"Creating Social Facts:
Alternative Approaches to Autonomous Action and Political Change" *

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Abstract

Theories that emphasize the role of norms, ideas or identities in international politics
have sometimes been criticized (like other theories of international relations) for being
better at explaining stability than elucidating change. However, recent analyses have
offered new approaches that leverage the respective strengths of "constructivism" and
"rationalism" to understand processes of political transformation. A number of these
synthetic approaches prompt researchers to borrow from constructivism to understand
issues that may be logically and temporally prior to the point at which a rationalist
analysis cuts in – in particular, the formation of actor preferences – and then to use
"rationalist" tools to understand how these preferences interact with strategic or structural
environments. Although these approaches have proved useful in some substantive areas,
I argue here that another kind of approach may be at least as productive: analysts could
strive to understand the role of autonomous and even strategic action in producing the
"social facts" that provide the ontological foundation for much constructivist work. To
illustrate the argument, I review recent approaches to systemic change offered by Ruggie,
Finnemore and Sikkink, and others and comment on the promises and potential pitfalls of
these approaches.

Introduction

The problem of explaining processes of political transformation is a challenge common to many substantive areas of international relations research. It has also provided a significant *raison d'être* for theories that emphasize the role of norms, ideas, and inter-subjective understanding, as well as an important source for constructivist critiques of various strands of "realist" and, more broadly, "rationalist" approaches – perhaps most prominently in the work of Ruggie (e.g., 1982, 1993). Nonetheless, constructivist scholarship has also faced important challenges that are tied up specifically with the question of explaining change. If, for example, actors seek to behave according to logics of "appropriateness" rather than as maximizers of independently-defined interests, or if "social epistemologies" help determine the world that political actors are capable of imagining, how do these logics or social epistemologies emerge in the first place? And, especially, how do they change over time? Understanding the sources of changes in norms and ideas, and attempting to demonstrate the subsequent impact of these changes on political trajectories, has therefore become an important component of empirical research in a constructivist vein.[1]

In such empirical research, however, explanations of the sources and effects of changes in norms and ideas have in fact tended to appeal both to the characteristic ontologies and epistemologies of constructivist research, such as the inter-subjective basis of meaning or the relationship of social facts to individual preferences, *and* to strategic and purposive behavior, in ways that one might conventionally characterize as typical of "rationalist" analysis. Indeed, some of the most interesting and productive attempts to theorize change in international politics -- in particular, to theorize broad processes of transformation -- may be those that have allowed for the interplay of "social facts" and autonomous action by states (or domestic or transnational non-state actors). I suggest in this paper that the most successful of these efforts have tended to rely on one of two broad analytic strategies, using several prominent examples of recent research to make the point. On the one hand, Ruggie's (1993) brilliant attempt to explain the origins

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[1] Various lines of research in this broad "vein" will be discussed below. Weber (1993), drawing on Keohane (1988), has underscored the particular explanatory challenge posed by processes of political transformation, and the way in which various analytic approaches have attempted to confront this challenge.

of the state system tends to take changes in the realm of what he calls "social epistemology" as exogenous. Ruggie (1993) then investigates the constitutive as well as causal effects of these social-epistemological changes on the formation of the territorially-disjoint modern state. This sort of approach appears to be isomorphic with increasingly frequent calls for a constructivist/rationalist synthesis, in which scholars could use "constructivist" approaches to investigate the formation of preferences and "rationalist" approaches to ask how those preferences interact with particular structural or strategic environments to produce outcomes.[2] While this is one possibly useful way to understand the interaction between constructivist and rationalist approaches to international relations, one might also learn a great deal by approaching the interplay between autonomous agency and "social facts" from the opposite direction. That is, rather than seeking to understand how the (exogenous) formation of "social facts" structures autonomous choice, a second analytic strategy for theorizing change in international politics takes the role of autonomous, possibly strategic action as exogenous and asks how such action may contribute to the production of new social facts. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) recent work on "norm cycles" arguably represents one use of such an approach to take up the challenge of elucidating change, as does recent research by Posner (N.D.) on ethnic politics in Zambia.

      I review these analytic strategies and some of their empirical exemplars with three goals in mind. The first is simply to point out that although a number of proposals for syntheses of rationalist and constructivist approaches have recently emerged, either as explicit methodological statements and philosophy of science positions (e.g., Fearon and Wendt 2002) or as implicit guides for particular empirical research programs, these syntheses are of different types. Namely, as I will suggest, one can productively (if, of course, never without fuzziness) dichotomize these approaches into those that begin from constructivist assumptions about the formation of preferences and use "rationalist" tools to understand how these preferences interact with political environments to drive outcomes, and those that appeal to strategic and purposive behavior to explain the emergence of "social facts." The second goal of the paper is to provide discussion of some of the characteristic strengths and potential pitfalls of these two approaches,

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[2] See Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner (1998) and Fearon and Wendt (2002).

particularly in the context of empirical research programs in which making and evaluating causal claims is a major objective. My third goal, as yet more incompletely achieved, is to compare the two approaches with a view to suggesting some conditions under which one or another approach might be more illuminating. That is, given an explicitly pragmatic philosophy of science such as the one this paper adopts, when might one or the other of these approaches be more helpful in the production and cumulation of knowledge about the social and political world?

