Constructivism and Security

By Dr. John T. Ackerman, Lt Col Barak J. Carlson (PhD), and Major Young I. Han

Constructivism has become a major theoretical challenger to the dominant international relations paradigms, realism and liberalism (Ba and Hoffmann 2003). The interplay between change in the international system and the behavior of the actors in the system can often be examined and explained using a constructivist lens. In particular, constructivist concepts such as, —the power of ideas, the interplay between actors and their social context, the notion that actors‘ words deeds, and interactions shape the kind of world in which they exist, and the world shapes who actors are and what they want‖ (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 15) have been used to analyze many of the previously unexplainable interactions within international relations. One domain where constructivism has been most fruitful is international security relations. The following three case studies offer three examples where realist and liberal explanations of the security influenced actor actions and interactions are found insufficient or incomplete. The case studies should provide clear, real world examples of the power of ideas, identities, and norms to shape and be shaped by international behavior.

The remainder of the text that follows comes from Ba and Hoffmann‘s work on teaching constructivism. The material has been modified to meet the needs of this lesson but only superficially. Importantly, the authors have created excellent case studies that will help students understand constructivism and recognize the differences and similarities between realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Comprehension of these three major international relations paradigms will enable military professional to make sense of a complex and dynamic international environment.

Principles of Constructivism

All international relations theories contain ideas about the nature of actors in world politics, the nature of the context that surrounds those actors, and the nature of the interactions between actors. These are necessary assumptions used for explaining why events occur and why actors choose to behave the way they do. Realism, for instance, maintains very clearly that the actors in world politics are power-seeking, security-conscious states. These states exist in an anarchical context where material resources (guns and money) are the most important characteristics and they interact (mainly) competitively with each other. Liberalism also describes the context of world politics as anarchic, but differs from realism in important ways.

Liberals ascribe importance to actors other than states (especially international organizations) and they are less pessimistic about the effects of anarchy they see cooperation being possible when international organizations can help states achieve mutual interests. Ultimately, however, neither realism nor liberalism pays significant attention to ideational factors. To these theories, ideational factors are either insignificant or means to other ends.
Constructivism is no different in terms of having ideas about actors, context, and interactions in world politics, but constructivists have very different notions about them and therefore very different explanations for phenomena in world politics. It is because of these different notions that constructivism can explain changes like those mentioned above. Let us look at actors, context, and interactions in turn (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 19-20.

Actors

First, constructivists share with liberals the view that there exist wide ranges of actors who are important players in world politics. They take seriously international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, multinational corporations, and social movements (among others), in addition to states.

Second, constructivists claim that the interests and identities of actors in world politics are malleable; that their interests and identities depend on the context in which they find themselves. This is in significant contrast with realists and liberals who consider that actors have a more or less fixed nature; states always have been and will always be self-interested--security-conscious and power hungry according to realists, and rational and concerned with maximizing economic gains for liberals. Constructivists argue that it is better to consider that actors in world politics are dynamic; that the identity and interests of states (and other actors) change across contexts and over time. Who actors are and what actors want is determined by their interactions with other actors and by the larger social context in which they exist. At times some states will be security-conscious and power-hungry, not because there is something inherent about states that make them this way, but rather because states learn to be this way by interacting with other states within a specific historical context. At other times and in other contexts, interactions can lead states to have different identities, interests, and behaviors.

Constructivists argue that states can learn to want things other than power and economic efficiency--state interests can change. States today seem to have an interest in supporting human rights, where they did not have this interest 100 years ago. States can learn to act in ways other than competitively--state behavior can change. In Europe, states that were fighting bloody wars 60 years ago have now joined in a cooperative union. States can even learn to be different--state identity can change. The US today is very different from the US 100 years ago. According to constructivists, these changes are at least partly shaped by the social context in which actors exist and the interactions they have with other actors (Ba and Hoffman 2003, 20).

Context

Constructivists claim it is impossible to describe the nature of actors independently from a particular historical context. But what characteristics define this context? Like traditional approaches, constructivists assume that the international context in which actors find themselves is anarchical, but they subscribe to a very circumscribed definition of anarchy. For constructivists, anarchy simply means there is no overarching authority in world politics that can make and enforce rules. Unlike traditional approaches, constructivists do not claim that anarchy has an inherent logic of suspicion and competition.
In addition, where traditional approaches focus on the material characteristics of the international context—the distribution of guns and money—constructivists emphasize the social character of international life. They claim that the important aspects of the international system are its societal and ideational characteristics—ideas, rules, institutions, and meanings. Actors do not just look around at the material capabilities of their neighbors nor do they simply perform cost/benefit analysis when deciding what their behavior is going to be. Instead, actors are also influenced by their social context—shared rules, meanings, and ideas. Notions of what is right or wrong, feasible or infeasible, indeed possible or impossible are all a part of an actor’s social context, and it is these ideas that shape what actors want, who actors are, and how actors behave.¹

