
Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics

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In recent years, a great deal has been written about a 'constructivist' approach in International Relations, which argues that international reality is socially constructed by cognitive structures that give meaning to the material world. Nevertheless, most of the epistemological, theoretical, empirical and methodological foundations of constructivism remain unclear. Nor are its potential contributions to a better understanding of International Relations widely appreciated. The present article seeks to fill some of these gaps. Constructivism occupies the middle ground between rationalist approaches (whether realist or liberal) and interpretive approaches (mainly postmodernist, post-structuralist and critical), and creates new areas for theoretical and empirical investigation. The bulk of the article lays out the social-epistemological basis of the constructivist approach; juxtaposes constructivism to rationalism and poststructuralism and explains its advantages; presents the concept of cognitive evolution as a way of explaining the social construction of reality; and suggests ways of expanding constructivist research agendas.

In our highly complex organic state we advanced organisms respond to our environment with an invention of many marvelous analogues. We invent earth and heavens, trees, stones and oceans, gods, music, arts, language, philosophy, engineering, civilization and science. We call these analogues reality. And they are reality. (Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*)

In recent years, a great deal has been written in the scholarly literature about the role of ideas in International Relations. This scholarship has sparked a theoretical debate between 'rationalists'¹ (mainly realists, neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists) and adherents of interpretive epistemologies (postmodernists and poststructuralists, critical theorists in the Frankfurt

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School sense,² and feminist theorists) about the nature of international reality and how scholars should go about explaining it. Increasingly, however, the debate has come to concentrate on and be influenced by the arguments of the constructivist approach.

The constructivist approach has been described and explained,³ applied empirically⁴ and contrasted to other International Relations approaches.⁵ Nevertheless, there is very little clarity and even less consensus as to its nature and substance. The reliance of constructivist International Relations theory on interpretive social theory and vocabulary; the mistaken belief that constructivism, poststructuralism and postmodernism are all varieties of the same 'reflectivist' approach; the relative scarcity of early constructivist empirical research; and, most important, the debates within constructivism itself as to 'what constructivism is really about' — all these have tended to obscure constructivism's scientific basis, its preference for ontology and epistemology over methodology, and its potential contribution to a better understanding of International Relations.

It is therefore imperative to attempt to pull together the pieces and provide a synthetic explanation of the constructivist approach. It is equally imperative to justify the constructivist approach on ontological and epistemological grounds and show how these lead to new theoretical and empirical ways of understanding international reality. Moreover, there is a real need to distinguish between the claims of constructivism and those raised by more radical interpretivists and/or by rationalist (mostly neo-liberal) renditions of the role of ideas in International Relations. To date, most constructivist descriptions have failed to emphasize the importance of *socio-cognitive* factors and have only just begun to reconcile *systematic* social-science theory and research with the role played by interpretation in social life.

Finally, it is crucial to make it clear, once and for all, that the core of the debate about constructivism is not science versus literary interpretation or 'stories', but the nature of social science itself and, therefore, of the discipline of International Relations. In other words, the issue pits a naturalist conception of science, almost entirely based on contested philosophies of science and on physical concepts and theories that physics has long since abandoned, against a conception of social science that is — *social*. A metaphor may help to illustrate this point.

Suppose you toss a rock into the air. It can make only a simple response to the external physical forces that act on it. But if you throw a bird into the air, it may fly off into a tree. Even though the same physical forces act on the bird as on the rock, a massive amount of internal information-processing takes place inside the bird and affects its behavior (Waldrop, 1992: 232). Finally, take a group of people, a nation or various nations and metaphor-

ically toss them in the air. Where they go, how, when and why, is not entirely determined by physical forces and constraints; but neither does it depend solely on individual preferences and rational choices. It is also a matter of their shared knowledge, the collective meaning they attach to their situation, their authority and legitimacy, the rules, institutions and material resources they use to find their way, and their practices, or even, sometimes, their joint creativity.

The first section of this article provides a brief introduction to constructivism as the 'middle ground' approach in International Relations. The next section lays out the social and epistemological basis of the constructivist approach. The issues I discuss in this section do not deal only with ontology and epistemology; they also have much to say about how we think about the world. In section three, I juxtapose constructivism with rationalism and poststructuralism and justify its claim to the middle ground. I also show that there are adequate methods for empirical research on the social construction of International Relations. In the fourth section I show how cognitive evolution — a dynamic application of constructivist thought to International Relations — may enhance our understanding of the world. Finally, I offer some suggestions for a constructivist research agenda.

Constructivism: The Middle Ground

Realists (Kaplan, 1957; Morgenthau, 1960) and neorealists (Gilpin, 1981; Waltz, 1979), undisturbed by the seasonal 'idealist' offensives that punctuate International Relations debates, and empowered by positivist⁶ and exclusively materialist philosophies of science (with the exception, perhaps, of Mearsheimer, 1994/95), have been reluctant to engage in ontological and epistemological polemics. They prefer to explain International Relations as simple behavioral responses to the forces of physics that act on material objects from the outside.⁷

On the other side of the divide, postmodernists and poststructuralists (Ashley and Walker, 1990; Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989), critical theorists (Cox, 1986, 1987; Hoffman, 1987; Linklater, 1989, 1996), and feminist theorists (Runyan and Peterson, 1991; Tickner, 1992) build on a relativist philosophy of science⁸ and interpretivist sociology of knowledge;⁹ they propose to debate the nature of international social relations and discuss ways for studying it, because, in the social and interpreted world in which (as they see it) we live, only ideas matter and can be studied.

The key epistemological and ontological dilemma raised by relativist approaches is described by the 'hermeneutical circle' — whenever people try to establish a certain reading of a text or expression, they allege other readings as the ground for their reading. Thus we can never provide a

rational explanation for a social situation and are condemned to appeal to common understanding of the language involved. Empirical data — what Charles Taylor called ‘brute data’ — become just one more interpretation, open to question by other interpretations or readings (Taylor, 1979: 30).

Neoliberal institutionalists cleverly circumvent this dilemma by following the Weberian maxim that material and ideal interests, rather than ideas, directly govern men’s conduct. Frequently, though, ‘the “world images” that have been created by ideas have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest’ (Weber, 1958: 280).

Like realists, neoliberal institutionalists consider behavior to be affected by outside physical forces. Like interpretivists, however, they make a concession to ‘ideas’, which they define, following the lead of psychological (mainly cognitive) approaches,¹⁰ as ‘beliefs held by individuals’. Next, taking a rational choice approach to information-processing, they explain how individuals’ beliefs can affect policy choices and outcomes (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993b: 3). Thus, by turning *individuals’* ideas and knowledge into ‘variables’ that may have causal effects on political choices, neoliberal institutionalists believe they can seize a middle ground between realist (positivist) and interpretive (relativist or post-positivist) approaches.

This article maintains that the true middle ground between rationalist and relativist interpretive approaches is occupied neither by an interpretive version of rationalism, nor by some variety of ‘reflectivism’, as described by Keohane,¹¹ nor even by all sorts of critical theories as imprecisely portrayed by Mearsheimer (1994/95), but by *constructivism*.¹²

Constructivism is the view that *the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world*.

Constructivism shows that even our most enduring institutions are based on collective understandings; that they are reified structures that were once upon a time conceived *ex nihilo* by human consciousness; and that these understandings were subsequently diffused and consolidated until they were taken for granted. Moreover, constructivists believe that the human capacity for reflection or learning has its greatest impact on the manner in which individuals and social actors attach meaning to the material world and cognitively frame the world they know, experience and understand. Thus collective understandings provide people with reasons why things are as they are and indications as to how they should use their material abilities and power.

Constructivism’s importance and its added value for the study of International Relations lie mainly in its emphasis on the ontological reality of intersubjective knowledge and on the epistemological and methodological

implications of this reality. Constructivists believe that International Relations consist primarily of social facts, which are facts only by human agreement. At the same time, constructivists are 'ontological realists'; they believe not only in the existence of the material world, but also that 'this material world offers resistance when we act upon it' (Knorr Cetina, 1993: 184). Thus constructivism is an attempt, albeit timid, to build a bridge between the widely separated positivist/materialist and idealist/interpretive philosophies of social science.¹³

Constructivism, unlike realism or liberalism, is not a theory of politics per se. Rather, it is a social theory on which constructivist theories of international politics — for example, about war, cooperation and international community — are based. Constructivism can illuminate important features of international politics that were previously enigmatic and have crucial *practical* implications for international theory and empirical research.

Constructivism challenges only the ontological and epistemological foundations of realism and liberalism. It is not anti-liberal or anti-realist by ideological conviction; neither is it pessimistic or optimistic by design. Consequently, constructivism represents the first real opportunity to generate a synthetic theory of International Relations since E.H. Carr (whose 'scholarship emerges out of the important middle ground between absolutism and relativism' [Howe, 1994: 287]) laid its foundations, just before World War II (Carr, 1964). If a persuasive case can be made that normative and causal collective understandings are real, insofar as they have consequences for the physical and social worlds, it will be much easier to claim that both an understanding of world politics and the progress of the discipline may depend on the construction of a socio-cognitive synthesis that draws on the material, subjective and intersubjective dimensions of the world.¹⁴

Social Epistemology and International Relations

Materialism and Idealism

Steve Woolgar describes three approaches to the ontological and epistemological debate about the reality of ideas — (1) the reflective; (2) the constitutive; and (3) the mediative (Woolgar, 1983). For reflectivists, reality is independent of cognition but can be accurately represented in true descriptions. Constitutivists, on the other hand, while not denying the existence of material reality, believe that it cannot be known outside human language. Since 'we have no way of deciding whether statements correspond to reality except by means of other statements, it makes no sense to assume

the independent existence of an external reality to begin with' (Fuchs, 1992: 27). Hence constitutive philosophers and sociologists adopt the relativist stance in which only the organization of discourse really matters.