I begin the remainder of the paper by surveying aspects of the regime literature that emerged in international relations in the early 1980's. This is a familiar literature but, as I will suggest, an important one to review, since different analytic approaches to the question of regime *change* prefigured in important ways the apparent paradigmatic schism between "rationalism" and "constructivism" that arose in the international relations literature in the 1990's. A brief genealogy of approaches to regimes and regime change therefore leads naturally to a discussion of several alternative theoretical perspectives on the role of ideas, norms, or identities in international relations and, in particular, the leverage they provide over questions of political transformation. After this review, I turn to the current debate over the relative status of ideas and interests in theories of international relations and relate this debate specifically to the issue of political change. First I discuss the efforts of Goldstein and Keohane (1993) to straddle "rationalist" and "reflectivist" approaches to ideas and beliefs and argue that, although their edited volume contains important insights about sources of political change, their tendency to oppose interests and ideas can also pose problems for an empirical research program geared towards understanding change. Constructivists, on the other hand, rather than debate the relative weight of interests and ideas in explaining observed variance, have largely taken the view that interests *are* ideas – an important step, in my view – but this has not necessarily eased efforts to understand exactly how paying attention to ideas, norms or identities helps to elucidate political change. Indeed, important epistemological difficulties, stemming from the posited ontological inseparability of ideas and interests, have sometimes made causal claims about ideas, norms and identities difficult to defend and alternative explanations for political change almost impossible to rule out. I therefore turn next to two kinds of synthetic approaches that seem to accept the notion

that interests should be treated as ideas but which have also leveraged what might be thought of as characteristically "constructivist" and "rationalist" strengths, in order to provide more empirically convincing characterizations of political transformation. I then conclude, as advertised, by comparing the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches and suggesting some conditions under which one or the other might be more useful.

Regime theory, stability and institutional change

The notion that norms, identities or ideas might explain stability better than they elucidate change in international politics may seem strange on its face. After all, much of contemporary anthropological and sociological thought seems to emphasize precisely the *fluidity* of norms and identities, that is, the extent to which these entities are multiple as well as "socially constructed." Understanding the apparent face validity of the notion that ideas, norms or identities might have a stabilizing effect on the interactions of states or other actors in world politics therefore demands an intellectual history of the way norms, identities and ideas were injected into the post-war study of international relations.

In principle, there are a number of places one could begin this intellectual history (Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* and the work of the English School being one prominent possibility), but I will start with the growth of the literature on international regimes in the early 1980's. Once all but banished from the field by the apparent failures of Wilsonian idealism in the inter-war period and the post-war dominance of realist theory, norms and ideas made their way back to prominence in the context of series of empirical developments in the 1970's that were anomalous from the perspective of the realist paradigms then dominating the field. On the one hand, consistent with realist expectations and particularly its "hegemonic stability theory" variants, the apparent decline of U.S. hegemony was associated with important changes in the international system: as the Soviet Union appeared to achieve nuclear parity, the Bretton Woods fixed-exchange-rate monetary system collapsed and oil-exporting countries organized a successful price cartel, prompting crises of "stagflation" among the oil-importing powers

(see Krasner 1982). On the other hand, the behavior of the international system did not concord in important respects with the predictions of the hegemonic stability theory developed by Kindleberger (1973), Gilpin (1981), Krasner and others, or with other realist arguments. Most prominently, there was no return to the drastic beggar-thy-neighbor trade policies of the interwar period, the monetary system turned out to perform at least reasonably well, and the Americans and the Soviets even enjoyed a period of détente. Assuming that U.S. hegemony had in fact declined -- an idea that Strange (1982,1987) and others, of course, vigorously disputed, and that the subsequent turn in post-Cold War international relations belies -- how could these apparent inconsistencies with realist expectations be explained?

The theory of international regimes, of course, suggested that the answer might lie in how regimes – whether these were conceptualized, as Krasner's (1982) definition had it, as the principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converged in a given issue-area, or in some other way -- could *continue* to condition and constrain the behavior of states, even in the wake of the systemic changes of the 1970's. Thus, as analysts took up the challenge of understanding how, in the absence of central authority and property rights, and in the presence of informational asymmetries and high transaction costs, states could coordinate on mutually beneficial (or even Pareto-optimal) outcomes (Keohane 1984), these scholars tended to emphasize the degree of autonomy, persistence and even the "path dependence" of regimes (Krasner). International regimes, it was suggested, could continue to condition and constrain state behavior even in the context of (perhaps relatively minor) shifts in the distribution of power. In an important sense, then, regimes initially entered the post-war international relations literature, at least in the United States, as a kind of stabilizing variable. That is, the intellectual genesis of regime theory was in this respect rooted in an attempt to explain stability rather than transformation.

Nonetheless, attempts to explain regime *change*, rather than regime construction or persistence, characterized this literature from the beginning. Krasner (1982) drew the distinction between changes *within* regimes (i.e., changes in rules and decisionmaking procedures) and changes *of* regimes (i.e., changes in principles and norms). In the same special issue of *International Organization*, Ruggie (1982) argued that while

international regime change in the 1970's constituted merely "norm-governed" change, the transition from orthodox liberalism to the "embedded liberalism" of the post-war period constituted a "revolutionary" change of principles and norms. Puchala and Hopkins (1982) stressed the role of new knowledge in underwriting "evolutionary change," which (like Ruggie's "norm-governed" change) suggested how rules and procedures might be altered within the context of a given set of principles and norms. Oran Young (1982) built a "social" explanation of the rise, transformation and demise of regimes. Krasner also offered (albeit several years later) a tectonic analogy for institutional change, in which underlying and relatively continuous shifts in the distribution of power built up pressure on existing regimes until the latter finally shifted, like the fault line during an earthquake, in marked and abrupt change.