The context of world politics is malleable. The ideas and meanings that shape actors are not static but instead change over time as actors change over time because it is the very behavior and interactions of actors that creates the ideational context of world politics. Sovereignty provides an excellent example. The rules that make up sovereignty form a crucial part of the international context in which world politics takes place. These rules shape who some actors are (states are in part defined by being sovereign), they shape some of what states want (sovereignty gives states an interest in protecting their borders), and they shape how states behave (states create customs offices, diplomatic protocols, immigration policies, and have other policies because of sovereignty). Thus sovereignty, as a set of ideas about how to organize world politics, shapes actors. But sovereignty itself has and continues to change as history unfolds—the rules of sovereignty have undergone numerous changes (e.g., from absolute sovereignty to popular sovereignty) and they continue to evolve today (according to some, globalization and humanitarian interventions have begun to erode the power of the rules of sovereignty).² These changes occur through the actions and interactions of actors (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 20-21).

**Actions and Interactions**

So now we come full circle with constructivist thought. Actors shape their own social context and the social context in turn shapes the actors (interests, identities, and behaviors) themselves. It is this cycle that is the core notion of constructivism. The actions and interactions of the actors keep the cycle moving.

Let us return to the sovereignty example. Sovereignty is a set of rules that tells state actors how to interact with one another—the rules shape actors’ identities, interests, and behaviors. But the power of these rules (indeed the very existence of the rules) depends on actors acting and interacting in accordance with them. If states stop acting as though borders are inviolate, some of the rules of sovereignty will cease to have power and may cease to exist. Actors create their own common understandings—their social context—through their actions and interactions. Human rights provide another example. There is no central authority that has decreed that states should protect human rights, but the idea that it is right to protect them has come to shape the interests and behavior of many states. For example, every time a state acts to protect human rights, as when states around the world condemned South African apartheid, this enhances the notion that it is appropriate for states to protect human rights.

Social constructivism is more complicated than other perspectives precisely because it assumes constant dynamism and change. The natures of actors and the
international context are not simple and pre-ordained. Instead, what actors do and how they interact determines the nature of the social context. In turn, this social context shapes who actors are, what they want, and how they behave. Constructivists claim it is this cycle that recurs through time in world politics. It is this cycle that is the foundation of constructivist explanations of phenomena in world politics (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 21-22).

Applying Constructivism

Change and Social Construction in World Politics
The world at the beginning of the 21st century is a very different world from that of a century ago. Some changes have been obvious. Technological and scientific revolutions have made the world both a larger and a smaller place. It is larger in the sense that the world’s population has quadrupled over the last century and the number of states in world politics has increased fivefold, smaller in the sense that we can communicate with and visit people and places all over the world faster than ever before. In addition, world politics has seen a geographical shift from Europe-centered politics to global politics. Other changes have been subtler. Different actors are now playing a large part in world politics, and the important issues of world politics are changing. Today world politics is being transformed by the forces of globalization, which have caused new issues to emerge as crucial and enabled new kinds of actors that need neither territory nor government to be part of “world politics.” Political phenomena and the stuff of world politics--actors, behaviors, outcomes, and patterns--do not remain static. Three puzzles make the changing nature of world politics abundantly clear and highlight the potential need for a constructivist perspective (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 17-18).

The European Union
Perhaps the greatest transformation in world politics this past century is Europe itself. The Continent began the 20th century with a few waning empires and a growing number of new nation-states. Until 1945, the history of Europe was one of constant rivalry and war that culminated in two bloody world wars. It ended the 20th century as a European Union (EU) with a single market and a single currency. Today Europe (or at least much of west and central Europe) is considered by many to be a zone of peace and cooperation (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 18).

Why the Change?
During the Cold War, the growing union of Western European states could be easily explained by the presence of an external threat--the Soviet Empire. However, the European Union grew stronger as that threat subsided and is now considered by some to be on the road to a new kind of political organization, no longer a collection of individual states, but an entity with supranational characteristics. Did the national rivalries that led to such destruction in the early 20th century disappear? Realism would claim that they have not and would predict the demise of the EU. Liberalism would claim that the real issue is the economic benefits that EU provides its members. According to liberals the EU will persist because it facilitates economic cooperation by supplying transparency and avenues of communication, but it will not influence the fundamental nature of the European states or their interactions. The evidence from the 1990s and early 21st century
suggests otherwise on both counts and we may need a different perspective to understand the EU (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 18).