Finally, 'mediativists' are ontological realists who believe that reality is affected by knowledge and social factors. 'Reality exists independently of our accounts, but does not fully determine them' (Fuchs, 1992: 27). More specifically, a mediative approach means that social reality emerges from the attachment of meaning and functions to physical objects; collective understandings, such as norms, endow physical objects with purpose and therefore help constitute reality.

Most scholars of International Relations follow Woolgar's first approach;¹⁵ they are materialists and positivists who, like Stephen Krasner (1993), believe that ideas do not construct and structure social reality, but only reflect the material world and serve to justify material causes. Other scholars, like Goldstein and Keohane (1993a), suggest that, within this material world, beliefs held by individuals may partly determine political outcomes.

Students of International Relations who identify themselves as post-modernists and poststructuralists embrace the constitutive position and propose textual and discourse analysis as the basis for understanding International Relations.¹⁶ Thus, reality 'can be nothing other than a text, a symbolic construction that is itself related to other texts — not to history or social structure — in arbitrary ways' (Alexander, 1995: 103).¹⁷

On the other hand, constructivists who (like postmodernists and post-structuralists) follow an interpretive approach embrace the mediative position. While accepting the notion that there is a real world out there, they nevertheless believe that it is not entirely determined by physical reality and is socially emergent.¹⁸ More important, they believe that the identities, interests and behavior of political agents are socially constructed by collective meanings, interpretations and assumptions about the world.

Individual vs Social Origins of Human Action: Elster, Durkheim and Giddens

The debate surveyed above raises another question — If ideas affect physical reality and do not merely reflect it, is cognition grounded in the individual level or the social level? The answer to this ontological question will probably determine the answer to the following epistemological question — Do we explain human action on the basis of individual motivation and the causal interaction of intentional agents,¹⁹ or do we explain individual cognition and action as a function of social forces or social structure?²⁰

Jon Elster, for example, has made the case for individualism not only at the methodological but also at the ontological and epistemological levels

(Hollis and Smith, 1991: 404). 'The elementary unit of social life', he argues, 'is the individual human action. To explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of individuals' (Elster, 1989: 13). For him, explanation in the social sciences, which is best achieved by a combination of rational choice and game theory, involves the intentional explanation of individual actions alongside causal explanation of the interaction between individuals. It also involves sub-intentional causality — processes that explain 'mental operations not governed by will or intention' (Elster, 1983: 20, 84).

Emile Durkheim, on the other hand, thought that ideas like 'Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities' (Durkheim, 1965: 22). In short, Durkheim believed that social facts could not be reduced to individual cognition and demanded a social explanation.

Structuration theory, however, argues that 'the properties of agents and of structures are both relevant to explanations of social behavior' (Hollis and Smith, 1991: 396). It explains social institutions and social change as the result of the 'duality of structure', i.e. 'the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and "exists" in the generating moments of this constitution' (Giddens, 1979: 5).²¹

Anthony Giddens's agents are far from being structural 'idiots', however. They are the social constructors of their own practices and structures and bear identities, rights and obligations (to name a few) in their own consciousness. These agents act according to institutionalized rules, but also according to their interests (Cohen, 1987: 302).

Constructivists, too, believe that 'ideas' have structural characteristics. First of all, ideas — understood more generally as collective knowledge, institutionalized in practices — are the medium and propellant of social action; they define the limits of what is cognitively possible and impossible for individuals. Concurrently, knowledge-based practices are the outcome of interacting individuals who act purposively on the basis of their personal ideas, beliefs, judgments and interpretations. The main goal of constructivism, therefore, is to provide both theoretical and empirical explanations of social institutions and social change, with the help of the combined effect of agents and social structures.

Verstehen as Epistemology and as Reality

I have established that, with regard to both ontology and epistemology, constructivists stand at two intersections — that between materialism and

idealism, and that between individual agency and social structure. Another factor that enables constructivists to seize this middle ground is their notion of intersubjectivity. To shed light on this notion we must start with interpretation or *Verstehen*. Max Weber's notion of *Verstehen* located the problem of explaining social action in an interpretive setting, which requires us to 'specify that there is meaning both in "the behavior of others" and in the "account" which the acting individual takes of it. That leads directly to the central hermeneutic theme that *action must always be understood from within*' (Hollis and Smith, 1990: 72; emphasis in the original, Weber, 1968).

Rationalists, like Goldstein and Keohane (1993a), as well as students of political psychology like Robert Jervis (1976), who, along with Weber, recognize the necessity of studying meaning, or 'what is in people's heads', take *Verstehen* as an epistemological problem. Hence they define it as 'the interpretation of meaning through empathetic understanding and pattern recognition' by an observer (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993b: 27). The problem, however, soon becomes one of explanation and of methodology, because 'Unless the interpreter's judgments are evaluated according to systematic standards for assessing the quality of inferences, they remain only the personal view of the observer' (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993b: 27).

Relativist philosophers and sociologists,²² by contrast, do not believe the problem of interpretation to be soluble by means of systematic social-science methods. If 'our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the concepts we use' (Winch, 1958: 15), we cannot know the world independently of the language we use. It follows that social scientists are condemned to interpret discourses, considered to be the only points of entry to hermeneutical circles of shared understandings — or, in Wittgenstein's words, 'forms of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953). Postmodernists, in particular, subscribe to the view that if people cannot know that there is an objective reality, they should not waste their time looking for it.²³

Constructivism does not build on the relativist implications of interpretive epistemology, but on the ontological implications of *Verstehen*.²⁴ To understand the ontological implications of *Verstehen*, we must start with the notion that what social scientists want to know, interpret or explain has already been interpreted in the social world. *Verstehen* is, thus, not just a method used by the social scientist, but also the collective interpretations, practices and institutions of the actors themselves (Schutz, 1977: 231). *Verstehen*, in fact, *is* social reality. It can be a set of norms, or consensual scientific understandings, or the practice of diplomacy, or arms control. All these knowledge structures are continually constituted and reproduced by members of a community and their behavior. At the same time, however,

they determine the boundaries between what these agents consider to be real and unreal.

Intersubjectivity

It follows from the ontological implications of *Verstehen* that intersubjective meanings are not simply the aggregation of the beliefs of individuals who jointly experience and interpret the world. Rather, they exist as collective knowledge 'that is shared by all who are competent to engage in or recognize the appropriate performance of a social practice or range of practices' (Cohen, 1987: 287). This knowledge persists beyond the lives of individual social actors, embedded in social routines and practices as they are reproduced by interpreters who participate in their production and workings. Intersubjective meanings have structural attributes that do not merely constrain or empower actors. They also define their social reality.²⁵

At the same time, the concept of intersubjectivity neither assumes a collective mind nor disavows the notion that individuals have purposes and intentions. Rather, it is based on the notion that, although 'each of us thinks his own thoughts; our concepts we share with our fellow-men' (Toulmin, 1972: 35). Similarly, when doing something together, 'the individual intentionality that each person has is derived from the collective intentionality that they share' (Searle, 1995: 25).

Intersubjective reality thus exists and persists thanks to social communication. The social world 'is intersubjective because we live in it . . . understanding others and being understood by them' (Schutz, 1962: 10). Karl Deutsch's notion of security communities (Deutsch et al., 1957) — groups of people who share a communication environment and, accordingly, share values, with mutual responsiveness (a 'we-feeling', of sorts) and mutual trust — comes close to the idea of intersubjectivity. So does Benedict Anderson's reference to nations as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991). 'Imagined communities' are not merely the sum of the beliefs of some national group; regardless of the physical existence of the individuals, they exist in symbols, practices, institutions and discourses. From the perspective of their consequences for the subjective world of the members of the community, as well as for the physical world, they are real.

Here I cannot improve on Karl Popper's depiction of intersubjective reality and his notion of 'World 3'. Popper divided the universe into three subuniverses, which he called World 1, World 2 and World 3. 'World 1 is the world of all physical bodies and forces and fields of forces; also of organisms, of our bodies and their parts.' World 2 is the subjective world 'of conscious experiences, our thoughts, our feelings of elation or depression, our aims, our plans of action'. World 3 is the world of culture, or of the products of

the human mind, 'and especially the world of our languages: of our stories, our myths, our explanatory theories, . . . of our technologies, . . . of architecture and of music'. World 3 acquires its ontological reality because 'a thought, once it is formulated in language, becomes an *object* outside ourselves. Such an object can then be inter-subjectively *criticized* — criticized by others as well as by ourselves' (Popper, 1982a: 118, 1982b: 53–4). Once the objects in World 3 are collectively generated, their reality is also predicated on the fact that they can have real consequences, both intended and unintended.

