



General Assembly at the United Nations Headquarters, New York City.

The Social Construction of War

by Mitchell Binding

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Introduction

The current resurgence of nationalism and emergence of “post-fact” politics offers an interesting opportunity to study how war is socially constructed.¹ I argue, in line with a constructivist framework, that actors are induced to act based upon a socially constructed reality; this reality is formed by norms and identities. The extent to which war is socially constructed matters most when observing how much actors can manoeuvre within this construct, to which the answer is, very little. I first explain why this question even matters, and clarify concepts that are prerequisite to a comprehensive understanding. I then address the core of this article: the ways that war is socially constructed, and the extent to which this is so. As with any honest analysis, my arguments are then tempered with a discussion of their limitations. Finally, I support my conclusions with a broad overview of case studies, preferring a broad approach to demonstrate the ubiquity of our findings.

Who Cares?

Whether a scholar, practitioner, military officer, activist, political leader or engaged citizen, it is instructive to reflect upon war as a social construct. The dialogue regarding international relations (IR) has fixated largely upon realist and liberal mindsets. Both paradigms offer many contributions to the field. Realism offers a pleasing straight-forward logic, and is supported by examples throughout the historical record.² Liberalism, and Liberal Democratic Peace theory (LDP) particularly, shares the same “rationalist” foundation as realism, although with some fundamentally different assumptions, offering a different, more optimistic prognosis for global affairs.³ Indeed, modern liberalism has been the bedrock of the Western-led order for most of the last century, and so, it has played no small part in IR. Both approaches have major shortcomings, however. Realists are criticized with ignoring many of the most important factors in the international system.⁴ Liberalism has contributed to the undertaking of many ‘illiberal’ wars in seeking to spread democracy, which many argue has weakened the normative order that the West has sought to uphold.⁵ Both are criticized with having a Western-centric worldview that does not transfer to other perspectives.



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The United States Capitol building in Washington, DC.

By reflecting upon how IR theory is instead *constitutive*, we understand that actors' conceptions of war and peace form the environment within which they act.⁶ This is important because it changes how we understand *why* things happen in the international system, and *how* best to address them – an endeavor that seems relevant, given the changing political and normative environment around the globe today.

Concepts

The first issue is to clarify the term 'socially constructed.' Actors cannot separate themselves from the system within which they act. In the constructivist view, there is a difference between material and non-material factors, or 'brute facts' and 'social facts.'⁷ It is the non-material or ideational factors that shape the international system and the way actors and states interact.

The ideas, norms, and cultures of actors and states are what create war. To be clear, this view does not hold war as 'non-real,' or something that can be wished away by changing how we think.⁸ As will be discussed in more depth later, anarchy, war, and other major elements of the international system are created by ideas, norms, and cultures that constitute an 'intersubjective medium,' whereby the actions of each actor and state affect those of every other.⁹ Because these normative constructions have been acted out, interpreted,

and reinforced countless times across centuries, they are virtually hard-wired into the international system.

So then, why not simply adopt a rationalist approach? This is no small question, but the short answer is that in doing so, theorists and practitioners exclude a considerable amount of nuance. Not only do they misunderstand key aspects of the international system (i.e., lacking understanding of the end of the Cold War and its reasons), but they also say little about terrorism, international crime, migrant crises, environmental issues, gendered politics, domestic politics, or really anything not at the interstate level.¹⁰ These issues have all played increasingly important roles in IR, and rationalist approaches ignore them to their detriment.

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So, after criticizing the two primary rationalist paradigms in IR, it is necessary to provide an alternative. The answer to many of the above issues, and to the stated research question, is tackled best by constructivist thinkers and the English School. These two schools of thought share similarities in their thinking, with some important differences.¹¹ The primary difference between the two relates to their approaches: constructivists see through a socio-political lens, while the English School prefers to view through a historical lens. Generally, however, the two have similar ideas regarding the role of ideas and norms in interstate relations, and indeed, some scholars have been working to merge the two schools.



St. Basil's Intercession Cathedral in Moscow.

