

Is Everything Socially Constructed?: A Guide to Why it Matters For International Relations

Joseph O'Mahoney

University of Reading

Abstract:

Despite the prominence of constructivism as a paradigm in International Relations, many students and scholars remain unclear about one of its central claims: that all of social reality is socially constructed. This paper explains what that claim means, defends it against common objections, and identifies four major implications it has for the study of international politics. Drawing on Searle's distinction between brute facts and institutional facts, the paper argues that the basic features of international politics, like states, sovereignty, interests, norms, and institutions, exist because humans collectively act as if they exist, and have their effects through the meanings humans attach to them. From this it follows that: political concepts lack fixed essences and must be studied as sites of contestation; radical social change is endemic rather than exceptional; legitimation is a central mechanism of political power; and norms and rules are everpresent features of international politics. Each implication is illustrated with empirical examples drawn from recent scholarship. The paper is intended as an accessible introduction to social construction in international relations.

Introduction

Often, students of international politics are introduced to the subject by being presented with several different theories or paradigms. These include realism (and perhaps subtypes like defensive realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism), liberalism, institutionalism, feminism, and others. One type of theory that I find gets consistently misunderstood or underappreciated is constructivism. It is possible that this is because there is no accessible introduction to the fundamental concepts. Many accounts of constructivism are written for constructivists or other theorists of international relations. This means that they assume that the reader already has a background knowledge of what they are talking about and so do not explain fundamental concepts. In this paper, I will restate the basic background understandings, how they fit together, and why they are important. In so doing, I hope to bring you the illumination of a constructivist approach, so that you can use it yourself to understand and explain international politics.

A basic starting point for thinking about international relations is that it is socially constructed. But what does this mean? It is not obvious from the literal meaning of the words. In order to both tell and show you what it means, this paper will first lay out some claims about social reality and describe some examples of things being socially constructed. Then, to demonstrate that this is a worthwhile use of your time, the paper will identify and describe four ways that thinking about international politics as socially constructed helps us understand it. Throughout, the paper responds to potential objections and uses examples, particularly from recent empirical scholarship but also from everyday life. Using a lot of varied examples is especially important when dealing with what we might call “threshold concepts”, those which open up new or transformed ways of thinking or of viewing the subject matter. Threshold concepts are often troublesome knowledge” (Cousin 2006). They are difficult to understand because they go against a common-sense or intuitive understanding. Reversing an intuitive understanding is hard. Social construction was a threshold concept for me; at first it was hard for me to understand not just what social construction meant but also how to use the idea of social construction to explain the world of international politics. Understanding threshold concepts is easier if you see how the concept plays out in different contexts.

The distinction between “brute facts” and “institutional facts”.

Human social reality is a different sort of thing from other parts of the natural world. So, it is a fact that “Earth is 93 million miles from the Sun” (Searle 2010: 10) or that Tritium is an isotope of Hydrogen with two extra neutrons in the nucleus. These are brute facts. If humans did not exist, or if all humans somehow forgot about Tritium, these facts would still be true. But there are also what Searle calls institutional facts. These are facts about human institutions, like “Barack Obama is President of the United States” (Searle 2010: 8). Is this true? Yes, (or it was in 2010). What about saying of a twenty dollar bill “this piece of paper is worth \$20”? This is also true. But are they true

in the same way as brute facts are true? Searle points out that the President, a \$20 bill, a licensed driver, etc. perform certain functions. So, for example, the President can order a nuclear strike (but cannot initiate legislation), a \$20 bill can be exchanged for goods and services (but only certain ones and not in France), and a licensed driver can drive a car (but not a truck without an additional license). But these functions are not performed in virtue of their physical structure, unlike Earth orbiting the sun, or Tritium undergoing fusion during a thermonuclear explosion. So how do these people or objects perform their functions? Searle argues that they can do these things because they have a collectively recognized status that they can perform these functions. That is, basically, that humans *act as if* objects have powers. A \$20 bill has the power to buy a book or a burrito because people *act as if* it has value. A president, or a police officer, or a professor, can tell you what to do, only because people *act as if* they have authority. And things like Starbucks, or George Washington University, or the United Kingdom, only exist in the sense that people *act as if* they exist.

If this is true, then how do these things get created? Searle argues that, essentially, humans talk these things into existence. They say “this thing exists” and other humans then act as if that is true. To get an example of how this works, think of a marriage ceremony. You have the bride, the groom, and the officiant (priest, justice of the peace, etc). In the ceremony, the marriage is created by the officiant saying something like, “by the power vested in me by the state of Connecticut, *I hereby pronounce* you wife and husband”. Then, both the wife and husband, as well as other humans act as if the two are married.¹ This is a famous example of creating social reality by saying something in a particular way. Most of the time no one says it quite so obviously, and in today’s world people often write it down rather than say it.² But this type of statement creates, or constructs, the social world.

Let’s think about how this works with another example. Imagine you are a child and you and some friends go to a park to play a game. You make up the rules, such as one person is “it” and must try to “tag” others by touching them, but not if they are touching the wall, which is a “base”. In what sense do these rules exist? They exist only if you and your friends *act as if* they exist. Imagine if one day a friend says, “the wall is not the base, the tree is the base” and then everyone acts as if the tree is now the base. This process is the same type of process that creates and makes up all of human social reality. It can sound unbelievable at first. Your job or school, where you go shopping, who your family members are, your country, almost everything that you think is real is real in the same way that a child’s game of made-up tag is real. This is not to say that they are not real. They are real. But they are real in this particular way.

¹ That is, according to their understanding of what being married means.

² Searle calls this type of statement a Status Function Declaration and he also makes the point that existing sets of rules can make status function declarations without needing a particular person to actually do it. So, for example, if the UK government changes the rules about the rights of a British National (Overseas) passport holder, say by putting a text document on their website, this effectively makes a status function declaration for every BNO passport holder.

Do you believe it? An interesting thought experiment I first heard from Patrick Jackson (Jackson 2008; Jackson and Jones 2011: 112) involves the university you are currently attending (or work for). This building, the one you are sitting in, is part of, say, the George Washington University. But imagine that GWU sold it tomorrow to American University. Then the building would not be part of GWU anymore. Nothing physically has changed. But now professors, students, cleaners, IT workers, will all act as if the building is not part of GWU. Admin won't schedule classes there, GWU cleaners won't clean it, and so on. Then imagine that tomorrow everyone wakes up and has forgotten about GWU. Completely forgotten. All the buildings would still be there. All the people would still be walking around. But the University would no longer exist. And this is because there would be no humans who *act as if* it exists.