The key to understanding the reality of World 3 (Searle calls it institutional or social facts) is the 'collective intentional imposition of function on entities that cannot perform those functions without that imposition' (Searle, 1995: 41). Thus, God could not see money or private property. Instead he would see '*us treating* certain objects' as money and private property. In other words, Searle makes the obvious yet usually unrecognized point that 'there are portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement' (Searle, 1995: 1, 12).

World 3 objects cannot exist without World 1 objects — 'just about any sort of substance can be money, but money has to exist in some physical form or another' (Searle, 1995: 34). At the same time, however, the move from World 1 to World 3 is a linguistic one, because once a function is imposed on a physical entity 'it now symbolizes something else. . . . This move can exist only if it is collectively represented as existing. The collective representation is public and conventional, and it requires some vehicle' (Searle, 1995: 74–5).

Moreover, Searle argues, 'institutional facts exist only within systems of constitutive rules' (Searle, 1995: 28).²⁶ For example, when we say that 'such and such bits of paper count as money, we genuinely have a constitutive rule, because . . . "such and such bits of paper" [are not sufficient to be considered as money, nor do they] specify causal features that would be sufficient to enable the stuff to function as money without human agreement' (Searle, 1995: 44).

Constructivism's Approach to Science

Based on a pragmatist philosophy of science,²⁷ constructivism turns interpretation into an intrinsic part of a scientific enterprise that seeks to explain the social construction of reality. This pragmatism, which should be even more relevant for the social sciences than it is for the natural sciences, dismisses the Cartesian notion that we must choose between objectivism and relativism. It underscores the role of choice, deliberation, judgment and

interpretation by communities of scientists who immerse themselves in a type of rational persuasion that must aspire, but cannot always be assimilated, to models of deductive proof or inductive generalization (Bernstein, 1985).

Constructivists believe that 'reason is a practice imbedded in science; when scientists argue about truth, they refer not to some supra-social reality but to this imbedded reason — to "the best possible scientific reasons that can be given"' (Alexander, 1995: 112). Unlike ideologues, however, scientists make decisions about beliefs according to fairly rigorous rules, norms and definitions (Vasquez, 1995: 228). Thus, like people in general, who can accept rules as binding not simply because they wish to be understood but because they recognize their validity, scientists can also reasonably recognize the validity of scientific traditions (Alexander, 1995: 117). Reason can guide scientists to dive at some point of the hermeneutic circle and produce the best explanation available.²⁸

Pragmatism is a useful corrective to attempts by relativists to delegitimize science altogether. But it is also a useful corrective vis-a-vis positivists, who judge constructivism on criteria that favor rationalism and are themselves the target of constructivist criticism (Smith, 1996: 13).

Constructivism's sociological approach (Katzenstein, 1996a) is consistent with pragmatism. To begin with, constructivism means studying how what the agents themselves consider rational is brought to bear on collective human enterprises and situations. This position commits 'us to finding out what the actors on the international stage think they are doing' (Hollis, 1996: 305). But because people's intentions and motives are affected by what they intersubjectively believe, any 'attempt to understand the intersubjective meanings embedded in social life is at the same time an attempt to explain why people act the way they do' (Gibbons, 1987: 3).

This raises the issue of causality. In the physical world, causal relations connect entities and occurrences into structures and patterns. In the social world, however, deterministic laws are improbable; the heroic leap of faith that social forms 'determine' human action, or the ontologically incomplete assumption that individual action 'determines' social forms, must both be rejected.²⁹ Constructivism subscribes to a notion of social causality that takes *reasons as causes* (Davidson, 1963), because 'doing something for reasons means applying an understanding of "what is called for" in a given set of circumstances' (Giddens, 1984: 345). However, because people do 'what is called for' on the basis of 'norms and rules emerging in historical and cultural circumstances' (Harré and Gillett, 1994: 33), norms and rules structure and therefore *socially constitute* — 'cause' — the things people do; that is, they provide actors with direction and goals for action (Finnemore, 1996a: 28).

It follows that causality in social science involves specifying a time-bounded sequence and relationship between the social phenomena we want to explain and the antecedent conditions, in which people consciously and often rationally do things for reasons that are socially constituted by their collective interpretations of the external world and the rules they act upon (Baskhar, 1982; Carlsnaes, 1992; Finnemore, 1996a: 28–9; Giddens, 1984). This relationship is demonstrated on the basis not only of logical persuasion, but also of detailed historical narratives that involve analysis of agents and their reasons and the socio-cognitive structures that help constitute their practices and behavior. Learning both the actors' reasons and the rules that govern a practice, 'enable[s] us to improve predictions of the behavior of those acting in accordance with it. So determining the meaning of actions provides some knowledge of causes' (Rosenberg, 1988: 87).

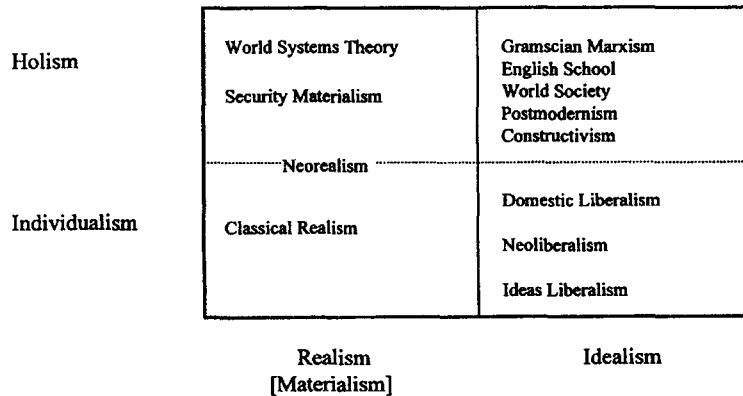
Constructivism's Middle Ground between Rationalist and Relativist International Relations Theories

By way of summarizing the argument so far about constructivism's claim to the ontological middle ground, and to set the stage for comparing constructivism to rationalist and relativist theories of International Relations, I suggest a revision of Alex Wendt's two-by-two matrix of International Relations theories (Wendt, forthcoming), in which the discriminants are realism (materialism) or idealism and holism or individualism. In this matrix, Wendt places constructivism alongside postmodernism and poststructuralism, all of them occupying the same structuralist-idealist box. Constructivism seizes the middle ground because it is interested in understanding how the *material*, subjective and intersubjective worlds interact in the social construction of reality, and because, rather than focusing exclusively on how structures constitute agents' identities and interests, it also seeks to explain how *individual agents* socially construct these structures in the first place. Consequently, constructivism belongs in the center of the matrix, the dense dot where all the lines intersect (see Figure 1).

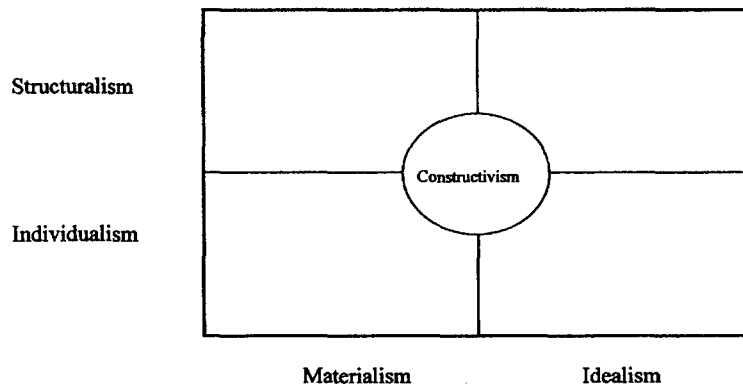
The realist, neorealist and dependency theories of International Relations in the two left-hand quadrants are grounded on a purely materialist (structural or individualist) ontology; hence they do not concern us here. Neoliberal theories, however, which reside primarily in the bottom right quadrant, suggest that individuals' ideas do matter. Acting in the background of the fixed essences of material interests, ideas affect the choices that states make and sometimes help overcome collective goods problems and lead to international cooperation (Keohane, 1984; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993b). Neoliberalism's ontological assumptions, however, beget a *minimalist* and therefore weak epistemological approach. According to

Figure 1
The Ontological Position of Constructivism

(A) Alex Wendt's Map of International Theory



(B) Constructivism's Middle Ground



neoliberalism, ideas work within structural constraints, such that they can affect choices about the material world only; interests are exogenous to interaction. Accordingly, neoliberal epistemology misses most of 'the action', namely, the constitution of actors' identities and interests by collective cognitive structures.

Neoliberal epistemology is also hampered by its exclusive reliance on methodological individualism.³⁰ For example, Goldstein and Keohane defend their analytical distinction between interests and ideas on individualist methodological grounds. They argue that the distinction is required to know whether, all else being equal, a variation in individuals' beliefs is causally related to a change in political behavior. The problem with

this argument is that, as Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie perceptively argued, studying behavior with strict positivist methods that separate between ‘objects’ and ‘subjects’ cannot lead to an understanding of the intersubjective ontological nature of meaning (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986). If constructivists are right, and cognitive as well as material structures play a role in constituting the identities and interests of actors, as well as the boundaries between them — international reality itself — empirical research must study ideas and interests as part of a unitary process of the creation of social reality.