Arguably, however, discussions of regime change, more than any other analytic issue, seemed to draw attention to characteristic intellectual and analytic schisms among scholars. The debates centered especially on how to conceptualize the interaction between formal rules and decision-making procedures and what Aggarwal (1993) has called the "meta-regimes" (or broad principles and norms) in which they were nested. As Ruggie (1982) had argued, the growth of a post-war Keynesian bargain, in which orthodox liberalism in the international monetary system would be "embedded" in the right of sovereign states to use monetary policy to stimulate domestic demand, could not be understood without reference to changes in the underlying principles, norms and world views of elites who made policy. Ruggie (1982), however, also characteristically stressed the role of broader intersubjective understandings in giving meaning to social action – for example, in making possible the recognition of particular acts as deviations from underlying regime principles or norms. Along these lines, Kratchowil and Ruggie (1986) suggested that rules could be either "regulative" or "constitutive" and that, crucially, understanding change in the former demanded an understanding of sources of change in the latter. That is, changes in constitutive rules were logically and temporally prior to changes in regulative rules. Clearly, these arguments about international governance anticipated later "reflectivist" or "constructivist" approaches to systemic change, not just Ruggie's (1993) work on the formation of the state system and the reciprocal notion of sovereignty, but also the broader ontological posture of much

constructivist work, including Wendt's (1999) effort to import structuration theory from sociology. As in the early critiques by Kratchowil and Ruggie and others of rationalist regime theory, a key issue in this later literature has centered on whether rationalism's analytic separation of ideas (or beliefs) from interests is in fact an "accurate" depiction of the world, and also the related epistemological issue of whether separating preferences and beliefs is a necessary condition for analytic tractability.

Of course, disagreements over the respective roles of "regulative" and "constitutive" rules, and the causal claims and standards of evidence that dealing with each of these might involve, were initially somewhat muted relative to other concerns in the regime literature. Realists involved in this debate (Strange 1982, for example) remained suspicious of the very notion that regimes could meaningfully constrain or condition state behavior. According to realists, shifts in the underlying distribution of power should result in attendant (and nearly frictionless) shifts in international regimes. It was for this reason, perhaps, that leading liberal regime theorists tended to be preoccupied with showing that even granting realist assumptions about the egoistic motivations of unitary states, states might nonetheless cooperate in the formation of international institutions (Keohane 1984). The primary paradigmatic split in the field during this period was therefore characterized as that between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Nonetheless, debates about the relationship between "regulative" and "constitutive" rules in processes of change and transformation were part of the regime literature all along, and they anticipated the emergence of major alternative theoretical approaches to the role of norms, identities and ideas in the 1990's.

Interests <u>and</u> ideas: norms, unexplained variance, and political change

Many recent theories of international politics that have emphasized the role of norms, ideas or identities have implicitly or explicitly engaged differences between what Keohane (1988) described as "rationalist" and "reflectivist" approaches.[3] In their edited volume on ideas and foreign policy, for example, Goldstein and Keohane (1993) sought

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[3] As a working definition, "reflectivist" approaches are isomorphic with what I take to characterize "constructivist" research.

to find a point somewhere between these traditions. Their edited volume is conceived as a challenge to *both* rationalist and reflectivist approaches, the former for its failure to recognize or test the potential causal import of ideas and the latter for its inability to propose falsifiable propositions and thereby meet the standards of empirical social science. Goldstein and Keohane (1993) consider three types of ideas, which they define as "beliefs held by individuals:" (1) *world views* (i.e., non-normative, broad thought patterns such as "religion" or the idea of the Westphalian state system) (2) *principled beliefs,* and (3) *causal beliefs.* While "world views" perhaps come closest to the constructivist focus on the inter-subjective basis of preferences, the spirit of Goldstein and Keohane's project is captured most clearly in the null hypothesis against which they argue: cross-sectional or inter-temporal variation in foreign policy can be entirely accounted for by changes in factors *other* than ideas. In its essence, then, the project opposes ideas and interests, asks about their relative causal weight, and investigates the degree to which interests alone can explain variance in outcomes.

Many of the contributions to Goldstein and Keohane's edited volume are useful in identifying ideational and normative sources of political change. Garrett and Weingast's (1993) contribution, although arguably functionalist in its attempt to explain the *existence* of international institutions in terms of their ability to provide gains from cooperation, is nonetheless illuminating in describing the process by which an ideational focal point may have been "constructed" in the process of the formation of the European Union's internal market. Interestingly, this process of constructing a focal point on which actors' expectations could converge is both logically and temporally prior to the stylized interaction that would lead to a Pareto-improving equilibrium in Garrett and Weingast's implicit game model. Like some recent game-theoretic approaches in economics that emphasize the role of culture (e.g., Kreps), the process of belief construction precedes the point at which Garrett and Weingast use a rationalist analysis to analyze outcomes. Thus this contribution arguably provides one example of an increasingly familiar rationalist/constructivist synthesis, in which the construction of social facts precedes an analysis of the strategic interactions these facts help to structure.[4] The final "causal

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[4] Less useful for understanding change are the contributions to the Goldstein and Keohane volume that focus on the "institutionalization" of ideas, since such arguments explicitly analyze the autonomy and

pathway" considered in the edited volume, the role of ideas as "road maps," also seems helpful in understanding the particular character of political change, if not its ultimate sources: Ikenberry (1993), for example, argues (following Ruggie's focus on the *content* as well as the *form* of hegemonic stability) that "embedded liberalism" depended on the particular set of ideas held by an elite group of policy-makers at a critical time.