There are a number of ways to approach the puzzle that the EU presents. Traditional approaches treat the EU as a way for states to cope with what they see as the enduring, unchanging logic of anarchy. This logic of anarchy—there is no force to prevent a state from attacking or double-crossing another so all must be concerned about their own security and well-being—defines the international system and serves as the main constraint faced by states. However, the persistence and growing strength of the EU does not fit with this characterization of the international system (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 22).

**Beyond the Security Dilemma: Constructing Anarchy**

Realists argue that states ignore their logic of anarchy at their peril and that this logic forces states to feel insecure and to work to maintain a favorable power balance with other states in order to survive. According to realists, anarchy forces states to be security conscious and suspicious of other states, because if they are not, they face elimination from the system. They predict recurring warfare, constant war preparation, and fleeting alliances.

In many eras of history, realists appear to be right to rely on their logic of anarchy. War, suspicion, and competition have indeed pervaded the modern international system. However, the European Union today stands in stark contrast to realist predictions. These Western European states have historically been at odds and the two world wars resulted from competition and suspicion on the Continent. Yet, today, Western Europe is united in the European Union. Borders have disappeared between countries that once fought bloody wars. Much of Western Europe uses a common currency. All of Western Europe is a common market. How, if the realist logic of anarchy is at work, did we get from world wars to a European Union?

Constructivists answer this question by arguing that the logic of anarchy at the heart of realist treatments is not set in stone. In a seminal article Alexander Wendt makes the claim that anarchy, rather than being characterized by an unchanging logic, is what states make of it (Wendt 1992). In essence, this means that anarchy is merely a permissive condition—it lacks an inherent logic. Whether anarchy forces states to be insecure and suspicious or whether it allows states to be cooperative and friendly depends on the social interactions that states have. Anarchy does not mean chaos—there are a number of rules and ideas that shape what anarchy means—nor does it imply competition. Instead, an anarchic system is filled with rules and ideas that emerge from the actions and interactions of the states in the international system. If states act as if other states are potential enemies, then anarchy will lead to insecurity. If, on the other hand, states act as if other states are friends, then anarchy can lead to cooperation and trust.

Constructivists claim that this is exactly what has occurred in Western Europe since World War II. Indeed, one observer argues, –Fear of anarchy and its consequences encouraged key international actors to modify their behavior with the goal of changing that structure (Lebow 1994, 251). To be sure, the European Union did not begin as an attempt to alter the logic of anarchy. At the end of World War II, two goals were uppermost in the minds of the victorious allies: (1) defend Western Europe from the Soviet Union and communism, and (2) contain/control Germany (Lebow 1994, 270). Numerous initiatives were designed to meet these two goals including the Marshall Fund,
the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (which would later become the World Bank), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Coal and Steel Commission. The last, and seemingly least relevant of these, would rise to become the European Community and then the European Union, an organization that has altered the map and destiny of Europe as well as our understanding of international relations. However, all of these measures began for reasons that realists find very familiar—Western Europe was vulnerable, suspicious of the Soviet Union, and wary of the possibility that Germany could rise again as an aggressive power. Thus the actions taken by the Western European states (aided, supported, and encouraged by the US) appear to be very realist in nature. These states faced an uncertain, insecure international context and took actions to increase their security. Yet an increase in security was not the only result of the activities that began at the close of World War II.

The Western European powers began to change their behavior toward more cooperative relations. This was not a big leap for France and Britain as they had been allies in the two world wars, but the cooperation included their enemies from the war, Germany and Italy, as well. Cooperative behavior in economic, political, and military areas, driven by the common Soviet threat, began to build trust. Beginning with the Coal and Steel Commission, the European states expanded cooperation into multiple areas of politics and economics, forming the European Court of Justice, the European Commission on Human Rights, the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe, and the Monetary Union, among others. Sustained cooperative interaction over time led to habits of cooperation, consultation, and community. States in Western Europe began to treat each other as friends. This altered the nature of anarchy. States in Western Europe made anarchy into a cooperative structure to the point of eliminating borders between them.