This point is also true of international politics. As Fearon and Wendt point out, the basic features of international politics exist in that people act as if they exist:

“What is it about Costa Rica that enables it to participate as an equal in the UN? The recognition by other states of its sovereignty as a right. What is it that, for a time in the early 1990s, made Iraq a 'rogue' state with which most other states refused to have contact, while in the past its aggressiveness might have been evaluated differently? Shared understandings that determine the boundaries of acceptable foreign policy practice.” (Fearon and Wendt 2002: 63)

Objection!: Not everything is socially constructed. What if you get shot by a bullet from a gun? You still die! The bullet isn't socially constructed, is it?

No, the bullet isn't socially constructed; it is a physical object with some properties that are completely independent of humans. And the person who has been shot dead is still dead. These are 'brute facts'. But why the shooting happened and the causal effects of the shooting depend on how the incident is socially constructed. For example, people might describe the incident variously as a “terrorist attack” or an “accident” or “police discharge firearm in self-defence”. And the actions that people will take in response to it will vary according to the way it is socially constructed. For example, if the shooter is a stranger trying to take the money of the person shot dead, people will send other people to force the shooter to stay in a small room for a long time. On the other hand, if the shooter is a soldier of country X and the shot person is a soldier of country Y, and country X and country Y are at war with each other, then the shooter will be applauded and might even get special honorifics, like a medal. Similarly, people will likely react to the incident differently if the shooter is a white supremacist or if he is an Islamic fundamentalist, or if he is neither. So, it is impossible to even understand what the description of the event is, let alone the event's causal consequences, without reference to social construction.

What about in international politics? Imagine another state acquires a nuclear weapon. A nuclear explosion or the physical location of missiles are brute facts. But how might a state react to this? It matters how this event is socially constructed. Take the different US reactions to the UK (Wendt 1992: 397) and Cuba (Weldes 1999: 226) getting nuclear weapons.³ When the UK successfully detonated a hydrogen bomb in 1957, the US reacted by signing the US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement in 1958. This allowed for sharing classified information and joint development of "atomic weapons". By contrast, when it was discovered that there might be nuclear weapons on Cuba, the US saw this as an existential threat, leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis and plans for bombing and invasion of the island. Even the description of the events are completely different, one is a "crisis" and one is not, let alone the causal consequences.

Are you ready yet to accept this fundamental fact about human social reality? Perhaps you still are not sure how to think about the fact that lots of things that seem obvious to you are socially constructed. One way in which the mere concept of social construction is confusing at first is that there is a difference between a thing and the social construction of the thing. Ian Hacking calls this the distinction between object and idea (1999). An object is the really existing thing in the world, like a woman refugee (1999: 10), i.e. an actual human woman who has fled her original country and has found refuge in, say, Canada. The idea of a 'woman refugee' is a way of classifying people such that legislators, bureaucrats, social workers, activists etc, say that some humans are women refugees, and these other humans are not, and that if they are classified as a woman refugee then that will change the way that other humans act towards them. For example, in some countries if someone is classified as a 'woman refugee' then that person is allowed to work, or to be given money, housing, and healthcare. If that person is not classified as a 'woman refugee', and is instead classified as, say, an 'illegal immigrant' then other people will not give her money and healthcare and many will not let her work. So, classifying someone as a woman refugee has large causal effects. It really makes a difference. And the idea of woman refugee is socially constructed. What does this mean? First, that this category both exists because it has been created by humans making it up and also that it has its effects because other humans act as if it is real. To say that the idea of woman refugee is socially constructed is also to say that there has been a particular historical process in which it has been determined what actually counts for those people deciding who should be classified as a woman refugee. One important aspect is that the human woman who has left her country must have left "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion", as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees.⁴

³ The Soviet Union owned and controlled the nuclear weapons on Cuba.

⁴ The United Nations 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees < <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/3b66c2aa10>>

This definition could have been different. For example, when negotiating the text of the Convention, diplomats could have left out race or religion, or explicitly included sexuality. They could have set the bar higher, so instead of persecution generally, they could have decided that refugees had to be, say, in fear of an imminent threat to their life. Or they could have said that anyone can move to another country whenever they want. Not only could it have been different, but the definition could change over time. And in fact, the way that the UNHCR has understood the meaning of the classifications did change over time. One important part of the refugee regime is the principle of nonrefoulement: no state shall “expel or return [*refouler*] a refugee . . . to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom shall be threatened.” (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 74). However, within the UNHCR, the mission to protect refugees came to be seen as best fulfilled by getting refugees home as soon as possible. This led to the UNHCR in fact sending many people back to places where their life or freedom was threatened. This demonstrates the important point that the content of classifications, or the way that humans act as if a classification is real, can change over time. Such change is an important part of why social construction matters to international politics.

There is yet another distinction that can cause confusion. Above I mentioned the way that the legal system classifies “refugee”. But that is not the only way that humans act towards “refugees”. In fact, there might be, and often are, many different ways of classifying. Look at the role that the phrase or concept of “woman refugee”, or phrases related to it, plays in everyday language. This is perhaps especially important in politics, where attempts to make people support or oppose policies or people (such as politicians trying to get elected) make such frequent use of related phrases and concepts. For example, in the UK “asylum seekers” and “channel migrant boats”, and in the US “illegals” and “migrant caravans”, have been used as concepts in newspapers, on tv programs, in political advertising, and on social media, to gain support for anti-immigration policies or for politicians taking anti-immigrant stances. And yet the people using the phrase or being mobilized to vote or take other action because of their understanding of the phrase/concept may not have an understanding of the concept that is the same as the classification as it actually works legally.⁵ Their understanding of the concept may be limited to a few phrases heard in the media or from the people around them, such as, “They are taking our jobs”. Or they may not be able to articulate any coherent account of the concept at all. And yet using the concept can cause people to take action, like vote or protest or enact legislation, that they wouldn’t have otherwise. When concepts are used in this way, they can be called “rhetorical commonplaces” (Jackson 2006).⁶ These play an especially important role in legitimation, as we will see later on.

⁵ For example, even though people can legally apply for asylum when they arrive in a country like the UK or US, many political actors in fact describe people traveling to the UK as “illegal”.