Despite these important contributions, the approach adopted by the Goldstein and Keohane volume as a whole ultimately seems to have difficulty sorting out the relative weight of ideas versus interests in the particular episodes of international relations they consider. The editors, who themselves recognize the problem, suggest its source lies in the ostensible bugaboo of using case studies to do variable-oriented research: too many variables chasing too few cases leads to an inability to identify, in the sense of a statistical model, the causal parameters of interest. However, I would suggest instead that the problem might lie first in the inherent difficulty of separating ideas from interests, both as a theoretical and an empirical matter, or even in the possible methodological use to which such a separation could be put. How, in the first place, can one possibly observe any interest (or "preference") held by a social actor and say that it is not in some sense also an "idea?" And treating "ideas" put forth by (quite plausibly strategic) actors in world politics as anything other than interests obviously begs equally difficult issues. Adding more cases for analysis would therefore hardly seem to solve the identification problem; it would instead raise difficult if not impossible measurement validity issues involved in treating ideas as a causal "variable" (i.e., are we really measuring the same "idea" across cases, say in different cross-national contexts?).

On the most fundamental level, then, the biggest difficulty posed by the Goldstein and Keohane volume relates to the challenge of ruling out alternative explanations. This, of course, is a difficulty that has beset even the most influential of the arguments that have made causal claims for ideas and opposed these ideas to "interests." Consider Ruggie's earlier argument about "embedded liberalism." Although Ruggie locates the source of embedded liberalism in the revolutionary transformation of the principles and

stability of ideas, once embedded in institutions: Krasner's (1993) "Westphalia and all that," for example, argues that once the idea of territorial state sovereignty was formalized in the Westphalian peace, it had an independent impact on the behavior of states (much as Goldstein has argued that contemporary variation in US trade policy does not exactly mirror the current economic positions and political resources of major actors).

rules by which elites made policy, it seems at least as possible that the causal action really relates to democratization and the extension of mass suffrage at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to the Pax Brittanica of the nineteenth century, when orthodox liberalism dominated the international monetary scene, the twentieth century witnessed the rise of newly-enfranchised mass actors who demanded monetary policies to stimulate employment during the inter-war Depression. The move to "embedded liberalism" in the post-war period is therefore quite compatible with an explanation focused on "interest-based" changes in domestic politics, as Eichengreen (1998) has in fact argued. Ruggie (1982) himself alludes to this point, but it is quite difficult to dispel this alternative explanation – and so the explanation is simply set aside.

These issues suggest some of the reasons why causal claims about the role of ideas, norms and identities have sometimes been discounted in the field: it has often been quite difficult to show that ideas have an impact that is "independent" of interests. One alternative possibility is to focus on ideas, norms or identities as "constitutive" forces in world politics. This is not to suggest that constitutive claims are necessarily non-causal, but they seem to get at causation through a different route. The best way to begin to explore such issues is to look at work that has focused, not on interests *and* ideas, but on interests *as* ideas (and thus *a priori* rules out the kind of questions with which Goldstein and Keohane engage, or at least reframes them in interesting ways). I will now turn to several of these attempts, which have been more closely identified with constructivism than with rationalism – but which, as I will argue, also appeal in important ways to the role of autonomous action in constructing social facts.

Interests <u>as</u> ideas: constructivism, constitutive rules and "social facts"

Although many elements typify the body of international relations research loosely grouped together under the rubric of "constructivism," none is probably as fundamental as the basic refusal to separate interests and ideas, on either ontological or epistemological grounds (or both). This refusal is usually rooted, in one way or another, in the tradition of analyzing "social facts" that stems from both French (Durkheimian)

and German (Weberian) nineteenth-century sociology. As Ruggie (1998) has stressed in his "What Makes the World Hang Together" article, social facts arise from the incessant way in which humans seem to endow actions with meaning: when one actor acts, something is <u>understood</u> by others to have transpired. This understanding moreover takes shape within or is mediated by a particular symbolic system. If Weberian "webs of signification" or Durkheimian "collective representations" around some issue-area become so dense or so reified that they are acknowledged by all relevant actors, they can become "social facts."[5]

While the intersubjective and social basis of human interpretation of the meaning of action might seem on some level undeniable, many constructivists want to insist on a further ontological point, which is the "mutually constitutive" nature of subject and object (or agent and structure). Wendt's (1999) path-breaking theory of international politics, for example, maintains that structure (or "culture") is, in fact, constitutive of agents, but seeks a synthesis between holist and individualist views such that agent and structure are "co-determined." The philosophical basis of this approach is compelling: it takes on issues that are akin to the question Rousseau raised in his second *Discours* about whether language proceeds consciousness or vice versa. (How can we think without using language? But how can we speak without thinking?) Nonetheless, in trying to attempt pragmatic explanations of actual instances of change in international politics, the fact that Rousseau's dilemma is famous does not lessen the awkward fact that we are left twisting on its horns.