At no time was this more evident than after the Cold War ended. In 1989 as the Berlin Wall fell, and in the early 1990s when the Soviet Union dissolved and Germany reunited, Western Europe faced two realities. First, the common threat of the last 40 years disappeared. Second, Germany, the feared aggressor in the world wars, was unified. What was the reaction? Did the states of Europe revert to suspicious, competitive relations and turn to individual security-building efforts, as the realist logic of anarchy would predict?\(^3\)

No. Instead, the integration of states into the European Union has deepened. Through their interactions, Western European states have altered their own context. By acting cooperatively, they built trust and altered the range of possible actions and the rules governing their relations. As Emanuel Adler argues, Europe has become a security community, which means that it is —not merely a group of states that, thanks to increased communication, have abandoned war as a means of social intercourse; it is also —a community-region in which people have mastered the practice of peaceful change— (Adler 1997a, 276). Indeed, as Lebow puts it, in Europe —[t]he allegedly inescapable consequences of anarchy have been largely overcome by a complex web of institutions that govern interstate relations and provide mechanisms for resolving disputes— (Lebow 1994, 269). Where once states fought to the death, there are now no military plans by one Union member toward another (Lebow 1994, 269). Indeed, a common security policy and even a security community are possible today, where before they were impossible (Lebow 1994; Adler, 1997a). The states of Western Europe constructed their own
(cooperative) context through their actions and interactions. They escaped the realist logic of anarchy and made Europe into a zone of peace (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 22-24).

**Beyond Cheating: Constructing European Political Order**

Liberals agree with the realists that anarchy is an obstacle for states, but perhaps it is a smaller obstacle than realists think. Liberals assume that states have many mutual interests (economic gains from trade and cooperation being among the most important). Rather than ensuring constant, deadly competition, liberals claim that anarchy makes it difficult for states to achieve these interests because without an authority to enforce rules, cheating on ‘deals’ will be rampant, and uncertainty will make cooperation difficult. The liberals claim that the EU, and other organizations, play a crucial role in helping states to overcome this fear of cheating.4 As Peter Katzenstein argues, ‘These institutions facilitate monitoring, enhance political transparency, reduce uncertainty, and increase policy relevant information’ (Katzenstein 1996, 13). The EU helps the states of Europe reach mutual interests by facilitating communication and providing a set of enforceable rules that ease the fear of cheating. Put another way, international institutions can help direct state behavior in cooperative, as opposed to competitive, directions (Johnston 2001, 488).

Thus, the transformation of Europe poses less of a problem for liberal approaches in that they see interstate cooperation, especially surrounding economic issues, as likely. Moreover, states will continue to value institutions like the EU even if the circumstances that brought them together in the first place (for example, the Soviet threat) have changed. Nevertheless, liberal approaches are also limited, not so much because what they describe does not take place in the EU, but because they do not capture all that is taking place. In particular, they do not consider the possibility that state identities and interests can change. Their views of anarchy also prevent them from seeing how international institutions are themselves a kind of social environment—not simply a set of ‘material rewards and punishments,’ constraining state action (Johnston 2001, 487). Their views of actor identities and preferences as fixed prevent them from considering how social interaction might produce cooperative norms and in turn changes in actor identities (Johnston 2001).

Constructivists look upon international organizations like the EU as much more than a forum for facilitating cooperation among actors with static interests in maximizing economic gain. Constructivists are interested in the broader effects that organizations, as part of actors’ social context, have. They are interested in how organizations shape not only how actors behave (i.e., liberals show how organizations can change cost/benefit calculations), but also how organizations shape what actors want (their interests) and who actors are (their identities) (Pollack 2001, 234–237).

Constructivists would claim that if we want to understand European states’ behavior, we must consider how the EU, a significant part of their social context, influences the interests and identities of those states. As just one example, in a discussion of the monetary union Risse et al. claim that:

…actors’ perception of their material and instrumental interests with regard to the Euro are deeply influenced by their visions of European political order. Thus, the Euro is about European Union and political order rather than only lowering
transaction costs or creating exchange-rate stability (Risse et al. 1999, 148; emphasis added).

The states of the EU have ideas of ‘Europe‘—what it is and what it signifies—that come
to govern their interactions with one another and the political order in Europe.
Thus, for constructivists, the EU is not merely a forum to help states reach
cooperative results. Instead, the EU is a fundamental part of the European states’ social
context. It is a forum that contains ideas, meanings, and rules that come to shape how
these states view the world, how they view themselves, how they decide what they want,
and how they decide to take action⁵ (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 24-25)

**Apartheid**

Reprehensible as it may seem today, apartheid was a very common practice 50
years ago. Few thought the system wrong; even fewer thought it necessary to actively
protest against such a system. In the United States (US) racial segregation was not
formally outlawed until the 1960s and in South Africa it lasted as official policy until
1991. The US was even a supporter of the white minority South African government until
the mid-1980s. Yet today, apartheid is officially eradicated throughout the world (though
informal segregation and racism certainly remain prevalent problems). The international
community took a stand against apartheid in South Africa and entirely delegitimized this
practice (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 18).