⁶ We might also want to understand a difference between what Brubaker and Cooper calls categories of analysis and categories of practice (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4). When scholars are trying to describe something, they use words like “race”, “democracy”, “class”, “elite”, “threat”, “power”, and they define them in a particular way.

Objection!: It sounds like you are saying “everything just exists in my mind and nothing is true”, and this is ridiculous.

Yes and no. Everything (or every institutional fact) does exist only in the minds of humans. But that is not how it seems to us most of the time. If we think of the social things in our everyday life they seem very real, at least as real as the brute facts of physical objects. As Berger and Luckmann say, “The institutions are *there*, external to him, persistent in their reality, whether he likes it or not. He cannot wish them away. They resist his attempts to change or evade them.” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 78). They seem like objective reality.⁷ But the crucial point here is that they do not just exist in your mind. They exist in *many people’s* minds. “The world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to myself” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 37). And this is the key to understanding one of the most important features of human social reality: sometimes it is fluid and changeable, and sometimes it is fixed and stable. People are, in a sense, just making it all up, so if they make it up a different way, then it actually will be different! However, this does not mean that anything goes all the time and nothing is true. In fact, social reality is often fixed (you cannot change it) and stable (it persists over time).

The reason why this is the case is that social reality is social; it exists because many people act as if it exists, not just one person. There is a difference between things that only exist in my mind and things that exist in everyone’s mind.⁸ This is the concept of *intersubjectivity*, which is a many-syllabled word that basically means shared understanding. If I make up a word, flurgle, that I think means “fruits that are red” and I go to someone who doesn’t know this word, and I say, “can I have a flurgle?”, then they will not know what I mean. But if I say “can I have some dessert?”, then they will know what I mean, because the word dessert is intersubjective. That is, you and I both know what the word “dessert” refers to.⁹ Even more than that, you and I know what the word dessert means generally in our society. And because social reality is intersubjective, I cannot change the meaning of the word dessert just by myself. So, I cannot start using the word “dessert” to mean things I wear on my feet. Everyone else would also have to change the way that they understood the word dessert. Getting everyone, or even lots of people, to change the way that they understand something, or use a word, can be very difficult to coordinate. So, in this sense social reality is often fixed and stable. Of course, change often happens. Just like language, in which meanings can change over time. Take the words ‘gay’, ‘wicked’, or ‘chopped’, which mean very different things today compared to in previous times. But the fact that changes in intersubjectivity are changes in a particular way means that

These scholarly definitions may never be used by regular people in actual political situations. They are used in analysis, and so are categories of analysis. But regular people also use words to categorize people or things and these are “categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors”, or categories of practice.

⁷ ‘Objective’ here means outside of your own personal, subjective, mind.

⁸ Note that it doesn’t have to be literally everyone’s mind.

⁹ And we know that the other person knows it. And that they know that we know, etc.

understanding how social construction works is essential to understanding how things like the international system changes.

So, even though it is true that social reality exists only in our minds, that doesn't mean that nothing is true, and it doesn't even mean that it isn't real and can stay the same over time.

Objection!: Ok, sure, everything is socially constructed, but that is trivial and doesn't matter to real international political outcomes.¹⁰

At this point, some people are intrigued and are ready to find out more about how social construction works and why we need it to understand global politics. But others are, reasonably, more skeptical. Sure, in this very basic sense, everything is socially constructed, they might say, but so what? How does knowing that matter to me or to understanding international politics? I contend that saying that international relations is socially constructed is only the starting point for understanding, not a final conclusion. There are some major implications of the thesis that everything is socially constructed that can be¹¹ very important for understanding and explaining international politics. For a preliminary reason, if we are studying social reality, then understanding the basic ways that social reality is created would seem to be a good idea. Mallon argues that we think our social constructions

... pick out real, relevant, causally important differences among the persons we classify. And it is in part because these differences can be relevant to our theoretical and practical projects that we use these representations and information they carry as we make plans, form our identities, coordinate our actions, and modify our attitudes and policies towards ourselves and others (Mallon 2016: 3).

Also, there is a lot of evidence that paying attention to processes of social construction can help us understand important features of international politics. For the rest of this paper, I will identify four types of ways in which social construction matters for understanding international relations,¹² with empirically persuasive examples drawn from the exploding academic literature influenced by social constructionism.

- 1) Anti-essentialism about political concepts
- 2) Radical social change is endemic
- 3) Legitimation is very important

¹⁰ Hacking focuses his critique of the use of the concept of social construction on its triviality. So, he literally says "Everyone knows that, and only a fool...would bother to say that they are socially constructed." (Hacking 1999: 12).

¹¹ Not always. See below for more on this point.

¹² This is not meant to be exhaustive.

4) Norms and rules are essential features of politics

Anti-Essentialism about political concepts

You might think that when you are using concepts to pick out (or refer to) cases in the world, you want the concept to pick out the right cases and not the wrong ones. So let's say that you want to see whether clashes between civilizations, like say "The West" and "The Islamic World", dominate global politics.¹³ First, you would want to define civilizations and then use that definition to describe and measure the different civilizations that exist in the world. Someone else then could critique your definition or measurement and say something like, "Australia is not part of Western Civilization" or "Surely Greece should be part of Western Civilization". This kind of debate assumes that there is, in fact, a thing that is Western Civilization in the world. It further assumes that there is some core essence that is a "civilization" and that we can separate out what makes something part of one and not part of another.

But maybe this is the wrong debate to have and a pointless waste of time. Maybe instead a better question to ask is, "How do people use the idea of Western Civilization to make something sound like the right thing to do?" If Western Civilization is a social construction and only exists in as much as people act as if it exists, then the important issue is how people act as if it exists. Jackson (2006) looks at a set of interesting questions surrounding the status of 'Germany' after the second world war. In particular, why was a West German state created and incorporated as a core ally in NATO and given vast amounts of reconstruction funding under the Marshall plan given that only a few years earlier 'Germany', under the Nazi Third Reich, had been a hated enemy of the other states involved? Jackson argues that opposition to this policy was reduced and avoided by framing West Germany and West Berlin in particular as "the last bulwark against Asia for Europe and the entire Western World!" (2006: 29). People basically talked about West Germany as a crucial part of the defence of Western civilization against Asiatic barbarism or Communism. This made it more acceptable, for some people, to support paying for the military buildup of ex-Nazis.

This account of the use of "Western civilization" can be true whether there is such a thing as Western civilization or not. One of the useful implications of seeing international politics as socially constructed is that it allows you to see how actors in fact use concepts to understand and shape the political world without having to have a "correct" definition of those concepts in the first place.