For example, although Kathryn Sikkink (1993: 140) skillfully shows ‘the power of ideas to reshape understandings of national interest’, she follows the rationalist path of assuming material interests as given and employs ideas as intervening variables between interests and political behavior. The adoption of normative beliefs that contradict material interests would have provided rationalism with reliable evidence for the independent power of ideas about human rights. But this would be like looking at the contents of a room through a tiny window. For what is at stake here is actually the construction, by collective beliefs about human rights, of Western countries’ identities, and the explanation of the role of social actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in constructing these identities in the first place. The interesting question is whether and how human-rights norms are becoming not only regulative injunctions designed to overcome the collective action problems associated with interdependent choice, but also constitutive, a direct reflection of the actors’ identity and self-understanding.

The top right quadrant takes us to constitutive ontology and epistemology; in this short article I cannot do justice to the variety of postmodern, poststructuralist, critical theory and (postmodern) feminist theory³¹ approaches and nuances. My primary goal is to distinguish between these approaches and the constructivist approach, because much of the confusion about constructivism lies in the conflation of constitutive and mediative epistemologies.

The proposition common to the majority of constitutive approaches in International Relations is that reality in its objective form (truth) cannot be known outside human language; thus, inexorably, reality must be a constitutive effect of discourse.³² Constitutivists, however, concede too much to ideas; unless they are willing to deny the existence of the material world, they should recognize, as constructivists do, that ‘a socially constructed reality presupposes a nonsocially constructed reality’ as well (Searle, 1995: 190) and that, consequently, the question of how the material world affects and is affected by the conceptual world is crucial for social science.

Some postmodernists, such as Baudrillard (1989), go so far as to turn not

only truth, but reality itself, into linguistic conventions (Rosenau, 1992: 110). This proposition is untenable, however. Statements are turned into facts not only by the power of discourse, but also by gaining control over the social support networks and the material resources of organizations and networks. Facts emerge when social and material resources 'make it too difficult and costly to deconstruct the statements supported by them' (Fuchs, 1992: 75). In other words, epistemic authority also has a material basis.

Constitutive perspectives, mainly poststructuralism and postmodernism, are also problematic because, although they concede that discourse practices are produced and reproduced by subjects, they nevertheless argue that individual subjectivity is completely constituted by discourse structures. *In their world* the subject, in its atomistic sense, causes nothing (Ashley, 1989). Hence, despite the poststructuralists' and postmodernists' respect for the agent/structure paradox 'as an opposition in which it is never possible to choose one proposition over the other', they are able only to *describe* histories of discursive practices; whereas history is understood 'in its intrinsic pluralness, as a boundless text of countless texts' (Ashley, 1989: 274, 280).

If, on the other hand, *in our world*, subject and structure constitute each other with the help of and in the background of *material* resources, it may prove difficult to explore the subject's production and reproduction of intersubjectivity and the latter's constitution of the subject 'from anywhere but within modernity' (Neufeld, 1995: 112). For example, taking agency and structure as different levels of stratified social reality (Archer, 1989, 1995), constructivist scholarship of the 'morphogenetic' tradition has enhanced our understanding of the dynamic social structuration of international reality and led to scientifically progressive explanations of foreign policy (Carlsnaes, 1992).

Because of their ontological stand, constitutivists are too ready to 'abandon the search for causes and objective [i.e. intersubjective] truths to celebrate semantic instability and interpretive multiplicity' (Yee, 1996: 100). Postmodernists in particular advocate an 'intertextual' approach to International Relations³³ and argue that 'without deconstruction there might be no questions of ethics, identity, politics, or responsibility' (Campbell, 1996: 178). Moreover, the main objective of inquiry, for constitutivists, is emancipation from oppressing discourses, power structures and ideologies and theories (critical theory) and the unmasking of 'the way power is used in all of society's sites' (postmodernism/poststructuralism) (George and Campbell, 1990).

A constructivist 'mediative' epistemology, on the other hand, is interested neither in emancipation per se, nor exclusively in uncovering the power

structures that affect the marginalized in history, but in providing better explanations of social reality. Unlike poststructuralists and postmodernists, who are 'not especially interested in the meticulous examination of particular cases or sites for purposes of understanding them in their own distinctive terms' (Ashley, 1989: 278), constructivists *do* want to know, *in detail*, how norms constitute the security identities and interests of international and transnational actors *in particular cases* (Katzenstein, 1996a).

The above does not mean, however, that constructivists are blind to ideas of progress in International Relations (Adler and Crawford, 1991; E.B. Haas, 1990a) or that they do not care about improving the world just as much as Habermas (1984) and other critical theorists do.³⁴ For most constructivists, however, it does mean that progress (1) is not based only on what theorists say but also, and primarily, on what political actors do; (2) occurs through the redefinition of identities and interests of the actors themselves; and (3) is inescapably about universal normative ideas, even if their meaning varies from time to time and place to place. Thus a constructivist theory of progress in International Relations, which explains the emergence and consolidation of practices that enhance human interests within and across political communities — including the manner in which theoretical knowledge intervenes in struggles over meaning and reflectively affects these processes (E.B. Haas, 1990a) — offers a better, more pragmatic and more even-handed alternative to critical theories that mark their favorite discourses for emancipation.

Finally, constructivist theory can be both 'critical' and 'problem-solving', in Robert Cox's sense. 'It is critical in the sense that it stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how the order came about.' But it is also problem-solving, in the sense that, once institutions and practices are reified, 'It takes the world as it finds it . . . as the given framework for action' (Cox, 1986: 208–9). For example, although Wendt (1992) explains self-help as a socially constructed institution rather than as a deterministic outcome of anarchy, he nevertheless sees the prevailing problem of predation as the explanation for the pervasive resilience of anarchical self-help.

Constructivism, then, is an evolving *modernist* enterprise that blends 'understanding' and 'explaining' to create a sociologically sensitive scientific approach to International Relations (Jepperson et al., 1996). Constructivism, for example, can accept the view that 'science . . . and interpretation are *not* fundamentally different endeavors aimed at divergent goals. Both rely on preparing careful descriptions, gaining deep understandings of the world, asking good questions, formulating falsifiable hypotheses on the basis of more general theories, and collecting the evidence needed to evaluate those hypotheses' (King et al., 1994: 37; see also Kritzer, 1996). Moreover, some

constructivists rely on precise comparisons³⁵ (Berger, 1996) and covariation between material and ideational factors³⁶ (Adler and Barnett, 1996). And when corroborating or cross-validating a theoretical or descriptive argument, constructivists may call on statistical and other quantitative methods (Cederman, 1996b) and make good use of historical counterfactuals (Cederman, 1996a).

Constructivism can do *more*, not less, than other scientific approaches in explaining International Relations because, in addition to relying on logical-deductive and inductive means for knowing and verifying, it *also* invokes a variety of interpretive methods, such as narratives³⁷ (Tickner, 1992) and thickly described 'histories'³⁸ (Adler, 1992; Katzenstein, 1996b) of socio-cognitive processes to uncover collective meaning, actors' identities and the *substance* of political interests.

I am aware, however, that not all constructivists will agree with the modernist portrayal of constructivism; the constructivist landscape is much more variegated than these paragraphs suggest. The diversity of approaches within constructivism reflects disagreements about the extent to which structure or agents are more important and about whether discourse should take precedence over material factors. Furthermore, it is sometimes hard to tell constructivists from postmodernists (Tickner, 1992; Weber, 1995). All constructivists do, nonetheless, share the mediative approach.

Thus, to build on a recent categorization by Cecelia Lynch and Audie Klotz (1996) and shed some light on the differences within the constructivist camp, we can think about constructivism as divided into four different groups demarcated chiefly by methodological disagreements. Scholars of the first, 'modernist', camp believe that, once ontological extremism is removed, there is no reason to exclude the use of standard methods alongside interpretive methods.³⁹ Within the modernist group, we can also distinguish state-centric constructivists (Wendt, 1992, 1994a, forthcoming) from constructivists who take the main actors of International Relations, such as nations and ethnic groups, as emergent features rather than as reified categories (Cederman, 1996b; Weaver, 1995).

A second group of constructivists, prominently represented by Onuf (1989) and Kratochwil (1989), uses insights from international law and jurisprudence to show the impact on International Relations of modes of reasoning and persuasion and of rule-guided behavior. This approach shifts 'the focus explicitly toward a non-positivist epistemology, emphasizing the point that "large-scale historical change cannot be explained in terms of one or even several causal factors but through an analysis of conjectures"' (Lynch and Klotz, 1996: 6). Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil, for example, have used this approach to show the constitutive effect of

normative change on the transformation of the international system in the late 1980s (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1995).

A third group (Tickner, 1992; Lynch, 1994) emphasizes narrative knowing. Particular attention has been given to gender-based narratives (Tickner, 1992), actions of agents such as social movements (Lynch, 1994) and the development of security interests (Ruggie, 1995; Weaver, 1995). Finally, the scholars of the fourth camp do not shy away from techniques developed by postmodernists. Some constructivists have used Foucault's genealogical method (Price, 1995);⁴⁰ others have engaged in the 'deconstruction of sovereignty' (Biersteker and Weber, 1996) by means of a detailed history of the delegitimation of non-Western polities by Western states. Deconstruction, in this sense, was only the preamble for the 'reconstruction of sovereignty' 'in the face of unambiguous opportunities for colonial imperialism' (Strang, 1996: 36-7).