The most important concepts in this 'third way' – constructivism, rooted in the English School – are those of norms, identity, and culture. To constructivists, these fundamentals are responsible for the construction of international society and its constituent parts, such as anarchy, peace, diplomacy, and war.¹²

War as Social Construct

To understand war as a social construct, we need also to understand how states themselves are social constructs. The material aspects of a state are apparent: its territory, population, economy, and materiel are all indisputable aspects of the state.¹³ States are also created and defined by ideas (capitalism, democracy, communism), cultures (religious, secular, ethnic), and norms (rule of law, revanchist, conciliatory).¹⁴ Social construction is further illustrated by examining how a state could exist without territory, or territory without state (governments can operate in exile or while occupied).¹⁵ As the international system changes, states' borders adapt and sometimes cease to exist altogether, even though its material properties are still intact in some capacity.¹⁶ The *people* as constituting a state can be questioned as well; the identities and cultures that

constitute a state are often not homogenous, and often do conflict. Cultures regularly exist across state lines, and are often one of several within borders.¹⁷ The state can, in fact, be observed as the formulation of three distinct but critical parts; the territory and material factors make up only one part, with the other two being the 'idea of the state' and the 'institutional expression of the state.'¹⁸ This trinity illustrates how material factors are only a part of that which comprises a state.

Viewing the state as a social construct influences how we observe the relations between them. These relations, as well, are influenced and often constituted by norms. If states are themselves constructs, then the anarchical structure that they comprise is also socially constructed.¹⁹ Norms are both regulative and constitutive; norms *regulate* the conduct of war (such as the United Nations charter and alliance treaties), yet without the rules and norms that *constitute* war, it would cease to exist altogether.²⁰

This connection is described by the concept of agent-structure. Political scientist Alexander Wendt, one of the core social constructivist scholars in the field of IR, explains that 'regular practices produce mutually constituting sovereign identities (agents) and

their associated institutional norms (structures).²¹ In other words, the agents in a system, in aggregate, create the structure within which they act. The system thereupon influences or regulates actions, which then feed back into the structure. This leads us to the conclusion that states, through their practices, constitute war.

This can be applied in understanding why realist and liberal thought is pervasive. Realism focuses on anarchy and the balance of power (or threat) and the systemic pressures that this places upon actors; if most actors in the world understand it to be Hobbesian in nature, then they will all act in a zero-sum, distrustful manner in the interest of self-preservation.²² Liberalism sees the same system but allows for norms of cooperation between like-states that make it feasible, through an iterative long-term version of the Prisoner's Dilemma, to break away from eternal conflict.²³ If every actor believes that cooperation among states is not only possible but very beneficial, then all would act accordingly to protect the groups and their own interests. These two discrete worldviews have been *necessary for* and *constitutive of* the conflicts and wars (as well as peace) seen throughout history.²⁴

Questions of Extent

Arguing that war *is* a social construct leads to the conclusion it is socially constructed to the full extent. I will attempt to answer a more fruitful question: to what *extent* can actors *manoeuvre* within this social construction?

As mentioned briefly earlier, the view that war is socially constructed does not mean that it is illusory or intangible, or can

be abandoned at will. The norms that constitute war are pervasive, and are further influenced by feedback from the agent-structure system.²⁵ This means that the extent to which actors can manoeuvre is limited.

The most important consequence of this is that actors essentially must act within a realist system because that is what has been repeatedly constructed.²⁶ Naturally, liberalism still holds ground and LDP is still relevant, but most of history goes to the realists – and we seem currently to be returning to a balance-of-power mentality. For instance, realists have for years predicted the resurgence of a great-power competition-based order once the ‘unipolar’ order began to decline.²⁷ We see this now between Russia, China, and the United States (US). The European Union (EU) is also on fragile ground and faces the serious possibility of disintegration, possibly leading to less friendly competition between Great Britain, France, Germany, and perhaps Italy.²⁸ This is the result of the reification of realist thought in international politics and strategy, and is why actors struggle to manoeuvre within the social construction of war.

Limitations

As with every approach in IR, constructivism comes with limitations. The most relevant involve the often complex nature of the constructivist argument, the difficulty in establishing guidelines for the analysis of norms, and its difficulty in predicting developments in IR. Many have argued that viewing war as socially constructed is overly complex, without any of the attractive simplicity of rationalist approaches (particularly of realism).



Big Ben and Westminster Bridge – London.

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Chairman Mao Zedong.

Scholars have discussed the immense complexity of the norms and identities at each level of analysis, and how they affect each other in often circular ways.²⁹ These complex normative relationships can make it very difficult to analyze and understand how they constitute a system.