Even the concepts most central to international politics can be fruitfully analyzed as socially constructed. For example, is the notion of "national interest" something clear and obvious and

¹³ This is a reference to a very famous articulation of this idea by Samuel Huntington (1993).

unchanging and inherent to the nature of a state?¹⁴ Or is it maybe something that “may not mean the same thing to different people” and “may not have any precise meaning at all” (Wolfers 1952: 481)? Do people in fact have different ideas about what it is and what it means for a particular issue? And do people use it to try to get others to take certain actions?

“Interests are often not obvious, and much of politics is a struggle to define them. States and the people in them spend a great deal of time and energy arguing about what their national interests are.” (Finnemore 2003: 49). This is because what the national interest is, is socially constructed. In order for a state to take action based, for example, on a threat to the national interest, “state officials must describe to themselves the nature of the specific situation that they face” which makes clear “both to those officials themselves and to others who and what ‘we’ are, who and what ‘our enemies’ are, in what ways ‘we’ are threatened by ‘them’, and how best ‘we might deal with those ‘threats’” (Weldes 1996: 283).

You could use the idea of national interest to benefit yourself. Imagine that you are running a company which is making a profit selling opium or bananas and another country tries to stop you. You could argue that declaring war on that other country, or engineering a coup in that other country, is actually in your own country’s “national interest” and so get the full power and resources of your country to help you continue to make a profit. As Henry Kissinger said, “When you’re asking Americans to die, you have to be able to explain it in terms of the national interest” (cited in Weldes 1996: 276). The first Opium War between the British Empire and the Chinese Empire was started in 1839 at least partly because British opium traders were able to frame Chinese attempts to stop the trade in opium as a violation of the British national interest. And after the US-owned United Fruit Company had some of its land expropriated by the new Guatemalan regime in 1952, the United States government conflated the interests of the company with the national interest of the USA itself. This led to the CIA organizing and funding a coup against the democratically-elected Guatemalan government, installing a military junta in its place.¹⁵

However, that does not mean that if I claim that something is in the national interest I am just claiming that it is something that I want. I have to claim that “something is to be preferred and ought to be chosen because certain reasons can ...support this claim when challenged” (Kratowich 1982: 6). People might agree that the reasons given in support of an action mean that the action is in the national interest, even if that is against their own personal interest. Weldes shows how the US national interest was constructed in a particular way in response to the Soviet Union and Cuba moving nuclear missiles to Cuba in 1962 (Weldes 1996). The Kennedy administration represented this move, both to themselves as well as the American public and the outside world, as a crisis requiring

¹⁴ Some would say, yes, states always want to survive and we can logically derive any more specific interests from that (Mearsheimer 2002).

¹⁵ Cullather 1999.

immediate action. This included the consideration of invading or bombing Cuba, actions which plausibly risked a nuclear war causing millions of deaths. They could instead have represented it as something else, like a nuisance that was annoying but couldn't be helped. But in fact, they consciously framed the deployment of missiles as aggression by the Soviets. They also explicitly argued that Soviet missiles in Cuba were worse and more threatening than similar US missiles in Turkey (which bordered the Soviet Union). By contrast, the Cubans and Soviets represented the move as defensive against US actions aimed at overturning the Cuban government. These included economic sanctions and a failed invasion of Cuba the previous year.

What about the concepts of "secession" and "war of conquest"? In 1971, after a democratically-elected government had been violently overturned by West Pakistani-controlled military forces, East Pakistan declared its independence as the state of Bangladesh. In part to stem the tide of refugees flowing across the border, India invaded East Pakistan/Bangladesh and supported the restoration of the previously-elected government. Was this a secession? Or a war of aggression and conquest setting up a puppet state? An essentialist approach would be to try to find the core properties of the event and compare them to the two definitions to see which one it was. An anti-essentialist approach would be to see how the different actors involved talked about it and tried to represent it to each other in order to get support for different policies. O'Mahoney's analysis shows that there were several different representations of the situation, and that actors like the UK, India, and Bangladesh were able to get the majority of the international community to treat the events as a case of secession rather than conquest (O'Mahoney 2017).

Radical Social Change is Endemic

Radical social change is fundamental rather than merely incremental. Change in what kinds of actors exist, what kinds of actions are considered possible or legitimate, and what rules govern behavior in international politics. This kind of change is different from other kinds of change that political scientists study. Technological change, for example, can alter the material conditions of international politics. The invention of nuclear weapons, or the internet, or the container ship, all changed what states could do. But technological change by itself does not tell us how actors will respond to new capabilities, or what uses of those capabilities will be considered acceptable. Those responses and judgments are social constructions, and it is changes in them that we are focusing on here. Similarly, economic change can shift the relative power of states, but whether a rising state is seen as a threat to be contained or a partner to be engaged depends on how its rise is socially constructed. Because social constructions exist because humans collectively act as if they exist, they can change whenever humans decide to act differently. This makes social change in some ways more volatile than technological or economic change, and in some ways more stable. More volatile, because a new

technology takes years to develop, whereas a social construction can in principle change overnight. More stable, because social constructions are intersubjective — they exist in many people's minds at once — and so changing them requires coordinating a change in how a large number of people think and act, which is often very difficult to do.

Because all that is required for social reality to change is for some humans to decide to act in a different way, and because humans do in fact change their minds a lot, radical change of social reality is endemic. That is, radical change happens a lot. Sometimes radical change happens very quickly, like when a state that yesterday did not exist, today exists. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was established in 1569 and was one of the largest countries in Europe, until it was partitioned and ceased to exist in 1795. On 8 July 2011, The Republic of South Sudan did not exist. On 9 July 2011, the Republic of South Sudan did exist. The rules by which we live our lives can sometimes be switched on and off rapidly: “a policy that at an earlier time might have been considered a gross violation of acceptable practice later becomes normalized and acceptable.” (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 75). Yesterday, we were not at war with France, and killing a Frenchman is punishable. Today, we are at war with France and killing a Frenchman is actively encouraged. Chinese footbinding, in which girls’ feet were tightly wrapped and thus broken and deformed to produce smaller feet, which were claimed to be more beautiful, continued as a practice for about 700 years. Then, after transnational advocacy campaigns starting in the 1870s, it disappeared by 1920 (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 64).