Nothing said so far invites the conclusion that constructivism is merely a theory of global peace and harmony (Mearsheimer, 1994/95). If international reality is socially constructed, then World War II, the Holocaust and the Bosnian conflict must also have been socially constructed, just as arms-control and environmental agreements and the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet empire were socially constructed. In other words, constructivism is a set of paradigmatic lenses through which we observe *all* socially constructed reality, 'good' and 'bad'.

It also follows that power must play a crucial role in the construction of social reality. Power, in short, means not only the resources required to impose one's view on others, but also the authority to determine the shared meanings that constitute the identities, interests and practices of states, as well as the conditions that confer, defer or deny access to 'goods' and benefits. Because social reality is a matter of imposing meanings and functions on physical objects that do not already have those meanings and functions, the ability to create the underlying rules of the game, to define what constitutes acceptable play, and to be able to get other actors to commit themselves to those rules because they are now part of their self-understandings is perhaps the most subtle and most effective form of power (Adler and Barnett, 1996; Williams, 1996). This means that there is a very strong relationship between knowledge and power; knowledge is rarely value-neutral but frequently enters into the creation and reproduction of a particular social order that benefits some at the expense of others. In this reading, power is primarily institutional power to include and exclude, to legitimize and authorize (Williams, 1996). Also, in this sense, international organizations *are* related to power, because they can be sites of identity and interest formation and because states and sometimes individuals and other social actors can draw on their material and symbolic resources.

In addition, there is hardly any concept that is more sensitive and amenable to constructivist logic and to the notion of power presented above than 'the national interest'. Constructivism seizes the middle ground because it integrates knowledge and power as part of an explanation of where interests come from (Adler, 1991a; Finnemore, 1996a; Weldes, 1996). National interests are not merely the collective interests of a group of people; nor, with rare exceptions, are they the interests of a single dominant individual. Rather, national interests are intersubjective understandings about what it takes to advance power, influence and wealth, that survive the political process, given the distribution of power and knowledge in a society. In other words, national interests are facts whose 'objectivity' relies on human agreement and the collective assignment of meaning and function to physical objects. 'The social construction of identities . . . is necessarily prior to more obvious conceptions of interests: a "we" needs to be established before its interests can be articulated' (Hall, 1993: 51). Constructivism is thus conducive to the empirical study of the conditions that make one particular intersubjective conception of interest prevail over others. In sum, constructivism is equipped to show how national interests are born, how they acquire their status of general political understandings, and how such understandings are politically selected in and through political processes.⁴¹

Constructivist Dynamics: Cognitive Evolution

A dynamic theory of institutional selection is the natural complement of constructivism. Because interpretation is involved in the social construction of international reality, constructivist theory must be able to address the question of which interpretations and whose interpretations become social reality. In other words, why do certain ideas and concepts acquire epistemic, discursive and institutional authority (Kratochwil, 1989; Mearsheimer, 1994/95; Risse Kappen, 1994)? More specifically, which norms, and whose, come to constitute the games nations play (Finnemore, 1996a; Katzenstein, 1996a; Klotz, 1995)? Finally, how and why do certain collective expressions of human understanding, neither valid nor true *a priori*, develop into social practices, become firmly established within social and political systems, spread around the world and become reified or taken for granted?

Critical, postmodernist and poststructural theories are not very helpful in answering these questions. Although they enhance our understanding of *how* people go about creating consensus around meanings,⁴² they fail to explain *why* social reality evolves around one particular set of interpretations as opposed to another. Neorealism (Waltz, 1979) does even worse, because it lacks a theory of institutional evolution and the state. Drawing on an analogy between organisms and states and insisting that material power is

the single arbiter of the selection of states, neorealism suggests that states must choose to survive or be marked for destruction by powerful systemic constraints. George Modelski's 'long-cycles' evolutionary theory (1990, 1996) is not very helpful either, because it highlights the selection of global political systems by systemic war, that is, only by material power.

Neoliberals, on the other hand, are not oblivious to institutional selection and ideas. Following rational choice theory, however, they concentrate on institutional efficiency in providing material benefits (Krasner, 1983; Stein, 1983). For example, although Peter Hall (1989) develops an elegant explanation of why Keynesian economic ideas became politically, administratively and economically viable, he remains firmly grounded in rational choice, because he aims at determining the structural conditions that affected the choice of Keynesian ideas in different countries.

Hendrik Spruyt (1994a, 1994b) suggests a different neoliberal explanation of institutional selection. Trying to overcome the fallacy that the existence of the institution derives from the functions it performs (Spruyt, 1994a: 532), he focuses on the selection of the sovereign territorial state from among its rivals. Spruyt contends that the sovereign state was selected because 'it proved more effective at preventing defection by its members, reducing internal transaction costs, and making credible commitments to other units' (Spruyt, 1994a: 527). Spruyt's account of 'selection' is still insufficient, however.

First, Spruyt reduces a rich history of the structuration between thinking and judging agents and intersubjective and social structures to material factors. Second, a true explanation of the selection of the sovereign territorial state must draw a feedback loop to cognition. Third, it cannot avoid the notion that intersubjective and social structures may 'engineer the selection process' — in other words, that intersubjective structures may partly determine the range and the nature of the choices and socially construct the 'proof' invoked by judging agents to choose among alternatives. Thus, while Spruyt is right when he points to the empirical usefulness of history, history is needed not only to show what alternatives could have been chosen, but also *how* and *why* human agents arrived at those alternatives and at the criteria for choosing among them.

A history of the selection of institutions should include an account of the agents, the innovators, the carriers of collective understandings who socially construct the alternatives, and the 'proofs' that legitimate the choices. It also should study the institutions that promote and socialize other actors to collective understandings and help to create social reality. Moreover, this history should account not only for processes of emulation, as in Spruyt's work (1994a: 555), but also for processes of active persuasion and recruitment. In order to answer at least some of the questions raised at the

beginning of this section, we need to know how cognitive and institutional variants make their appearance in the first place, how they display their merits as solutions to international problems and how — given favorable conditions — they spread and establish themselves. This suggests a theory of cognitive evolution.

Cognitive evolution is a ‘homologous’⁴³ type of theory; it holds that the way social facts become established in the social world is relevant to the way they exert their influence (Gould, 1989; Pasic, 1996). Thus cognitive evolution has history and historicity (Alker, 1996) built into the theory; it is interested in the origins of social or institutional facts, such as identities, interests, practices and institutions.

Cognitive evolution (Adler, 1991a)⁴⁴ means that at any point in time and place of a historical process, institutional or social facts may be socially constructed by collective understandings of the physical and the social world that are subject to authoritative (political) selection processes and thus to evolutionary change. Cognitive evolution is thus the process of innovation, domestic and international diffusion, political selection and effective institutionalization that creates the intersubjective understanding on which the interests, practices and behavior of governments are based.

A cognitive evolutionary theory is structurationist to the extent that individual and social actors successfully introduce innovations that help transform or even constitute new collective understandings, which, in turn, shape the identities and interests, and consequently the expectations, of social actors. Collective understandings, such as norms, are not sufficient cause for actions; individual agents must act according to their identities and as their interests dictate. Domestic and international politics, however, may sometimes keep them from acting in this way. Sometimes domestic politics is the arena in which cognitive structures are politically and institutionally empowered, before they can make their mark on the international scene. At other times, cognitive structures develop at the international level before leaving their mark on the domestic scene of individual states. In any case, a cognitive evolutionary approach requires that new or changed ideas be communicated and diffused and that political stakes be created, which political groups may then help maintain through the use of power.

Cognitive evolution is a theory of international learning, if by learning we understand the adoption by policy-makers of new interpretations of reality, as they are created and introduced to the political system by individuals and social actors. The capacity of institutions in different countries to learn and to generate similar interests will depend not only on the acquisition of new information, but also on the political selection of similar epistemic and normative premises. The political importance of these premises lies not in their being ‘true’, but in their being intersubjectively shared across

institutions and nation-states. Seen in this light, learning increases the capacity and motivation to understand competing alternatives to a currently entertained inference and becomes a creative process through which alternatives and preferences or 'interests' are generated.

For example, 50 years ago there was no political value, and thus no interest, in arms control, sustainable development and universal human rights. Today, both the value of and interest in all three are intersubjectively taken for granted — international security has come to depend on arms control practices. Domestic and international economic and environmental decisions are increasingly shaped by our relatively recent 'discovery' of the finite nature of our global environment. Human rights have become a central factor in the interests of democratic nations because they increasingly define their social identities.

Because we 'invent concepts and categories that we use to carve up the world . . . and find ourselves categorized as well' (Kauffman, 1995: 300), the key demand made of the theory of cognitive evolution is to explain how institutional facts become *taken for granted*. To be taken for granted, institutional facts need to be 'naturalized', that is, to be taken as part of the natural order of the universe. Thus, to be 'politically selected' an institution must gain legitimacy by being grounded in nature and reason. Next, it provides its members with a set of analogues with which to explore the world and justify the naturalness and reasonableness of the institutionalized rules (Douglas, 1986: 112). The 'taken-for-grantedness' process implies that as certain ideas or practices become reified, competing ideas and practices are delegitimized.

Second, unlike rationalist thought, a cognitive evolutionary approach maintains that it may not be the best-fitted ideas, nor the most efficient institutions, that become 'naturalized' or reified, but those that prove most successful at imposing collective meaning and function on physical reality. I have in mind ideas that help produce a balance or temporary consensus between competing trends within governments and societies, and between them, and that may serve as a rallying point for the formation of dominant coalitions.