**Why the Change?**

The US did not change its policy toward South Africa in the mid-1980s because
the oppressed people who suffered under apartheid suddenly became more powerful.
Neither did the US and the rest of the international community change their policy toward
apartheid because of a change in the strategic or economic situation in Africa—the
perceived communist threat that drove a permissive US stance toward apartheid was still
present, as were the economic benefits of supporting the apartheid regime. Again, the
explanations drawn from traditional approaches to world politics appear to fall short (Ba
and Hoffmann 2003, 18-19).

**The End of Apartheid**

One hundred years ago, systems of apartheid could be found on almost every
continent of the globe. Though the institution of slavery had lost legitimacy, the
segregation of peoples based on physical characteristics, religion, tribe, or other group
membership remained a common practice. In the United States, for example, the formal
institution of slavery ended with the American Civil War but was quickly replaced by a
system of legalized racial segregation, a system of ‘Jim Crow’ laws and practices that
denied African Americans equal access to resources, equal opportunity, and equal
protection. Not until the 1960s was this system—sometimes referred to as ‘the American
apartheid’ (Massey and Denton 1993)—finally deemed unconstitutional.

Of course, when most of us think of apartheid today, we think of South Africa,
which formally ended its apartheid system in 1991. As Audie Klotz explains, in the mid-
1980s important changes took place in how the world viewed and responded to the South
African apartheid. These changes, especially in US policy, offer a good example of how a
special class of ideas—in this case, global norms of racial equality—do not simply constrain behavior but can also redefine states’ interests (Klotz 1995). A hundred years ago, South Africa was the object of struggle between British colonizers and previous Dutch settlers. Though British colonizers did implement laws calling for the better treatment of nonwhites in South Africa, racial equality was far from a widely held norm. (In fact, British ordinances on the subject were an important source of tension between the British and Dutch settlers.) Even in the 1960s, when the formal system of apartheid—the „Grand Apartheid“—was adopted, few in the world (including the United States) took an active interest in, let alone opposition to, what is widely considered today an inhumane and unjust system (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 25-26).

**Beyond National Interests: The Role of Social Norms**

Traditional approaches offer a compelling explanation of US policies until the mid-1980s. They argue that major powers did not see it in their material (strategic or economic) interests to force the white minority government to change its policies. For example, in the early 1980s, the US claimed that Cold War strategic and economic interests, continued access to South Africa’s large mineral deposits, and concerns about vulnerable sea-lanes far outweighed US interest in racial equality (Klotz 1995). US inaction was also justified by ideas of sovereignty that deemed the internal affairs of states as off limits to outside intervention. However, traditional approaches are less able to explain the US decision to impose sanctions on the South African government in 1985–1986. Why did the US decide to override ideas of sovereignty and impose sanctions on South Africa in the mid-1980s when there was no corresponding change in its economic and strategic situation? In fact, the Reagan administration at the time argued that US strategic interests in South Africa had increased, not decreased. Why did the United States and the international community become concerned with the internal politics of South Africa? Traditional approaches are unable to explain the change.

Social constructivists argue that we have to pay attention to how norms can define states’ interests. Norms are ideas that express –shared (social) understandings of standards for behavior (Klotz 1995, 451). In this case, a global norm of racial equality redefined how the United States understood its interests in South Africa. This norm did not have automatic effect, however. UN resolutions supported a norm of racial equality as early as 1960 but the United States continued to veto any attempts to impose mandatory sanctions on the South African government. Klotz (1995) demonstrates how grassroots and transnational actors advocated for an antiapartheid norm, raising public awareness about, and mobilizing protests around, the issue of apartheid. They did this by explicitly connecting the domestic conversation on civil rights in the US to the international discussion on apartheid. This linkage was critical because it made it increasingly difficult for US policymakers and corporations to continue doing business with South Africa without opening themselves up to charges of racism at home.

These activities made it clear that the social context within which the US existed had changed and apartheid was seen as illegitimate. Faced with pressure from these groups throughout the 1980s, the anti-apartheid norm served to alter US notions of its interests (Klotz 1995). Starting in Congress and eventually throughout the US government, the US now saw its interests as including the promotion of racial equality in South Africa, resulting in the sanctioning of the South African government in 1985–1986.
Such sanctions from the world’s largest economic power and world community imposed important economic constraints on the South African government. These constraints, along with significant internal pressure and shrinking strategic leverage vis-a`-vis the US and the Soviet Union due to the ending of the Cold War, helped convince the South African government to formally end its system of apartheid in 1991.