Sometimes radical change happens slowly and incrementally. For example, today in the UK, women have pretty much all of the same legal rights as men, but this is only recently the case. For example, back before 1870, if a married women earned wages, or was given money as a gift or inheritance, it legally belonged to her husband, who could spend it as he wished and prevent her from spending it.¹⁶ Over time, women have gained more and more rights in law, although not all of these rights are always respected. An important international relations example of gradual change comes from Schmidt, who shows how before World War II it was practically unknown for sovereign states to allow foreign military bases on their territory, unless the foreign state was interfering into the host's domestic authority structure. Stationing troops or military stores on a territory was only done if a state had military exclusivity there. That is, they conquered or annexed or colonized the territory, then used it as a base. It did not even occur to states that they might simply ask to be allowed to base military personnel on another state’s territory, or even buy or rent facilities. But, over time, practices changed, and today there are lots of military bases inside other states (Schmidt 2014) and it is considered a reasonably normal practice.

¹⁶ Until the 1870 Married Women’s Property Act < <http://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/nineteenth-century/1870-33-34-victoria-c-93-married-womens-property-act/>>

Of course, radical change can include processes or causal mechanisms that are not related to processes of social construction. For example, the SARS-COV-2 virus and the disease it provokes in humans are brute facts that caused radical changes in international politics. However, many of these associated changes are changes in social constructions or are filtered through processes of social construction.

Change in actors and actions.

One way to think about different changes resulting from processes of social construction is to split them up into changes of different types of thing. For example, two types of thing that can change because they are socially constructed differently over time are actors and actions.

Consider actors first. The set of entities that count as legitimate actors in international politics, that is, those whose claims, grievances, and agreements are taken seriously by the international community is not fixed. It is socially constructed and has changed dramatically over time. The most important category of actor in international politics today is the sovereign state. But the characteristics that a state must possess to be recognized as a legitimate member of international society, and the processes through which recognition is granted or withheld, are themselves social constructions. Before the twentieth century, recognition was often granted through conquest, dynastic succession, or great-power agreement, with little reference to the wishes of the populations involved. The Congress of Vienna in 1815, for example, redrew the map of Europe through negotiations among monarchs, with no democratic mandate from the peoples being assigned to new sovereigns. Today, by contrast, a state seeking recognition must demonstrate that it represents a people with a legitimate claim to self-determination, that its government has some basis in popular consent, and that it is not simply the product of one state seizing another's territory by force.

New actors can also come into existence. In the twentieth century, intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund became important actors in their own right. They were given the capacity to make rules, allocate resources, and legitimate or delegitimize the actions of states. These new actors did not arise spontaneously from the logic of the international system; they were constructed through the deliberate actions of states and other groups, who agreed to act as if these bodies had authority and then organized their behavior accordingly.

New states are in the most recent context created through democratic processes validated by international organizations. East Timor was created in 2001 through an election held by the United Nations. Montenegro, in 2006, and South Sudan, in 2011, were created after independence referendums. By contrast, the Islamic State, which came into existence through the use of force, was rejected by the international community. Despite at one point controlling large amounts of territory in which millions of people lived, more than sixty nations, including the US and Russia, engaged in

military action against it. Numerous international organizations condemned it and branded it a terrorist organization, rather than a state.

Whatever actors there are in international politics, they take actions. What actions? The set of actions that actors consider, how they think of the costs and benefits of those actions, and how other states react to those actions are all socially constructed and often change over time. Think of some differences between the international world of the 19th century and that of the 21st century. A state in the 1800s might decide to increase its territory by buying it. The USA, for example, purchased what was then called the Louisiana Territory¹⁷ from France in 1803. In exchange for 60 million French Francs, Napoleon agreed to “cede to the United States in the name of the French Republic for ever and in full Sovereignty the said territory with all its rights and appurtenances”.¹⁸ Similarly, the US also bought Florida from Spain in 1819, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho from the British Empire in 1846, and Alaska from Russia in 1867. Notice that the USA bought these territories from the European states claiming them, rather than from the native inhabitants, who were not considered legitimate members of international society at the time. Today, however, this kind of action is no longer considered normal or legitimate. We can see that this is true from the reaction to US President Donald Trump’s attempt to buy Greenland from Denmark in 2019.¹⁹ First, people considered the idea so outlandish in the current context that they thought this was a joke. The Prime Minister of Denmark Mette Frederiksen said “I strongly hope this is not meant seriously”.²⁰ Second, the proposal conflicts with two widely-accepted principles in international society. One is the global recognition of the principle that peoples and nations have a right to self-determination under international law. Another is that the colonial or imperialist idea that entire territories can be transferred between states without consideration of the inhabitants is now generally seen as deeply immoral.

Another good example of change in the actions available to actors in international politics comes from the politics of sovereign default (Finnemore 2006: 24-51). What if the Mexican government owes money to a French citizen and cannot or will not pay it? There’s no world government who can make them pay. So what can you do? Well, in 1838, France sent warships to attack the Mexican city of Veracruz, occupied the city, and forced the Mexican government to pay its debts to French citizens. In 1902, Germany and Britain together attacked Venezuela, sinking Venezuelan ships and bombarding Venezuelan forts until Venezuela agreed to pay debts to British and German companies.

¹⁷ This included the entirety of Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska, as well as most of North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Louisiana, as well as part of other modern US states.

¹⁸ https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/louis1.asp

¹⁹ Scott R. Anderson, ‘Why Trump Can’t Buy Greenland’, *Lawfare*, 16 August 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-trump-cant-buy-greenland>,

²⁰ CNBC, ‘Greenland belongs to Greenland’: Denmark says selling world’s largest island to US is absurd, 18 August 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/18/greenland-belongs-to-greenland-denmark-says-selling-worlds-largest-island-to-us-is-absurd.html>

This led to an arbitration at an international tribunal in the Hague, at which it was found that because the UK and Germany had used force, they had more right to payment than other states. In other words, this practice was considered normal and good by the members of international society. By contrast, today this kind of action is illegal under international law and does not happen.

Why does it matter that radical change is endemic?

If radical change is endemic, then it is an important part of what international politics is and so needs to be explained. And when you need to explain something, you need to be able to describe or measure it first. So, we need to describe the ways that humans have constructed international politics over time. Finding out that these ways are different (if they are) is an increase in our knowledge. If radical change is endemic, then some claims about international relations may only apply to limited contexts, such as certain periods of time, or certain groups of actors. Maybe there are no changes in the particular thing you are looking at. But maybe there are, in which case you risk conflating, or treating different things as if they are the same.