Third, to be taken for granted, institutional facts must be backed by power; in other words, intersubjective ideas must have authority and legitimacy and must evoke trust.⁴⁵ Institutional facts are more likely to become established when agents, acting on their behalf, manage to frame reality around authoritative meanings (scientific or not) and/or gain control of the social support networks of politics, making it too difficult and costly for opponents to deconstruct institutionalized intersubjective ideas (Fuchs, 1992).

Fourth, institutional selection is not an arbitrary act in a subjective sense,

nor does it take place in an 'instant' of rational choice. It is rather the continuous rational institutionalization of a tradition that provides new or improved understandings of reality.

Fifth, political selection is driven by political leaders' intersubjective expectations of progress, that is, by ideas and institutions that conform to concepts that have been brought to public awareness as involving new and/or progressive solutions to critical political problems. Expectations of progress can be based on experience, scientific understandings and even myths. Thus political selection becomes a function of what is collectively regarded as 'better' or 'worse', which in turn depends on intersubjective understandings and prior social agreements about 'good' and 'bad'. What leaders can 'see' or not 'see' depends on collective normative and causal understandings about what is needed and about which needs should be promoted to the level of interests.

Sixth, institutional facts acquire prominence when people are collectively aware of the problem in practical terms. Institutions dispose individuals to follow the rules because they can intervene in the world to solve a problem. It is only in and through practice that social facts acquire self-criticism and transformation procedures that make the whole process 'rational' (Toulmin, 1972).

Finally, institutional facts collectively emerge both from socialization processes that involve the diffusion of meanings from country to country and from political and diplomatic processes that include negotiation, persuasion and coercion. Particularly noteworthy is the role of persuasion. Persuasion is a struggle to define mutual understandings 'that underpin identities, rights, grievances, . . . interests, [and] attempts to control behavior through a wide range of social sanctions, only one of which is the use of force' (Klotz, 1992: 11). When political actors interact, cooperatively or otherwise, they may be able to affect each other's understanding so that they can have a shared definition of their situation; they can collectively identify beneficial courses of action and recognize them as norms; and they can try to persuade each other to enact such norms through symbolic communication that threatens or enhances 'face' or 'dignity' (Barnes, 1995: 77). For example, one of the most relevant roles of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe during the Cold War was to serve as a forum where shared meanings between East and West were socially constructed by means of persuasion.

A Constructivist Research Agenda

The descriptions, explanations and hypotheses produced by constructivism and cognitive evolution are oriented toward empirical research. Although

constructivists were initially slow to develop research programs based on their approach (Wendt, 1994b), the discipline now is bursting with constructivist studies.⁴⁶ In the pages below, I suggest ways of broadening and deepening constructivist research agendas.

Change in International Relations as Cognitive Evolution

A constructivist approach can go a long way toward a systematic explanation of change in International Relations. To a certain extent, the social construction of reality that assigns changes in collective meaning and purpose to physical objects is itself an important component of the process of change. Take, for example, the end of the Cold War, a powerful event that traditional approaches have found difficult to explain, and certainly did not predict. It has become increasingly clear that events and phenomena that seemed to be 'systemically' unimportant, such as the Soviet dissident movement, which helped fuel the international delegitimation of the Soviet Union, and the Chernobyl nuclear accident, which brought home the horrors of uncontrolled nuclear power, gave rise in a few years to far reaching and unpredictable consequences.

Koslowski and Kratochwil (1995) have shown that changes in the political context and normative environment, that is, in the political conventions and practices of the communist world, took place before the changes in the material environment. The overall change in intersubjective understandings that led to the delegitimation of Eastern European communism in 1989, the hollowing of the Warsaw Pact, the subsequent delegitimation of Soviet communism and imperialism, and, finally, the revival of nationalism and movements of self-determination in the Soviet Union (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1995: 158–9), all contributed to the deterioration of Soviet capabilities. Much work remains to be done, though, to understand the end of the Cold War. For example, we need to understand better how institutions like the Helsinki process (the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) helped create the standards that led actors to discover new preferences (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 10–11; Thomas, 1991).

A constructivist approach can also explain changes in the international political economy. For example, because it can show that changing collective understandings of technology and national and global economies may have direct material effects on the wealth of nations, constructivism may do a better job of explaining North–South relations than rational explanations (Krasner, 1985) that focus chiefly on material objects, and than postmodern explanations (Doty, 1996) that focus exclusively on discursive changes.

The evolution of international environmental policy offers another fertile

ground for constructivist research. Take, for example, the concept of 'sustainable development'. Physical conditions led individuals to develop this normative and causal concept in their minds. After the concept was circulated extensively, it was officially adopted by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, and later by the 1992 Rio Conference. UN institutions emerged to implement policies of sustainable development; even the United States adopted the concept as official policy on the environment. In the wake of all these, sustainable development became an intersubjective understanding on the basis of which problems and solutions regarding the environment and development are analysed and repertoires for action formulated.⁴⁷ Because there is more than one interpretation of sustainable development, and some of them conflict, a consensual intersubjective definition is developing only in and through practice; this allows material factors to leave their mark. In any case, this understanding has begun to determine policies that act on the material world, affecting the physical environment, people and their well-being.

Epistemic Communities and the Construction of Social Facts

The study of epistemic communities⁴⁸ does not make much sense unless it follows the constructivist approach. Epistemic communities are not a new actor on the international scene or an interest group. They are rather a vehicle of collective theoretical premises, interpretations and meanings; in some cases they help construct the social reality of International Relations. NGOs, social movements, international organizations and domestic institutions may play a similar role (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). All these actors are significant for a broader theoretical understanding of the social construction of International Relations by intersubjective knowledge. In other words, constructivism broadens our understanding of the relationship between scientific knowledge and International Relations outcomes with the argument that International Relations in general, whether cooperative or *conflictual*, are framed and socially constructed by all classes of knowledge, scientific and other.

The interesting question about epistemic communities, from a political perspective, is not whether scientific knowledge is objectively true or not — much of what passes for the scientific knowledge of epistemic communities can hardly be considered truly objective, for the simple reason that in most cases it is amalgamated with social knowledge that can rarely allege truthfulness. The interesting question is how the effect on political and social reality of socially constructed scientific knowledge, produced 'in the laboratory' by people wearing white coats and adorned with a large dose of social legitimation, differs from that of socially constructed knowledge that

does not claim to represent reality or that is accompanied only by normative, and not causal, claims.

While it is important to describe the ways in which dominant epistemic beliefs emerge from social interaction within a scientific group or community, it is equally important to study how *politically* dominant ways of framing issues emerge in interactions among political groups. We must look at the entire cognitive evolutionary process, trying to explain how knowledge is constructed twice — first by members of epistemic communities and later by individuals and institutions interacting in domestic and international political systems. Because mainstream ideas have a better chance of surviving the political selection process, epistemic communities that succeed in bringing mainstream ideas to public awareness may have a better chance of emerging as winners.

More broadly, constructivism can enlighten us about the role played by epistemic communities in bringing about major changes in the ways political leaders think about science and its consequences. To see how this may happen, think about science as a *constitutive norm* that socially constructs the identities, interests and practices of modern rulers. Consequently, modern rulers can be thought of as increasingly relying on science not so much as a result of a calculated choice as because science has become part of their modern identity. On those rare occasions when epistemic communities diffuse a *new* normative view of science and of the global environment through the institutions of state and society, both the norms and their carriers may help bring about a transformation of political actors' identities, interests and practices. These changes can be empirically documented.

Seen this way, normative ideas of science — carried by epistemic communities — may be more than just a resource that encourages states to act in a way that is consistent with the norms (e.g. cleaning up a polluted environment) and the transnational impact of these norms may go beyond helping bring about 'policy coordination' between states (P. Haas, 1990). Rather, their most far reaching effect — in other words, the 'constructivist dependent variable' — may be *the transformation of identities and interests*. The social construction of International Relations by epistemic communities may thus consist of the diffusion and internalization of new constitutive norms that end up creating new identities, interests and even new types of social organization.

The Emergent Nature of Political Actors: Security Communities

The more we buy into the notion that international security is increasingly associated with the establishment of a security community⁴⁹ and that the boundaries of security communities are ideational, the more plausible it

becomes 'that regions are socially constructed and are susceptible to redefinition' (Adler and Barnett, 1996: 77). The research task, then, is to trace the social construction of security communities through history and compare them across areas.⁵⁰

A security community agenda recognizes the social character of world politics; consequently it can make a major contribution to the constructivist research program by exploring the relationship among structures (defined in material and normative terms), the practices that are made possible and imaginable by these structures, the security orders that are rendered accessible within that field, and how those security orders regulate or extinguish the use of force. Thus, understanding security must begin not just with a set of previously constructed and thus reified categories, but also, and primarily, with the recognition that policy-makers may have the ability to act upon the world with new knowledge and new understandings about how to organize security.

A research agenda on security communities requires identifying those interstate practices and transnational forces that create the assurance that states will not settle their differences through war. It also entails the notion that states govern their domestic behavior in ways that are consistent with the community. Said otherwise, membership in the community is shaped not only by the state's external identity and associated behavior but also by its domestic characteristics and practices (Adler and Barnett, 1996: 76). For example, it would be very difficult for a European state to consistently abuse human rights and still be deemed to belong to contemporary 'Europe'.