In practice, I believe that many successful attempts at empirical research from a constructivist perspective (like successful research from a "rationalist" perspective) leave something exogenous to the theory at hand. In other words, rather than seeing everything (including structure and agency) as endogenous to interaction, at least on epistemological grounds analysts do take some piece of an empirical puzzle and use it to explain some other piece of the puzzle. This is even true of efforts to explain fundamental political

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[5] Of course, Durkheim provided the leading early discussion of social facts. In his *The Rules of Sociological Method,* Durkheim (1982 [1895]: 51-53) offers the following definition, among others: social facts "consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him…What constitutes social facts are the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively."

change. Some of the most interesting recent work in this vein has sought to understand the interplay between autonomous action and social facts in provoking transformations in international politics.

Take, for example, Ruggie's (1993) effort to locate the sources of the constitution of modern sovereignty in the figure of the territorially-disjoint state. Ruggie's work provides a good opportunity to contrast a constructivist approach with a paradigmatic rationalist one, and in particular with paradigmatic neorealism, for it is precisely the Waltzian image of state system populated by functionally undifferentiated states that he takes on. As Ruggie points out, realist (and, for that matter, liberal) attempts to imagine the possibility for fundamental transformation of the state system may be impoverished by the epistemological "black-boxing" of the process of formation of the state system, a process that is both logically and temporally prior to the international system of states that Waltz and other neorealists assumed.

Instead, Ruggie (1993) focuses on the "constitutive rules" by which territorial exclusivity was achieved at the end of the feudal era and the beginning of the early modern period in Europe. Ruggie argues that a new social consensus that emerged around the legitimate internal authority of the modern state was actually rooted, at least in part, in changes in social epistemology. The emergence of bourgeois architecture emphasizing the divisions between public and private spheres, the growth of single-point perspective drawing, the rise of the "I-you" form of language: all of these changes in social epistemology represented mental equipment on which people could draw to imagine new forms of political community. These social-epistemological changes were therefore crucial for the imagining of modern states as territorially-disjoint entities. Ruggie provides a fascinating and quite convincing account of how the emerging social fact of territorially-defined sovereignty was projected externally into the international arena in a series of "constitutive," "configurative" and "positional" wars. Only the latter, of course, correspond to the type of wars described by Gilpin, in his realist theory of structural transformation through hegemonic war. Thus, Ruggie provides a theoretical account that actually subsumes realist visions and makes claims that are simultaneously constitutive and causal.

However, it is important to note that the ultimate source of this change in mental equipment or social epistemology is essentially unaddressed by Ruggie. This is not to fault his approach; indeed, Ruggie simply points to patterns or developments in one realm to explain changes in another, a time-honored analytic strategy since every theory must start somewhere (lest the problem of infinite explanatory regress overtake us, so we point to "Cleopatra's nose" as the source of historical change or, like Jared Diamond, tell a History of Everything). However, it may be telling that even this comprehensive approach to explaining fundamental systemic change, which offers both causal and constitutive claims, depends on making some elements of the analysis exogenous. Less than the focus on "mutually-constitutive" subject and object might lead us to believe, Ruggie's success in explaining a real-world instance of change arguably depends on this analytic move. In this sense, the explanatory strategy Ruggie adopts may actually be more isomorphic than it first appears with the "boxes-within-boxes" approach proposed by a number of rationalist analyses.[6]

The key difference between Ruggie's contribution and other "boxes within boxes" approaches to explanation may therefore lie in the emphasis he places on social epistemology and in particular the importance of social facts. In this sense, however, he may adopt an approach to making both constitutive and causal claims that broadly agrees with recent calls for a rationalist/constructivist synthesis along the following lines: as scholars of international relations, we should use constructivist approaches to study where preferences come from, and rationalist approaches to study outcomes as those preferences interact with particular structural and strategic environments. Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner (1998), for instance, suggest such a division of intellectual labor; Fearon and Wendt (2002) also make roughly analogous suggestions in their skeptical commentary on the rationalism/constructivism divide. Wendt (1999) concedes in places that rationalists and constructivists may ask different questions: rationalists are interested in how incentives posed by the political environment affect the strategic calculus of actors maximizing certain interests or preferences, while constructivists explore where incentives and interests come from.

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[6] See, for example, Lake and Powell (1999) on strategic choice, Putnam (1988) on two-level games or even Moravcsik's (1997) liberal theory of international politics).

For many practical research questions, such an approach is indeed both appropriate and useful. For example, Jeffrey Legro (1996), in his study of the use of different types of combat in World War II, argues that (exogenous) changes in organizational culture influence bureaucratic priorities and that these priorities in turn shape national preferences, a process he terms the "international cooperation two-step." Even the "world polity theory" associated with John Meyer and others, who have argued that initially very different polities have converged on isomorphic conceptions of the state or of bureaucratic and private organizations, remains relatively circumspect about the ultimate sources of world culture except to suggest that it originates from the modern Western tradition (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer et. al. 1975, 1997). The same argument might also be made with respect to the institutional isomorphism literature in sociology (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell 1983), which arguably takes as exogenous to the theory certain kinds of pressures for change, originating in changes in social epistemology, and then asks how the convergence of institutional forms reflects the pressures thereby engendered.