Legitimation is Very Important

You know that feeling when you are doing something that you kind of know you shouldn't be doing? Perhaps like drinking alcohol when you are not legally old enough, or taking a sick day at school or work when you are not really sick? Or perhaps you see someone doing something like jumping a queue and you think to yourself, "That's outrageous! How dare they?" These types of feelings are the basis of legitimacy. Legitimacy is the rightness or acceptability, or "oughtness", of an action, policy or person.²¹ And this is different from your preferences or interests or where you might say, "I like this". I'm sure you can think of situations where something is nice or pleasurable but you don't feel like you are supposed to be doing it. And what does "not supposed to" mean here? You know that it would be frowned upon or disapproved of if you told people about it or did it publicly. And "publicly" is important because the judgment you are imagining comes from what you think the reaction from the public is going to be. So a feeling of rightness is different from how you personally feel about something. Some things you do tell people about or do publicly and they are ordinary or unremarkable, or even seen as 'good' things to do. And some things sound wrong if described in one way, but sound right when described in another. That person jumping the queue might have a good reason to go to the front, for example. Maybe they are joining their family member who is already in the queue. Or they were previously at the front but had to go and exchange a leaky carton of milk. When we hear these (or similar) redescrptions, exactly the same physical action, with the same

²¹ Suchman, for example, defines it as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman 1995: 574)

consequences for us in terms of having to wait longer, feels different in terms of how right or acceptable it is.

If people feel that an action is right, or that a person has a social role, then they will not oppose it and may even act in support of it. So, making actions or people legitimate is very useful. It can be a cheap and easy way to exercise power, control people, or get what you want. Making something legitimate is called legitimation. Because social objects and social rules only have powers because humans act as if they do, then legitimation is very important. As Berger and Luckmann point out, “the institutional world requires legitimation, that is, ways by which it can be ‘explained’ and justified” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 79).

For example, if you declare, “I am the king!”, this only has effect if other people accept that you are the king. So, you both have to be in an institutional context where there actually are kings, like a monarchist state, and also have to give good reasons why *you* are the king and not somebody else. What is a “good” reason why you are king? This depends on what people will accept as a good reason. For example, the Kings of Bohemia were elected, and in 1619, when Ferdinand II tried to force Catholicism on Bohemian lands, the people elected a new king, Frederick I, who was a Protestant. So, different people have different beliefs about what is legitimate.

A good everyday example of legitimation can be found in the rhetoric and discourse around recycling. If someone who was not socialized into our culture saw you taking, say, food out of a cardboard and plastic packet, they might reasonably say something like, “What are going to do with that cardboard and plastic?” If you replied, “I’m going to throw it on the ground and forget about it”, this would sound disturbing, especially as you realize that everyone is doing this multiple times a day, everyday, all over the world. Many people would feel that this is not okay. They would feel that this is not legitimate. However, what people usually say nowadays is that they will “recycle” the cardboard and plastic. How does recycling work? Perhaps you know a lot of data about the process of taking ink off or out of cardboard, or about different types of plastic and the chemical reactions involved in reprocessing them. More likely, you do not (I don’t). But you probably have a vague sense that it all gets taken away and made into something else. And this makes you feel better about the whole thing. And so you continue buying food packaged in large amounts of cardboard and plastic. This is a process of legitimation. The idea of recycling makes people think that their actions are good (or, at least, acceptable rather than bad). And so, not only do people expend time and effort putting their cardboard and plastic into separate recycling bins, but they are also reconciled to buying food with lots of packaging. Companies know this and so, in order to legitimate their own products, they put words and symbols related to recycling on their packaging. These words and symbols may or may

not be relevant to whether your local authority can cheaply (or profitably) repurpose the materials.²² But they can make you feel that participating in a process that results in huge amounts of trash being dumped, buried or burned is legitimate.

Legitimacy is often contrasted with self-interest. A common type of news story relates that a politician has been caught with a self-interested motive behind a decision that appears as if it is in the public interest and hence legitimate. Corruption or hypocrisy appears widespread and so it can seem as if legitimacy doesn't matter because self-interest drives behavior, and legitimacy is just window dressing. However, this response misses a couple of things. First, the fact that some reasons for actions (public interest) are seen as acceptable to people and others are not, shows the potential power of legitimacy (we will return to this point shortly). Second, self-interest and legitimacy are not opposites; they are two different concepts. The opposite of self-interest, or a pro-self orientation, is group interest, or a pro-social orientation.²³ The opposite of legitimate is illegitimate.

	Legitimate	Illegitimate
Pro-self	Making a profit	Stealing
Pro-social	Collecting money for charity	Expropriation of property

Figure 1.²⁴

Imagine that you are taking some money from someone else. This act could be pro-self or pro-social, and legitimate or illegitimate. If you are “making a profit”, taking money from someone is selfish, in that the money is going to you personally. But it is also legitimate; profit-making is the basis of a capitalist society and almost everyone accepts it as right and good.²⁵ By contrast, “stealing”, while also selfish, is illegitimate and society punishes and shuns people who steal. You can take money from people for non-selfish reasons, for the welfare of the group, “the greater good”, such as when you are “collecting for charity”. This is legitimate, in that this is allowed by society and is often seen as morally praiseworthy. However, “expropriating property” for community purposes is illegitimate.²⁶ For example, the 3rd Amendment to the US constitution prevents the government from using people's houses to billet soldiers.

²² In fact, much of this waste is not reusable at all. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/21/us-plastic-recycling-landfills>. And only 9.5% of all plastic ever made has been recycled (<https://rss.org.uk/news-publication/news-publications/2018/general-news/statistics-of-the-year-2018-winners-announced/>)

²³ See Rathbun 2014 for a discussion of social motivation and the difference between prosocial and proself.

²⁴ Note that the legitimacy of these activities is my judgment of what is generally legitimate in the UK in February 2022.

²⁵ Not in all circumstances. Price-gouging for example. Or selling questions to be asked at Prime Minister's Question Time.

²⁶ Especially without compensation. Expropriation can be legitimated to some extent through a regularized taxation system.

Much of the time, most people's actions are routine, or habitual, which means that issues of legitimacy do not intrude too much into conscious thought. However, sometimes, someone does something that looks like it might be illegitimate and this sparks a fight. This could be a literal fight, like the war to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991, but more commonly there is a fight using words, what we can call rhetorical or normative contestation. In this contest, the fighters are trying to get people to accept their interpretation of the situation over another. The debate over Brexit is a classic example; are we trying to escape the domination of authoritarian foreigners who take money we need to spend on our health, or are we trying to stay in an organization that we partially control and that makes us safer and more prosperous, and lets us live, work, and travel on a whole continent?