This research agenda also requires studying the role that international and transnational institutions play in the social construction of security communities. By establishing, articulating and transmitting norms that define what constitutes acceptable and legitimate state behavior, international organizations may be able to shape state practices. Even more remarkable, however, international organizations may encourage states and societies to imagine themselves as part of a region. This suggests that international organizations can be a site of interest and identity formation. Particularly striking are those cases in which regional organizations have been established for instrumental reasons and later and unexpectedly gained an identity component by becoming a new site for interaction and source of imagination.

National Security and the Social Construction of 'the Strategy of Conflict'

Peter Katzenstein and his colleagues (1996a) have conclusively shown that a constructivist approach can be very useful in explaining the normative underpinnings of national security, primarily security cooperation. This line of research, however, should be supplemented with the study of the social

construction of conflict and war. On this issue, recent scholarship that emphasizes the cultural aspects of decisions about the use of force in war (Legro, 1995), military doctrine (Kier, 1996, 1997), military strategy (Johnston, 1995) and war proneness (Ross, 1993) suggests a fruitful research direction for constructivists to take.

Military strategy is a particularly promising field for constructivist research because the structural situation in which the actors find themselves in a strategic game situation — characterized by interdependent reciprocal expectations (Schelling, 1960: 207) — results not only from material objects or independent subjective beliefs, but also from dynamic intersubjective understandings based on shared historical experience, epistemic criteria, expectations of proper action and, most important, the existence or lack of mutual trust.

A constructivist reading of Schelling's theory should emphasize the role played by social communication — and by the transfer from nation to nation of meanings, concepts and norms — in socially constructing the intersubjective understandings and the focal points that make a peaceful solution to the strategic game possible. As Schelling himself remarked — 'the players must *bargain* their way to an outcome. . . . They must find ways of . . . communicating their intentions. . . . The fundamental psychic and intellectual process is that of participating in the creation of *traditions*, and the ingredients out of which traditions can be created, or the materials in which potential traditions can be perceived and jointly recognized, are not at all coincident with the mathematical contents of the game' (Schelling, 1960: 106–7).

Because strategic knowledge can become part of reality and its unfolding, constructivists should also study the effect of military traditions and military academic knowledge on the social construction of military strategy and international affairs. For example, a shared set of epistemic criteria, together with convergence on a common practice of arms control — which Schelling and his colleagues helped to socially construct — enabled the United States and the Soviet Union to develop a coordination game and discover the extent to which its symbolic contents suggested compromises, limits and regulations (Adler, 1992). In this case, academic theoretical knowledge was neither just 'reasoning' about an external reality, as positivists would have it, nor simply a practice produced to discipline society to the rituals of power, as postmodernists might interpret it. Rather, strategic theory, by contributing to intersubjective understandings about strategic and arms control practices, provided 'reasons' to actors and thus affected the material world.

It is also remarkable how little appreciation there is in the International Relations literature of the fact that, like any other social institution, war is

socially constructed and consequently partly depends for its persistence on collective ideas about the inevitability of war and its desirability for achieving political gain, riches and glory. Constructivists should be able to test John Mueller's theory of 'the obsolescence of major war' (Mueller, 1989) by showing whether, as a practice, war is collectively being redefined as inefficient, undesirable and normatively unacceptable. Constructivists can try to show whether and how changes in nuclear technology (Jervis, 1988) and values of war (Mueller, 1989) are helping to constitute anti-war identities that promote the development of war-prevention national interests and strategies (Adler, 1991b).

Finally, although the notion that the social construction of an enemy ('the other') is part of the development of identities of 'self' has been validated by social identity theory (Mercer, 1995) and analysed by postmodern scholars (Campbell, 1996), constructivists have yet to develop research projects that can show how enemies and military threats are socially constructed by both material and ideational factors.

The Social Construction of the 'Democratic Peace'

The 'democratic peace' cries for a constructivist explanation. The leading neoliberal explanations of the democratic peace⁵¹ share a combination of rationalistic and normative claims about the incentives and restraints imposed on state leaders by their societies and the international system. The 'democratic peace', however, is neither about constraints nor solely about the subjective beliefs of particular individuals. Nor should we take liberalism as a fundamental deterministic variable. Instead, the democratic peace is about the historical development and spread over part of the world of an intersubjective liberal identity that, cutting across national borders, becomes an identity marker and indicator of reciprocal peaceful intentions. In other words, the democratic peace is about the social construction of a transnational '*civic culture*' (Almond and Verba, 1963) that engenders mutual trust and legitimacy. Needless to say, this hypothesis requires additional refinement and examination.

Furthermore, research can also follow the lead of Thomas Risse-Kappen (1995), who recently examined the social construction of a community of liberal values among North Atlantic democracies in the postwar era, and of Ido Oren, who has shown that the democratic peace is only a social construction of American social scientists, whose selection of empirical criteria 'is consistent with the dominant image of democracy in current American culture'⁵² (Oren, 1995: 150).

Conclusion

I hope that the present essay has shown that knowledge and interpretation are not only compatible with good social science, but are in fact indispensable for understanding and explaining the social construction of international reality. Constructivism may hold the key for developing dynamic theories about the transformation of international actors, institutionalized patterns, new political identities and interests and systems of governance. It also establishes new areas of empirical investigation — non-existent for realists, overlooked by liberals and unimportant to psychological approaches — namely, the objective facts of world politics, which are facts only by virtue of human agreement.

I also hope I have shown that constructivism means, not abandoning reason or rationality, but rediscovering how rational considerations are brought to bear in collective human enterprises and situations (Toulmin, 1972: 371, 486). With constructivism prudently located in the middle ground, the 'Third Debate' (Lapid, 1989) can now begin — not as a means to 'celebrate' dissent, but chiefly as part of the common enterprise of developing a socio-cognitive theory of International Relations.

Notes

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1. Realism, neorealism, game theory and strategic studies, along with neoliberal institutional approaches, share a rationalist approach to states, which they all view as 'conscious goal-seeking agents pursuing their interests within an external environment characterized by anarchy and the power of other states. The paradigmatic question is how states pursue their goals given the constraints under which they operate. When goals are interdependent, the question assumes a strategic form: How can one state achieve what it wants, given the preferences and capacities of others?' (Caporaso, 1992: 605).
2. As represented by the work of Jürgen Habermas (1971, 1984).
3. Wendt (1992, 1994a, 1995).
4. See, for example, Adler (1992), Barnett (1995), Finnemore (1996a, 1996b), Katzenstein (1996b), Klotz (1995), Price (1995), Price and Tannenwald (1996), Risse-Kappen (1995), Weaver (1995).
5. Adler and Barnett (1996), Katzenstein (1996a), Wendt (1992).
6. Positivism involves: (a) 'a commitment to a unified view of science, and the adoption of methodologies of the natural sciences to explain the social world'; (b) 'the view that there is a distinction between facts and values, and, moreover, that "facts" are theory neutral'; (c) 'a powerful belief in the existence of regularities in the social as well as the natural world. This, of course, licenses

- both “deductive-nomological” and the “inductive statistical” forms of covering law explanation’; and (d) ‘a tremendous reliance on the belief that it is empirical validation or falsification that is the hallmark of “real” enquiry’ (Smith, 1996: 11, 16).
7. ‘Behaviourism: “life is but a motion of the limbs,” at any rate for purposes of social science’ (Hollis, 1996: 304).
 8. The ‘thesis that the natural world and such evidence as we have about the world do little or nothing to constrain our beliefs’ (Laudan, 1990: viii).
 9. Like ‘ethnomethodology’ (Garfinkel, 1984), it takes knowledge as a collective accomplishment (Barnes, 1995).
 10. By ‘cognitive’ I mean approaches that study political beliefs and belief systems in International Relations from a perspective that takes individual human acts of cognition, such as perceptions, as independent variables that explain foreign-policy behavior. See, for example, Herrmann (1988). Much of the work on cognitive psychology, however, has taken human inference models as normative, in the sense that judgments that deviate systematically from such models are either misperceptions (Jervis, 1976) or ‘erroneous’, indicating bias in the underlying inference process (Kahneman et al., 1982). For an overview of the field, see Smith (1988) and Tetlock and McGuire (1986).
 11. Keohane (1988) uses the term ‘reflectivist’ to describe all interpretive IR scholars, including constructivists, whom he finds antithetical to the rationalist approach.
 12. See, for example, Adler (1991a), Barnett (1993, 1995), Finnemore (1996a, 1996b), Katzenstein (1996a), Klotz (1995), Kratochwil (1989), Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986), Onuf (1989), Risse-Kappen (1995), Ruggie (1983, 1993), Wendt (1992, 1994a, 1995, forthcoming).
 13. The way we think about International Relations is not unrelated to what we believe about knowledge in general, science and human understanding. For some general overviews of the philosophy of science, see Chalmers (1994), Hacking (1981, 1983) and Harré (1972).
 14. Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (1990: 196–216) argue that such a synthesis is impossible. For an accessible introduction to interpretive philosophies of science and sociologies of knowledge as applied to International Relations, see Hollis and Smith (1990). A particularly effective introductory study is Doyal and Harris (1986).
 15. Because Keohane (1988) used ‘reflective’ to describe students of international institutions who take an interpretive perspective, I refrain from using this term.
 16. See, for example, Der Derian and Shapiro (1989).
 17. ‘Indeed, texts cannot themselves be accepted as representations, even of arbitrarily signified referents. Composed not just of presences but of absences, texts do not exist as complete wholes’ (Alexander, 1995: 103).
 18. Emergence, an increasingly important concept in physics, means that physical and biological systems are partly indeterminate (even though they respond to laws); accordingly, once they cross a threshold of complexity, they can

spontaneously organize themselves into more complex, self-sustaining and self-reproducing structures. 'Weather is an emergent property: take your water vapor out over the Gulf of Mexico and let it interact with sunlight and wind, and it can organize itself into an emergent structure known as a hurricane. Life is an emergent property, the product of DNA molecules and protein molecules and myriad other kinds of molecules, all obeying the laws of chemistry' (Waldrop, 1992: 82; see also Kauffman, 1995: 24). In the social world, I take emergence to mean that 'in contrast to the past which is closed, as it were, the future is still open to influence; it is not yet completely determined' (Popper, 1982a: 56, 130). In other words, the social world is emergent because we humans can reflectively and often surprisingly affect it with formulated human knowledge. Metaphorically speaking, then, human knowledge can produce instabilities that generate the propensity for self-organization.