Nonetheless, I would like to argue that this analytic "two-step" is not the only, nor necessarily always the most useful, approach to understanding the interplay between social facts and autonomous (possibly strategic) action: one should not concede on *a priori* grounds that causality (or, perhaps more appropriately, constitution) cannot flow from autonomous action to social facts. Indeed, a range of recent research interestingly suggests precisely the role that such autonomous action can have on constructing social facts, and it has even shown with some success the impact that such processes can have on influencing change in international politics. One excellent example is the compelling article by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) in the fiftieth anniversary issue of *International Organization;* another is recent research by Posner (N.D.) on ethnic politics in Zambia. I will next turn to this research, in order to consider what it might tell us about other possible complementarities between rationalist and constructivist approaches.

Towards an alternative synthesis: instrumental action and social facts

Although constructivist discussions of the role of social facts and constituted identities in informing desire and preferences are well-taken (as Wendt 1999 suggests, we want what we want because of how we think about it), it is somewhat ironic that many constructivist approaches seem not to have focused sufficient attention on the contested nature of many social facts. Even supposing, as the sociological institutionalists have it, that actors behave in conformity with "logics of appropriateness" rather than seeking to maximize independently-defined individual preferences, what is "appropriate" is itself often challenged. As Steve Weber (1997) points out, reflectivist approaches often offer no basis for predicting who might win when different knowledge claims compete. Weber himself develops a process-oriented approach to understanding institutional change that takes both rationalist and reflectivist approaches to task: the former for the explicitly static equilibrium concepts on which they rely, the latter for failing to help us understand how anything other than shared, stable understandings or "logics of appropriateness" might exist.

Assuming we inhabit the inter-subjectively structured world posited by constructivists, one possible way to go about thinking about the struggle among knowledge claims is to say that social and political contexts contain contested understandings as well as stable and shared ones. The next step might be to investigate the processes by which stable and shared understandings can become contested, and, in contrast, the processes by which contested understandings become stable and shared. Keck and Sikkink (1998), for example, in their work on transnational advocacy networks, suggest that what networks of principled activists do is to work in particular strategic and instrumental ways, within a universe of generally stable and shared understandings, to contest and reshape certain of these understandings. Among other examples, Keck and Sikkink (1998: 67) cite the campaign against female genital circumcision in Africa, which according to Keck and Sikkink only reached global proportions once activists replaced the term "circumcision" with "mutilation," a rhetorical move that raised the salience of the issue for Western audiences by implying a stronger linkage with male castration and reframing the issue as one of violence against women.

Where do these transnational networks of principled activists come from? Why do they contest certain stable understandings and not others? In Keck and Sikkink's (1998) view, advocacy networks depend on the principled action of committed *individuals*, who usually have experienced some conversion to an alternative understanding that leads them to contest the "naturalness" of existing arrangements. One might say that unmasking social facts (that is, Weberian "webs of signification" or Durkheimian "collective representations") as "socially constructed" and therefore not at all "natural" becomes the *raison d'être* and the main instrumental goal of principled networked activists, who try to make social facts seem more contingent and historical in the eyes of a target audience and therefore less like the mandates of some natural law. When something as basic as the actor's identity or even interests can be seen as the product of historically-contingent forces (whether the actor in question is an individual or a state), we can understand how otherwise tautological statements like "social identity is socially constructed" gain a certain subversive appeal.[7]

However, so far this discussion describes a particular approach to understanding what normative change might consist of, and who the key actors involved in such change might be, but does not specify a complete theory of how such change might actually take place. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) insightful article provides some compelling seeds for such a theory. The authors focus on a three-stage "life cycle" of norms and focus in particular on the adoption by states of human rights protocols and other normative commitments. First is the stage of "norm emergence," when a few political entrepreneurs, such as those populating Keck and Sikkink's transnational advocacy networks, might experience personal, transformative normative change and then begin to attempt to persuade both states and international society of the merits of normative change. At some point in some such efforts, a "tipping point" may be reached, when a critical mass of states have accepted the norm in question. The second stage is therefore characterized by a "norm cascade," in which many follower states may take up the norm. Crucially, the behavioral motives of conformity or fear of sanction that characterize action in this stage may not be the same as those that characterized the action of committed norm entrepreneurs during the first stage of the norm life cycle. The final

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[7] Fearon (1999), in his discussion of identity, makes a similar point.

stage of this cycle is one of "norm internalization," when the norm becomes a regularized part of social interaction and thus, perhaps, a part of the "logic of appropriateness" or the universe of shared and stable expectations according to which political actors behave.

Finnemore and Sikkink's work therefore constructs a provocative theory of international change that inverts the more characteristic logic of rationalist/constructivist syntheses, by suggesting how intentional and even strategic action may be involved in the construction of social facts. It is true that exactly how "tipping points" are reached, and why they are reached in some cases and not in others, seems incompletely explained. Yet what is notable is that here is a theory that can simultaneously explain both stability *and* change in norms: while the first two stages of Finnemore and Sikkink's norm "life cycle" are focused on emergence and diffusion of new norms (change), the final stage perhaps corresponds to the "logic of appropriateness" described by sociological institutionalists (and, perforce, to stability). In their agent-based approach to the construction of social facts, Finnemore and Sikkink therefore avoid a prominent pitfall of constructivist approaches overly focused on the determinative elements of structure.