One way that legitimation matters for international political outcomes is that often there are a range of possible actions an actor *could* take, but some of them are more legitimate and some of them are less legitimate, or even illegitimate. What this means is that of the people who are going to react to the action, more of them think that, say, action A is legitimate than think that action B is legitimate. If having rules or actions be seen as legitimate is valuable, we should see people strategically trying to get legitimacy for their own preferred rules and actions. Which we do! And so the way in which people strategically pursue and contest legitimacy is an important driver of outcomes and a crucial research topic.

Examples of Legitimation

Legitimation can also help us to understand much of the international world as it actually exists. For example, von Billerbeck explains various puzzling actions and statements by UN and other international organization personnel as "self-legitimation". People often need to feel that what they are doing is a "good thing", and people working for the UN, NATO, or the World Bank, are no different. These self-legitimations have other effects, such as making people act on behalf of the international community rather than their home state. They can also make changes to the organization difficult, because if staff are motivated by their belief in the mission, then reform threatening that mission causes anxiety, fear and thus resistance (von Billerbeck 2020).

A recent example illustrates how important the concept of legitimation is to international political outcomes. Goddard answers the question, "if a state is rising in power, why do the already powerful states not band together to stop it in its tracks?". There are lots of examples of states becoming much more powerful in a relatively short period of time but facing little resistance, such as post-independence United States, Meiji Japan, Hitler's Germany, and Prussia in the mid-19th century. Rising powers try to legitimate their behavior by providing explanations or reasons for their behavior and trying to make these reasons fit within recognized norms and rules.

By justifying its actions, a rising power hopes to manage its audience's understanding of its actions and, in the process, shape whether to mobilize against or to allow revisionist behavior.

If the existing great powers are going to contain or confront a rising power, they have to convince both their domestic and international audiences that the challenger is a significant threat, one worth bearing the cost of containment or confrontation. If the rising power can give reasons that create questions about whether it is a threat or, better yet, assure its audience that its intentions are benign, then this should have significant effects. If a revisionist action looks legitimate, then alliances will become difficult to mobilize. If a revisionist action is justified, then domestic publics will not be willing to bear the costs of mobilizing against the rising power. (Goddard 2018: 22)

Take the Prussia example. From 1864 to 1871, Prussia fought several wars, ending up controlling a new state of Germany that became one of the most powerful states in Europe. And nobody stopped them. Bismarck argued that Prussia's invasion of Denmark in 1864 didn't undermine but instead upheld the Concert treaties that the other powers supported. He was able to prevent a balancing coalition of Russia, Britain, and Austria from working to stop him unifying the German states. Bismarck's diplomatic acumen is legendary, and Goddard shows how its effectiveness came, partially but crucially, from Bismarck's skill at legitimization.

Bukovansky shows how legitimization can be deeply ingrained in our thinking, so much so as to be almost invisible, and yet can change utterly over time. She looks back to the 18th century and before, when the question of who should rule a state, or a polity, was answered very differently from how it would be today. Different claimants to ruling authority today almost invariably use their ability to represent "the people" as a reason why they should be in charge. Even states with no elections or any democratic characteristics call themselves things like "The People's Republic of China", or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. And the polity that they claim authority over is the nation. But in past centuries, legitimate political authority was completely different. People claimed they had the right to rule because of the divine right of kings, because of heredity, because of their bloodline, or because they were part of a dynasty, perhaps by marrying into it. As Bukovansky shows, dynastic legitimization of monarchical sovereignty changed, beginning with the American and French Revolutions, into popular legitimization of national sovereignty. "What state today would use the mechanism of dynastic marriage to extend its territorial holdings? What ruling authority today dares to rely primarily on claims such as the right of the conqueror, or papal sanction, to legitimate its rule? All these were once considered legitimate claims." (Bukovansky 2002: 9).

Norms and rules are essential features of politics

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish

*swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”*²⁷

All of the institutional facts, the social constructions, are like the water in this parable; they are around us all the time, so much so that we often do not even notice them. In fact, there are so many of these socially constructed rules and norms that even trying to describe a single one can seem like you are just talking about literally everything. So, how should you think about and then use the fact that norms and rules are all around us?

What is a norm?

Even among IR scholars studying norms there is no agreement on what words to use to describe the various intersubjective social constructions that exist in international politics. Above I used Searle’s term of “institutional facts” to refer to all social reality, but this is not in common usage in IR. An easy to understand informal definition of norm might be “a statement made by a number of members of a group, not necessarily by all of them, that the members ought to behave in a certain way in certain circumstances” (Homans 1961: 46). A standard starting point for understanding norms comes from Finnemore and Sikkink’s classic paper; “A standard of appropriate behavior for an actor with a given identity” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891).

This definition captures two things that are important. First, norms are relational. This means what is “appropriate” depends on the identity of the actor in question. What is appropriate behavior for a great power is not the same as what is appropriate for a small state, a non-governmental organization, or an individual diplomat. Second, norms are about what *ought* to happen, not merely what *does* happen. This is the distinction between a statistical regularity and a norm proper. If most states tend to have large militaries, that is a pattern. But if states believe they *should* have large militaries, or *should not* acquire certain weapons, that is a norm.

Scholars of international relations often distinguish between *regulative* and *constitutive* norms (Wendt 1992). Regulative norms regulate behavior that would exist independently of the norm itself, like a norm against cheating in a game that already exists. Constitutive norms, by contrast, define the very categories they govern. The norm of sovereignty, for example, does not merely regulate the behavior of states; it partly *constitutes* what a state is in the first place. So, who can be a state, what actions states can take, what kinds of interests states have, etc. This is an important distinction because it means that norms do not only constrain actors who already exist with fixed interests. They also shape who the actors are and what they want.