19. On methodological individualism, see Weber (1968) and Elster (1983, 1989).
20. See, for example, Berger and Luckmann (1966), Durkheim (1965), Fleck (1979), Kuhn (1970), Peirce (1992), Schutz (1962), Winch (1958) and Wittgenstein (1953).
21. For applications of structuration theory to International Relations, see Carlsnaes (1992), Dessler (1989), Wendt (1987). According to Wendt (1987), structuration theory 'says something about what kinds of entities there are in the social world and how their relationship should be conceptualized, . . . but it does not tell us what particular kinds of agents or what particular kinds of structures to expect in any given concrete social system' (Wendt, 1987: 355).
22. Wittgenstein (1953), Winch (1958) and Willard Quine (1961); critical theorists like Jürgen Habermas (1971, 1984); and postmodernists such as Michel Foucault (1970) and Jacques Derrida (1978).
23. On the other hand, although Jürgen Habermas (1984), who best represents the Critical Theory school, sees the simple objectivism of positivism as mistaken, he nevertheless believes that 'there are secure foundations for knowledge, and that some versions of the social world are more objective than others' (Smith, 1996: 36).
24. Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (1962), Martin Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) (1962), Alfred Schutz's studies of the common-sense meanings of daily life (1962), George H. Mead's 'symbolic interactionist' construction of social reality (1934), Harold Garfinkel's 'ethnomethodology' or empirical study of practices (1984), the studies by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) of the processes by which bodies of knowledge come to be socially established as reality, and Clifford Geertz's thickly described 'cultures' (1973) — to mention just a few.
25. 'In other words, intersubjective meanings quasi-causally affect certain actions not by directly or inevitably determining them but rather by rendering these actions plausible or implausible, acceptable or unacceptable, conceivable or inconceivable, respectable or disreputable' (Yee, 1996: 97).
26. Following Rawls (1955), Searle (1995: 27–8) distinguishes between regulative and constitutive rules. Regulative rules regulate already existing activities. On

- the other hand, constitutive rules '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.'
27. James (1975), Bernstein (1985), Peirce (1992) and Putnam (1995).
 28. I thank Cecelia Lynch for this point.
 29. When applying a naturalist and determinist view of scientific causality to social science, positivists should take note of the fact that, by the 1930s, this view had been replaced in physics by the understanding that subatomic relationships are inherently stochastic. And in 'recent decades, an entirely new view of uncertainty or chance has emerged under the rubric of chaos theory' (Ruggie, 1995: 94).
 30. 'Methodological individualism is defined primarily by the belief that society consists solely of its members. They alone are real. . . . Individualism rules out social structures as supra-individual causes and traces causal inferences to particular individuals or to individuals in general' (Rhoads, 1991: 117).
 31. Postmodern feminist theory deals with the constitution of International Relations by gender. It argues that International Relations are the result of a hegemonic masculine discourse and that, therefore, 'any claim about "reality" that denies, misrepresents, or simply re-presents women must be thoroughly contested and, thereby, radicalized' (Runyan and Peterson, 1991: 100).
 32. Nick Rengger and Mark Hoffman (1992) classify constitutive approaches into: (a) 'critical interpretative theory' (Habermas, 1984), which provides a minimal basis of evaluation between different theories; and (b) 'radical interpretatism', which denies even critical theory's minimalist claims about science and the possibility of emancipation.
 33. 'A semio-critical activity, ever searching for and seeking to dismantle the empirico-rational *positions* where power fixes meaning' (Der Derian, 1990: 296).
 34. Habermas (1984) takes the securing of freedom from distorted communication as a progressive enterprise. Poststructuralists and postmodernists, on the other hand, when choosing to highlight some forms of subjective discourse over others, do so randomly and as a reflection of their own personal preferences.
 35. The structured, focused comparison method was described by Alexander George (1979).
 36. It is crucial to remember, however, that constructivism, by assuming that agents and structures constitute each other, goes beyond a linear characterization of causality (Giddens, 1984; Klotz, 1992: 10).
 37. Ruggie (1995: 98), citing Polkinghorne (1986), argues that 'in the narrative mode . . . significance is attributed to antecedent events and actions by virtue of their role in some "human project" as a whole. This mode of explanation comprises two "orders of information": the descriptive and the configurative. The first simply links occurrences along a temporal dimension and seeks to identify the effect one had on another. The second organizes these descriptive statements into an intersubjective gestalt or "coherence structure." These gestalt operations rest on a method of interrogative reasoning that Charles Peirce called "abduction": the successive adjusting of a conjectured ordering scheme to the

- available facts, until the conjecture provides as full an account of the facts as possible' (Ruggie, 1995: 98).
38. 'Thick description' has been described by Geertz (1973).
 39. Adler (1992), Barnett (1995), Cederman (1996b), Finnemore (1996a), Katzenstein (1996a), Klotz (1995), Risse-Kappen (1995).
 40. '[H]istory of the present that looks to the past for insight into today. It focuses on "local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges." Genealogy dismisses the possibility of any view of history as a "unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise, and order . . . in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects"' (Rosenau, 1992: xi–xii; Foucault, 1984).
 41. For a recent discussion of some of the implications that follow from studying the national interest through constructivist glasses, see Weldes (1996).
 42. For example, through: (a) the sharing of 'forms of life' and traditions (Wittgenstein, 1953); (b) the engagement in 'ideal speech situations', 'a form of discourse in which there is no other compulsion but the compulsion of argumentation itself' (Habermas, 1970; Bernstein, 1976: 212); and (c) the historical development of 'truth' regimes on the basis of disciplinary knowledge (Foucault, 1980).
 43. As opposed to 'analogous'; both concepts are borrowed from biology. 'When similar functions are present in different entities, a homologous account looks to the common ancestry of such a function.' In contrast, an analogous explanation 'provides an account by seeing the similar function as independent responses to similar circumstances' (Pasic, 1996: 20).
 44. I owe much of my understanding of cognitive evolution to Ernst Haas. See, for example, Haas (1990a and b).
 45. Thus, not unlike Foucault's concept of power, which emphasizes the disciplinary effects of bodies of knowledge and discourse, power sets a field of conceptual, normative and practical possibilities that define what is legitimate and illegitimate in international politics (Foucault, 1980; Price, 1995; Williams, 1996).
 46. See note no. 4.
 47. See, for example, Rowlands (1992: 209–24).
 48. 'An epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area.' Epistemic communities have a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, shared causal beliefs, shared notions of validity and a common policy enterprise (P. Haas, 1992: 3).
 49. A security community is a 'group of people which has become integrated', i.e. 'in which there is real assurance that the members of the community will not fight each other physically, but will settle their disputes in some other way'. Amalgamated security communities involve the 'formal merger of two or more previously independent units into a single larger unit'. Pluralistic security communities, on the other hand, retain the legal independence of separate governments, possess a compatibility of core values derived from common institutions, mutual responsiveness, and a sense of 'we-ness', and are integrated

- to the point that they entertain 'dependable expectations of peaceful change' (Deutsch et al., 1957: 5–6).
50. Adler and Barnett (1996) have categorized pluralistic security communities as loosely and tightly coupled, according to their depth of trust, the nature and degree of institutionalization of their governance system, and whether they reside in a formal anarchy or are on the verge of transforming it. A loosely coupled security community, which refers to a transnational region of sovereign states whose people maintain dependable expectations of peaceful change, is consistent with Wendt's state-centric constructivist approach. On the other hand, a tightly coupled security community is something of a post-sovereign system, endowed with common supranational, transnational and national institutions, and, as such, it exemplifies the emergence of novel political actors on the world scene.
 51. See, for example, Doyle (1986), Maoz and Russett (1993), Ray (1993), Russett (1993), Owen (1994).
 52. This image is used to socially construct an identity of self and, consequently, an idea of 'the other'. Oren's analysis suggests that Jonathan Mercer's arguments (1995) about the formation of identity in-groups ('our kind') and out-groups ('their kind') can be made amenable to historical-contextual, and thus to constructivist, analysis.

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