The complexity in studying norms is made no easier by the difficult methodologies that must be adopted to study them. Some scholars have provided methods for analysis, but subjective and ill-defined concepts such as norms, identities, and culture are not easily assessed.³⁰

The *constructivist* approach also struggles to anticipate directions of change, as it is not possible to predict the nature or transmission of ideas, whereas a *rationalist* or *systemic* approach could predict how countries will act based on what the structure dictates.³¹ Security practitioners require a certain applicability of concepts to the real world to devise forward-looking policies. The complexity and unpredictability of norms and ideas could make the constructivist approach less appealing.

Having acknowledged these limitations, it is important to note that none of them negate the reasons for understanding war

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Virginia’s Professor Jeffrey W. Legro, another specialist in IR, analyzes the lead-up to the Second World War, disagreeing with traditional arguments, and focusing instead upon how organizational cultures in Britain and Germany inadvertently escalated toward conflict.³⁴ Dr. Elizabeth Kier, an associate professor in

the Department of Political Science at the University of Washington, studies offensive versus defensive doctrines related to French military culture during the interwar years, finding that militaries do not inherently prefer the former.³⁵ Harvard professor Dr. Alastair Iain Johnston discusses the prevalence of cultural realism in China during Mao Zedong’s reign, finding that offensive *realpolitik* has been internalized by Chinese leaders by historical events over centuries.³⁶ Boston University’s IR Professor Thomas U. Berger assesses the tendencies of both Germany and Japan, since the Second World War, to buck the realist trend by being extremely hesitant to resort to military means because of cultural and historical factors.³⁷ Doctors Richard Price (University of British Columbia) and Nina Tannenwald (Brown University) use a normative approach to explain the non-use of chemical and nuclear weapons in instances where the deterrence model does not hold up.³⁸ Then, Dr. Robert G. Herman tackles the fall of the Soviet

as a social construct. Rationalist approaches still fail to understand the normative causes for the structures and institutions that they observe, or their consequences.³² Thus, constructivists do not aim to displace realism or liberalism, but to *collaborate* with them. Some have said that constructivism is not much more than a complement to realism,³³ but it seems more accurate that realism and liberalism could both be subsumed under constructivism.

Overview of Case Studies

For the purposes of this article, a broad sampling of case studies is best suited to demonstrate the application of a constructivist approach to the real world. Such an approach inevitably sacrifices depth; I take a broad overview of both historical and contemporary examples to provide a sense of the many possibilities for applying a social construction understanding to war and IR.

Scholars have written on the role of norms, identity, and culture in numerous cases from the last century. University of

Union, showing that ideational factors led to the end of the Cold War more than material ones.³⁹

The beginning of the current century has provided many case studies as well. We have witnessed the War on Terror and the construction of its narrative on both sides.⁴⁰ As the UK departs the EU and hastens its demise, and the US nationalistically turns inward and away from its allies, the world witnesses the incipient decline of the Western-led order.⁴¹ The vacuum is filled by two resurgent great powers: Russia rejects the normative hegemony of the West and so acts aggressively to attain former glory, while China looks to re-establish itself as the powerful Middle Kingdom.⁴²

Much of the change we have seen over the last several years has nought to do with changes in material capabilities (although China and Russia have been building and utilizing new-found material strengths). The changes have come from ideational factors: nationalism and populism are on the march across the West as a result of disenfranchisement with elites and globalization.⁴³ Russia's fall from super power status, and China's cultural memory of its "century of humiliation" drive both of these countries.⁴⁴

Many cases will resemble realist situations. For example, relations between the US and China will likely decline, and may

fall into Thucydides' Trap, whereby rising powers and established hegemony come to inevitable conflict.⁴⁵ But this is not necessarily the case; it is just as possible that more peaceable ideas take hold. The breadth of case studies surveyed here supports the claim that war is socially constructed, and so realist conceptions will not necessarily hold.

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Conclusion

Realism and liberalism have long dominated the dialogue in IR, but they are both limited in their power to understand war, since neither pays due attention to the importance of norms, identities and cultures. These factors constitute the actors, states, and structure of the international system, and so are crucial for a comprehensive understanding – even more so when considering what the most important security issues facing Canada are today. This constructivist

approach provides essential nuance when approaching terrorism, international crime, migrant crises, environmental issues, and the myriad other complexities to which we will contribute our best solutions. Utilizing a constructivist approach, the global normative environment will be interesting to study over the coming years as the world faces fundamental changes.



Secretariat Building at United Nations Headquarters.

United Nations Multimedia photo #715035

NOTES

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