The South African case illustrates a number of important constructivist points that contrast with those of dominant theories. First, norms matter. They do not necessarily determine outcomes but they do help define and limit a range of acceptable policy choices and reformulate understandings of interest. In the case of South Africa, one could choose any number of ways to bring pressure to bear on the South African government, but what was no longer okay was not to do anything at all. The global norm of racial equality had put tolerance for apartheid outside the range of legitimate US options. Second, states are not the only actors that matter. Apartheid in South Africa was ended largely through the efforts of sub-state actors and a transnational coalition of actors and groups. Finally, change does not necessarily depend on leadership by powerful actors. In this case, the United States was a follower, not a leader, and transnational groups and weak states had an influence on US policy far greater than their material resources and capabilities would suggest (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 26-27).

Chemical Weapons

In World War I, major powers on both sides (The Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente) of the conflict used chemical weapons--noxious gases like chlorine gas and mustard gas. Yet in World War II, gas was not used in combat, and today the vast majority of states consider the use of chemical weapons virtually unthinkable (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 19).

Why the Change?

Some would say that chemical weapons are taboo because they are not useful weapons of war. This argument does not hold up under scrutiny. Chemical weapons have great utility, and further, would have been very useful in many situations since World War I. Others claim that states do not use chemical weapons because they are, by nature, inhumane weapons. However, is dying by asphyxiation any worse than having flesh torn apart by metal shards or being blown up by high explosives? These explanations for the prohibition against chemical weapons are not satisfactory and thus call for a better explanation for the change in attitude toward chemical weapons since World War I.

In short, whether one is talking about the politics of Europe, views about racial equality, or the practice of warfare, world politics has been transformed in significant ways over the past century. Though realism and liberalism have long dominated the study of world politics, their ability to explain changes like these has been limited by different understandings of ideas, identities, and norms. Social constructivism offers a rival understanding of world politics that has the potential to explain changes like those mentioned above. We now turn to a brief discussion of constructivism’s major tenets before applying them in more detail to the cases introduced above (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 19).

The Chemical Weapons Ban
During the 20th century, states developed a tremendous capacity to make war, but this has not meant that they are completely free to make use of the weapons available. The use of some weapons, as in the case of chemical weapons, is considered "taboo," even "unthinkable" in most situations.

Richard Price argues that the case of modern chemical weapons is unique because, from the beginning, there was a sense in the international community that this category of weapon was contrary to the practices and ideals of a civilized society (Price 1995; 1997). In fact, as early as 1898, the Hague Declaration identified a ban on using such weapons in war. While this ban did not prevent combatants in World War I from using chemical weapons, it was an important factor in the prohibitions against their use in World War II. Today, chemical weapons are considered a particularly reprehensible category of weapon. They are especially not to be used against civilians (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 27).

**Beyond Material Power: Constructing Identity**

What explains the general reluctance of states to use chemical weapons? Price asks, -how is it that among the countless technological innovations in weaponry that have been used by humankind, chemical weapons almost alone have come to be stigmatized as morally illegitimate?‖ (Price 1995, 73). Realists are confused by this. Why would states give up any tool for securing power? Standard arguments explain the general lack of use of chemical weapons by arguing that they are more cruel or less useful than other weapons. However, it is difficult to conceive that death by asphyxiation is any worse than other means of dying or killing one another. In addition these weapons have military utility. Their wide usage during World War I took place precisely because they were viewed as tactically valuable. Similarly, in debates about their regulation following World War I, military negotiators tried to prevent a comprehensive ban based on their perceived utility (Price 1997). The fact is that in any number of situations since World War I chemical weapons would have been useful and in the case of World War II, possibly decisive, yet they were not used because combatants recognized that this was a line they could not cross (Price 1997). Given their utility, realists have a difficult time understanding why states would limit themselves by banning these weapons.