The rationalist/constructivist synthesis proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink seems both sensible and plausible on its face, and an illuminating way to study at least some of the areas of concern to international relations specialists. It must be said that empirically investigating these claims, and ruling out alternative hypotheses, here as elsewhere has proven an important challenge. Nonetheless, the agent-based approach to the construction of social facts that is typified by Finnemore and Sikkink's approach is quite helpful in providing a useful alternate synthesis of rationalist and constructivist concerns, one that starts and ends up at different places because it specifically seeks to explain changes in social facts over time. Adler (1997) has also urged constructivists to focus more on how individual agents, through strategic action, "socially construct" various social constructs in the first place (a statement that would seem completely tautological were it not, perhaps, for the history of the debates in which it is embedded). What areas of substantive concern might such efforts entail? One obvious candidate, on which scholars have already done much work, is the study of ethnic identity and ethnic conflict, whether within states or across borders. For example, much of the existing literature on ethnic identity emphasizes the endogeneity of ethnicity to social and political processes

and decisions.[8] Here the social fact itself elicits agent-based explanations; the problem is to show how the construction of the social fact matters for subsequent political outcomes.

Posner's (N.D.) recent, illuminating analysis of ethnic politics in Zambia provides a compelling model for a synthetic approach to identity.[9]   Posner asks the question, what determines the form of identity that becomes politically mobilized? Recognizing that, as social constructivists argue, identities are multiple, Posner suggests that political institutions have an important role in causing particular identities to become politically salient. In Zambia, the question is why political competition has sometimes revolved around "tribal" identities while at other times around linguistic groupings. Posner's answer is that when the one-party state of Kenneth Kaunda restricted political entry at the national level and forced political competition down to the local level, political entrepreneurs could best assemble "minimum winning coalitions" at the local level by appealing to tribal groups. On the other hand, in the immediate post-independence period as well as after the return to multi-party democracy during the 1990's, the ability of rival politicians to form national political coalitions meant that mobilizing around one of Zambia's four major language groups, rather than around one of Zambia's 72 tribal groups,[10] proved most advantageous to political entrepreneurs.

Posner's overall analytic strategy is to divide the task of explanation into two stages: first, why did particular identities – namely, tribal and linguistic ones – emerge as the two major potential bases for political mobilization in Zambia in the first place? Second, once the "identity repertoires" of individuals around which political competition *might* be mobilized have been defined, what explains why one or another identity in fact becomes politically salient? Posner says that he adopts a "historical institutional" approach to answering the first question and a "rationalist" approach to answering the second. In this sense, his approach clearly fits within the first general methodological

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[8] This seems especially true of the literature on sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps because of the recognized role of European colonialism in constructing ethnic identities, but it is also true more generally, for example in the literature on the formation of the national citizen-subject in early modern France.

[9] Although Posner's (N.D.) work is perhaps engaged more with the comparative politics literature than the international relations field, I think it carries illuminating lessons for both fields, and certainly overlaps with the international relations literature on ethnic conflict.

[10] In fact, as Posner explains, the number of tribal groups in Zambia probably differs from 72, yet because this number has been promulgated in official government statistics and in the popular media, the datum is ubiquitously cited by Zambians and Zambianists alike.

rubric outlined above: that is, he first investigates the constitutive forces that account for a particular constellation of social facts, and then inquires as to how regulative rules work to provide the incentives that structure political life and drive political outcomes. Yet as becomes clear in his chapter on the emergence of tribal identities in colonial Northern Rhodesia (which became Zambia after independence), the task of constitutive explanation itself appeals to purposive, strategic political action. British colonial administration, under the auspices of Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company, sought to assure a sufficient supply of labor for the copper mines without engendering permanent rural-urban migration and the ensuing problems this might create. In a myriad of ways, colonial officials thus sought to cultivate the ties between migrating workers and their tribes and tribal chiefs, helping to ensure that retirees from the mines would return to their home villages.[11]

While a full description of Posner's convincing evidence would take us too far astray here, the major point is that this is an explanation that takes constitutive rules as a dependent variable to be explained and appeals to the role of purposive actors in structuring what became social facts. It moreover has a clear role for power asymmetries in its explanation of the outcome, answering to some extent Steve Weber's point that reflectivist approaches sometimes offer no basis for predicting who might win when knowledge claims compete. To do so, the argument appeals to the key role of *incentives* in structuring the identities around which social and political conflict or collaboration might coalesce. In colonial Northern Rhodesia, the British provided a set of incentives (negative as well as positive) that caused migrating miners to invest in their relations with tribal chiefs and tribal relations in their home village, for example by leading them to anticipate their need to return home after retirement from the mines. These incentives to *invest* in particular identity-ties led such identities to become reified over time, thereby constituting the historically-determined set of identity repertoires upon which later (post-independence) attempts at political mobilization along ethnic lines could draw.

Of course, appealing to incentives to explain the emergence of a social fact such as ethnic identity seems to take us back, epistemologically and also ontologically, to a

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[11] The endogeneity of ethnic identity in much of colonized and post-colonial Africa to colonial policy is, of course, a well-explored and well-documented theme more generally.

world in which interests are preordained, since every theory that appeals to "incentives" must slip in a theory of motivation and behavior as well – in short, a theory of preferences. And indeed, it does do this: it appeals to individual interests that may from one perspective seem quite "thin" in order to explain the emergence of a social fact, that is, a set of expectations about the make-up of social groups that is in the end quite "social," that is, following Durkheim, external to the individual. The approach proceeds by positing that social actors want certain things (in Posner's case, they want a supply of regionally-distributed public goods that will be more readily supplied by politicians who are their co-ethnics rather than those from an out-group), and this presumption of interest may get us back to the unresolved and important questions about why actors want what they want (Wendt 1992, 1999).

