international level is to increase transactions between private citizens and commercial actors, and to establish other cross-cultural networks and exchanges between peoples. If you think about the Fulbright program or the Rotary Scholarships program or any other kind of study abroad experience, one of their functions, say constructivists, is simply to have more interaction between private citizens so people know more about each other and therefore they can help to form a community. Some states also directly and publicly address the issue of conflict and the reduction thereof through material and moral support for sub-national and international **peacebuilding** and conflict resolution organisations. To name just a few, the US Institute of Peace (United States), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sweden) and the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (Ghana) all seek to develop, share and normalise peace and conflict resolution practices while supporting conflict resolution communities throughout the world. By shifting state identities, such peacebuilding efforts may contribute to the formation and reinforcement of security communities.

One other necessary condition for the formation of a security community is some sort of shared narrative of commonality, some notion that the members of a group belong together, share common values or ideals, and are willing to share a common future. One cannot just make that up out of whole cloth; rather, one has to use existing cultural resources to start building community and its supporting narratives. 'Europe' is a great example of this: constructivists note that the idea of Europe as a community has been around for hundreds of years. People (especially intellectuals) have been talking about it since the Crusades, and circulating the idea that countries in that particular part of the globe *belong together* and form some sort of natural unity. Not only was there a lot of interaction between this group of countries, but there was also a shared story of belonging to a common enterprise. This shared story made possible a '**nesting**' strategy (P. T. Jackson 2005) whereby a group of actors was collectively subsumed under a single larger identity. A nesting strategy, like a strategy of alter-casting, can produce actor-level identity change, but the direction of influence is different: where alter-casting involves one actor shifting another's identity by cajoling it into certain attitudes and behaviours, nesting involves a group of actors using a common narrative to reframe all of their interactions, changing them from contacts between separate states to transactions between the members of a larger cultural and political entity.

Along these lines, after World War II, there was a very deliberate attempt to eliminate the possibility of war between some of the primary belligerents, and particularly between France and Germany. These two countries were at war more often than not for large portions of European history, and a lot of major wars involved the French and the Germans on either side of the battle-lines. After World War II, there was a very deliberate effort to say no, we should re-frame this because we are all part of the same community and we do not resolve our disputes with military force (Parsons 2006). So the EU was born as states were nested within it – originally it was the European Economic Community, and then it transformed into the European Community and ultimately the EU. For a constructivist, this process was not just about militarily balancing against the Russians or anybody else, and not just about gains in trade; it was about change in the identities of states and their populations. The common story of Europe, incorporated into the identities of a group

of states via a nesting strategy, helped to construct a community where war between its members has been rendered unthinkable.

Conclusion

The constructivist approach enriches, at the cost of complexifying, the study of world politics. When *meaning* becomes a component to explaining state action, issues such as anarchy and power become much more contingent and case-specific. At the same time, a treatment of identity based on meaning opens up wide opportunities concerning what may be possible when those identities begin to shift and change. Though constructivists are hesitant to predict the future, they are never limited in exploring the possibilities; change, as always, is the only thing that stays the same.

QUESTIONS

1. What is state identity and how does it influence world politics?
2. How is a constructivist understanding of change different from a liberal or a realist one?
3. How does a constructivist understanding of institutions explain state actions?
4. How might a constructivist approach to world politics inform an understanding of the causes and ways of ending inter-state war?
5. What are the strengths of the constructivist approach to world politics compared to other IR theories? What are its weaknesses?

FURTHER READING

Barkin, J. Samuel 2010, *Realist constructivism: rethinking international relations theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An attempt to synthesise realism's insights into power and constructivism's understanding of method.

Katzenstein, Peter (ed.) 1996, *The culture of national security: norms and identity in world politics*, New York: Columbia University Press. Important early collection of essays by leading constructivists on a range of different security issues.

Ruggie, John Gerard 1998, *Constructing the world polity: essays on international institutionalization*, London: Routledge. Insightful collection of essays on multilateralism and the historical transition to the modern states-system from a constructivist perspective.

Wendt, Alexander 1999, *Social theory of international politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Seminal account of a constructivist theory of international relations.