Constructivists focus on the social and cultural meanings and significance that society attaches to certain things and practices and thus they approach the chemical weapons ban differently. For constructivists, the taboo associated with the use of chemical weapons illustrates how certain ideas about ourselves—our identity—guide our behavior, even in warfare where physical survival is at stake. In this case the non-use of chemical weapons has stood as an important "marker of civilization" (Price 1997, 43). As such, the taboo against chemical weapons stems from our ideas about what constitutes a "civilized society" and what makes us "civilized people." This association between the non-use of chemical weapons and a civilized society began with the Hague Declaration and continues to the present day. Think, for example, about recent discussions about chemical weapons: only individuals as "uncivilized" and "barbaric" as Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden would think of using such weapons. In Saddam Hussein’s case, his "barbarism" was confirmed twice over when the world learned of his gassing of Kurdish civilians in Iraq.
By the same token, ideas of civilization have not protected all peoples equally. While the social and cultural meanings and significance society has attached to these weapons have acted as an important constraint on action, they have done so mainly against those whom actors have identified as civilized as they are. In other words, the rules and norms of warfare among _civilized_ peoples/states are often understood as different from those governing warfare with or involving _uncivilized_ peoples/states. For instance, Germany resisted using chemical weapons during the Allied invasion of Normandy in World War II, but arguably, the US had less of a problem using a form of chemical weapons (napalm) in its war against Vietnam.

In short, constructivists concentrate on questions of interpretation and identity, on how states have understood these weapons and themselves, and how those ideas are, in turn, translated into practice. The unique moral stigma associated with chemical weapons has far less to do with their inherent characteristics (e.g., their utility or inhumanity) and far more to do with _how civilizations and societies have interpreted those characteristics and translated them into practice_ (Price 1997, 6). Again, they are no less useful and no less humane than many other weapons, but states have identified these particular weapons as especially awful. States do not use them because that is not what civilized people do. Thus, writes Price, _Abiding by or violating social norms is an important way by which we gauge _who we are_—to be a certain kind of people means we just do not do certain things_ (Price 1997, 10).

Price’s discussion of the chemical weapons ban illustrates another constructivist insight, namely, that norms, identities, and practices are mutually reinforcing but at the same time are subject to change. For example, the moral stigma associated with chemical weapons, according to Price, was a necessary, but not sufficient factor in prohibiting their use since World War I. The stigma is what distinguishes chemical weapons from other weapons but had we allowed previous violations of the Hague Declaration to go unchallenged—had their use in World War I not provoked the vigorous debate about their use and significance—chemical weapons might today be a perfectly acceptable form of warfare. This also underscores the constructivist point that positive behaviors like a ban on chemical weapons require reinforcement because actors’ behaviors create expectations about what is appropriate behavior.

The perceived odiousness of chemical weapons has very much constrained actor behavior in ways unanticipated by other theories. Thus, the saying, _All’s fair in love and war_ is not completely accurate because in the conduct of war, there are some practices and some weapons that are considered _not fair_ and thus prohibited by international society. What is all the more amazing is that today, not only do states take it as fact that such weapons are horrifying, but also it is no longer socially acceptable to openly question or debate whether they are in fact inhumane and immoral. They just are. The chemical weapons ban illustrates how certain ideas and practices build upon and reinforce one another to _produce and legitimate certain behaviors and conditions of life as _normal_’ (Price 1995, 87). In other words, some ideas and some practices become so established that we come to consider them simply _facts of life_. This does not mean that those ideas and practices will not later be open to reinterpretation or change; in fact, quite the contrary. By highlighting the process of social interpretation and reinterpretation, constructivism offers an approach to world politics that considers the important dynamism of political life. Some of the greatest—and often most subtle—changes stem
from evolving ideas about how world politics should be conducted and relatedly how states and other actors think of themselves as members of particular world communities (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 27-29).

The Power of Ideas: Constructing the World for Good or Ill

With the last three examples, we have seen the power of ideas that constructivists argue is a crucial factor in explaining phenomena in world politics. Beginning with the dual notions that agents create their own contexts and the contexts shape agents, along with an emphasis on meanings, ideas, and norms, constructivists are able to explain change in world politics. They can show how states can escape the realist logic of anarchy--as the European states altered their behavior they created a context of peace and security, where there once was war and suspicion. They can show how international organizations are more than facilitators of mutual interests--the EU has come to fundamentally shape what European states want and who European states consider themselves to be. They can show how US policy toward the South African apartheid changed--through the actions of actors in world politics, an anti-apartheid norm arose and replaced the understanding that apartheid is an acceptable manner of organizing a society. They can show how chemical weapons became taboo--as states came to conceive of chemical weapons as barbaric, their actions reinforced the notion that any state that wants to consider itself, or to be considered, "civilized" will reject the use of chemical weapons.

In each case, the cycle of actors' behaviors and interactions created a new social context, and that context shaped those actors, giving rise to new ways of conceiving the world and relations between actors. It is the idea that European states are a peaceful community, the idea that apartheid is unacceptable, and the idea of a European identity and the idea that chemical weapons are taboo that shape expectations and relations. Constructivists claim that ideas (norms, rules, meanings) are powerful and must be taken into account when explaining world politics—and the empirical cases they draw upon demonstrate that their claims are plausible.