The advantage, however, is that this approach allows for a compelling explanation of why some identities come to "matter" politically whereas others don't, and the focus on incentives can also help explain how the identities that matter come to change over time. As mentioned above, much of the relevant anthropological and sociological literature has recently stressed precisely the fluidity and malleability of identities and interests and rejects the older cultural anthropology's "essentialist" approach to identity and ethnicity. Yet since practically anything in which a person takes a special pride (see Fearon 1999), and which serves as a characteristic that can demarcate one set of people from another, could potentially serve as an identity that could become the basis of a socially or politically salient cleavage, the real challenge is to explain why one set of characteristics becomes predominant whereas another does not. Appealing to incentives provides a way to do this that both integrates power considerations (including the full panoply of sources of power, such as money, one's grip on the state, the ability to frame issues, agenda-setting power, first-mover advantages, etc) *and* provides a way to explain how such incentives to cultivate one or another identity might change over time. In the case of ethnicity, as Fearon (1999), Fearon and Laitin (2000) and a number of other analysts have recently commented, focusing on the endogeneity of ethnicity to strategic or instrumental action helps to lead away from "primordialist" explanations, such as explications of ethnic violence in the former Yugoslavia that center on the "ancient" mutual hatred of Serbs and Croats yet fail to explain how, in the immediate run-up to

mass violence in the post-Tito Balkans, members of these groups could be living side-by-side, even happily intermarried.

A pragmatic approach to the epistemology of ideas, interests and political change

The philosophy of science position taken in this paper is an explicitly pragmatic one. Resolving the question of the ontological priority of interests versus ideas is as elusive to current scholars as it has been to past generations. Happily, however, this question need not be sorted out for useful and cumulative social science to take place. Indeed, as scholars such as Fearon and Wendt (2002) have recently stressed, the apparent paradigmatic schism between "rationalism" and "constructivism" sometimes seems misplaced, and these approaches may diverge not so much on ontological as on epistemological grounds. A skeptical view of this schism, such as that offered by Fearon and Wendt (2002), suggests a range of possible syntheses between characteristically rationalist or constructivist approaches.

On epistemological grounds, however, there may be times when it may be more compelling to deploy paradigmatically "constructivist" approaches to the formation of preferences and then apply a "rationalist" analysis to the interaction of those preferences with particular institutional or strategic settings; at other times, it may be more illuminating to ask about the role of purposive and perhaps strategic behavior in constructing social facts. An important question for further theoretical development therefore concerns the "type(s)" of synthesis between rationalism and constructivism, and the conditions under which one or another "type" might be more useful.

A starting point is to stress the two approaches outlined above have characteristic strengths and weaknesses. If an approach that starts from the presumption of autonomous preferences can seem thin with respect to the ultimate ontological bases of these preferences, an approach beginning with the stipulation of social facts often leaves unexplained the ultimate sources of these facts. When do power differentials matter for the construction of shared ideas, norms, and inter-subjective understanding? How do constructivist approaches account for the emergence of particular norms or ideas? In practice, attempts to answer such questions often appeal to precisely the kind of

autonomous action that has provided the starting point for other forms of rationalist analyis.

One critique that comes to mind, of course, is that the two broad approaches outlined in this paper seek to explain different kinds of outcomes: one takes social facts as "independent variables" and seeks to explain ensuing political outcomes, while another seeks to explain the appearance and transformation of social facts themselves. While this construction of the project has some validity, the claim I want to make is somewhat stronger than this. It is not just that different questions demand different approaches, but also that both approaches outlined in this paper will leave something exogenous to the theory at hand. Thus, while it may be, to paraphrase Geertz, turtles all the way down, the "boxes-within-boxes" approach to explanation that has more often been seen to characterize various forms of rationalist analysis is just as much at work with respect to many leading attempts at empirical research in a constructivist vein.

Conclusion

Paradigmatic "rationalist" and "constructivist" theories both exhibit tremendous variation in the degree to which they can explain change. For example, while Waltz's neorealist theory of international politics is largely geared towards explaining stability, Gilpin's theory of hegemonic wars is explicitly a theory of change. On some level, this may reflect the position various analysts take on basic questions of agency versus structure in world politics, and this is no less true for constructivist than for rationalist arguments. Wendt (1999), like Waltz, sometimes seems to focus on explaining stability at the expense of large-scale transformation, a tendency that may stem in interesting ways from the roots of structuration theory. Finnemore and Sikkink and other "agentive" constructivists, on the other hand, share with Gilpin a stronger focus on issues of political transformation, and indeed their basically agentive approaches may facilitate analyses of change. Both rationalist and constructivist approaches tend to share a common challenge, namely, the difficult task of providing satisfactory explanations for broad political transformation.

Yet constructivist approaches also have unique difficulties in explaining why ideas or norms may have an impact on political change that is "independent" of interests. Here I have suggested that the most productive approach may be to treat interests <u>as</u> ideas; but then to leverage both the strengths of rationalism and constructivism to interrogate the relationship between autonomous action and social facts. At least two broad strategies are available to analysts interested in this relationship – one asks about the role of social facts in constructing autonomous action and the role of autonomous action in constructing social facts. Either of these attempts at "rationalist/constructivist" syntheses carries characteristic strengths and weakness, yet each can provide scholars with important insights into processes of change in world politics.

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