²⁷ David Foster Wallace, *This is Water*, Commencement Speech, Kenyon College 2005, <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

Another important issue is instantiation. How do we see these institutions in the world? One manifestation of an institution is written statements of the rules and practices that are consciously and officially agreed to. Good international examples are treaties, agreements, covenants, and resolutions. However, these do not constitute the entirety of institutions. Many aspects of institutions are informal rules and norms. These can be seen when actors make reference to them and orient their action around them. For example, even though it may not be written down anywhere or actively agreed to, there might be an informal rule in a restaurant that customers should clear their own tables. People might ask, “Should we bus our own tables?” or tell others, “You are supposed to bus your own table”. Finnemore and Sikkink point out that a good source of evidence that there is a norm is the reaction or judgment of a community; “We recognize norm-breaking behavior because it generates disapproval or stigma and norm conforming behavior either because it produces praise, or, in the case of a highly internalized norm, because it is so taken for granted that it provokes no reaction whatsoever” (1998: 892).

A good example of being able to see norms because of how actors react when they are broken comes from the post-WWI period. Before the First World War, imperial powers regularly got together to divide up other countries, take territory for themselves, or interfere with other countries. Just a couple of examples of this include the 1861-3 invasion of Mexico by Britain, Spain, and France to collect debts and install a pro-French Emperor of Mexico (Finnemore 2003: 28), or the 1895 Triple Intervention in which Russia, France, and Germany stopped Japan from annexing the Liaodong province of China but allowed Japan to annex Taiwan from China. Imperial powers may not have liked it when other powers got something that they wanted, but they accepted imperialism and the spoils of conquest as a normal practice. However, we can see that the rules of international behavior were changing after WWI as by 1931, when Japan tried to interfere in the Chinese province of Manchuria, the other powers opposed this on the basis that aggression and conquest were illegitimate now (O’Mahoney 2014). The League of Nations and the US Secretary of State Henry Stimson issued statements saying that violations of the Pact of Paris²⁸ would not be recognized. The fact that Japan’s actions caused such a fuss, provoked such a reaction, is evidence of the existence of new, or changed norms surrounding how states could treat other, weaker states.

Because all of human social reality is socially constructed, we are all enmeshed in norms and rules all of the time. Humans create these norms and institutions, which then come to seem part of the normal, natural objective way of doing things. Humans then create more norms about the existing norms! An everyday example of this might be the norm of gift giving around Christmas. Originally, there was some norm of celebrating in midwinter. Then, Christianity layered a story about Jesus being born on that holiday (he wasn’t), presumably partly to legitimate a Christian holy day. Then, over time, the

²⁸ Aka the Kellogg-Briand Pact or the pact outlawing war.

legend of St. Nicholas came to inspire giving gifts at Christmas. Prince Albert brought the norm of pine trees in the house from Germany in the 19th century, and now there is a norm of children waking up on Christmas morning to open presents under the Christmas tree.²⁹ This norm is reproduced in all sorts of ways, including through media like adverts or posts on Instagram, using this practice as a backdrop to marketing products or sharing images of your family.

Such layering is crucial to understanding international politics. Norms about, for example, the rules of engagement for peacekeeping forces are layered on top of norms about when and how peacekeepers are deployed and authorized. These norms are layered on top of norms about membership in international organizations, about the fact that there even are international organizations at all. And these are all layered on top of norms about sovereignty, who has authority in international politics and what they can do with that authority. Reus-Smit argues that there are fundamental institutions undergirding global orders that are prior to, and productive of, the more specific norms and rules governing particular issue areas. Reus-Smit (1997) argues that beneath the many specific rules of international law and diplomatic practice there are deeper constitutional structures that define what legitimate statehood and legitimate international action look like in any given era. These include shared understandings about the moral purpose of the state, the organizing principle of sovereignty, and the procedural norms of rightful action. These constitutional structures change over time. Medieval European international order rested on different foundational assumptions than the Westphalian order, which in turn differs from the post-1945 order built around the United Nations. Understanding these deep layers of social construction is essential if we want to understand not just the specific rules that govern international behavior at any moment, but why those rules look the way they do.

Objection!: Are you trying to say that social construction explains everything?

When does it really not matter that everything is socially constructed? Sometimes, even though it is true that everything is socially constructed, it doesn't matter. What do you mean it doesn't matter? I mean that you can make true causal claims about social reality that could be true even if social reality was not socially constructed. Take a relatively simple example; imagine a decrease in the price of solar energy (due to increased supply), leading to many people choosing to use more solar energy instead of, say, natural gas. Here, there are no changes in the actions seen as acceptable, no use of legitimation to make people choose one policy over another. This explanation of why people changed from gas to solar does not rely upon any processes of social construction at all. This is despite the fact that the conditions under which this event occurred relies upon many socially constructed entities, like energy companies, money, bank accounts, etc. And it is also despite the fact that, arguably, part of

²⁹ This is only true in some societies. In the Netherlands, Santa arrives on a steamship from Spain and leaves presents in your shoe on 5 December.

the reason why the supply of solar energy increased was because tax credits and other incentives for solar were legitimated as part of a narrative that sees solar energy as a means to mitigating the climate emergency.

Conclusion

This paper has made a case for why social construction matters to understanding international politics. I have tried to show not just that it is true that everything is socially constructed, but that this has real consequences for how we should study and explain the international world. The basic proposition is a simple one. The features of international politics that matter most, such as states, sovereignty, wars, alliances, norms, interests, institutions, exist because humans collectively act as if they exist, and they have their effects through the meanings that humans attach to them.

From this proposition four important implications follow. The concepts we use to describe international politics do not refer to fixed, natural kinds. They are categories that can be and are used strategically, and their meaning is contested. Taking this seriously means asking not “what does this concept *really* mean?” but “how is this concept being used, by whom, and to what effect?” Because social reality is constructed it can also be reconstructed, which means that radical change is not exceptional in international politics but endemic. States come into existence and disappear. Actions that were once normal become unthinkable. Understandings that seem eternal are historically produced. This should make us cautious about treating any feature of international politics as permanent, and attentive to the processes by which change occurs. Because social objects derive their power from collective recognition, legitimation is always at stake. Actors spend considerable effort justifying their own actions and delegitimizing the actions of others, and this contest has real consequences for what actors can actually do. And because norms and rules are not merely constraints on action but constitutive of the identities and interests of the actors themselves, understanding international politics requires attending to them, tracing where they come from, how they are maintained, and how they change.

None of this means that social construction explains everything. As noted above, there are perfectly good causal accounts of international outcomes that do not need to invoke processes of social construction at all. But for a very wide range of important phenomena — why states go to war or seek peace, why rising powers are balanced or accommodated, why some practices become legitimate and others do not, why new actors come to be recognized and old ones are denied recognition — understanding social construction is not optional. It is, rather, the starting point for rigorous analysis.

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