In addition, though constructivists focus on the power of ideas, they do not ignore other sources of power. Material power is not irrelevant in constructivist analysis. It should be no surprise that all ideas are not equally significant. It makes a difference who is advocating what ideas. In the case of the European Union, it is not coincidental that the cooperative relations that altered anarchy in Europe were supported and encouraged (if not demanded) by the US. Similarly, the antiapartheid movement was moving relatively slowly until it was able to change how the US viewed the issue in South Africa. Once the US was on board, the antiapartheid norm quickly became more powerful and more easily replaced the norm that held that apartheid was acceptable. Finally, it was the great powers that acted as the arbiters of civilization, deciding that chemical weapons were uncivilized—they had (and continue to have) the power to make sure that others did not use chemical weapons and this added to the power of the chemical weapons taboo.

Does this mean that it is really just material power that matters? No. In all three of those cases, though the material power of large states was integral to the change that occurred, the material power itself tells us nothing about which direction change will go. The power of the US and other great powers does not determine how they will act; even powerful states are shaped by their context. Recall the apartheid case. US behavior itself was shaped by the international context that held that apartheid was unacceptable. In
addition, though the US may have helped to initiate cooperation in Europe, it was the actions and interactions of the European states that forged the zone of peace--the power of the US may have gotten things started, but the outcome was more a result of the cycle of actors creating their context and the context shaping the actors. In constructivist analysis, then, ideas play a central role, but it is the interaction of material power and the power of ideas that explains phenomena in world politics.

Finally, as a note of caution, constructivist tools do not work to explain only the happy phenomena in world politics. Objectionable phenomena are socially constructed too. While we have highlighted three positive changes in world politics--the growth of peace in Europe, the elimination of apartheid, and the taboo restricting the use of chemical weapons--we must remember that in each of those cases, the preceding conditions were socially constructed as well.

In the case of the European Union, throughout most of the modern history of Europe, states behaved and interacted in ways that made anarchy just the way that realists conceive of it--as a condition that necessarily leads to suspicion, insecurity, and conflict. In the case of apartheid, there were international norms upholding the acceptability of apartheid--norms of sovereignty that forbid interference in another state, and norms that restricted which groups of people qualify for human rights (Klotz 1995; Finnmere 1996). Finally, in the case of chemical weapons, the ‘civilized’ great powers deemed them entirely usable in World War I, and the identity ‘civilized’ was not constructed to include the non-use of chemical weapons. Thus just as ideas like universal human rights, peace, and democracy can come to define a social context and shape actors identities, interests, and behaviors, so can ideas about oppression and conflict.

Indeed, we may be witnessing and participating in an instance of socially constructed conflict in the world around us today. In a famous (or infamous depending on your opinion) article, Samuel Huntington described what he calls the ‘Clash of Civilizations.’ He hypothesizes that the nature of conflict has changed over time--from conflict between princes (early history through 17th century) to conflict between nations (18th and 19th centuries) to conflict between ideologies (20th century) and now to conflict between civilizations (Huntington 1993, 23). He views civilizations as the highest and broadest groupings of human beings and believes that potential conflict will arise on the ‘fault lines’ between civilizations (Huntington 1993, 24–29).

This is a perfect example of the social construction of conflict. Huntington notes several ‘objective’ characteristics that civilizations share, but even Huntington admits that ‘subjective self-identification’ is necessary for a civilization to exist as a distinct group (Huntington 1993, 24). Remember that a social context--like a notion of an overarching civilization--requires that actors act in a way that produces that context. In order for a civilization to be a meaningful concept, actors have to believe they are a part of the civilization and act in ways that make the civilization real. The notion of a civilization is a socially constructed idea. In addition, even if Huntington is right that civilizations have objective elements (elements that are real regardless of what actors do or say), the notion of civilizational conflict is certainly constructed. As we learned in the case of the EU, actors create their own context--there is no inevitability to conflict between actors (civilizations or otherwise) unless actors’ actions and interactions create a conflictual social context.
The idea of civilizational conflict is a powerful one, and one that has the potential to construct world affairs in a dangerous manner. Consider the rhetoric surrounding the September 11th attacks and the US response to them. There are a number of people who discuss this tragedy and its aftermath in terms of the West versus Islam. This rhetoric reinforces the social construction of civilizational conflict. Indeed, as one observer has noted (Ba and Hoffmann 2003, 29-31),

Moreover, if we treat all states who are part of some other ‘civilization’ as intrinsically hostile, we are likely to create enemies that might otherwise be neutral or friendly. In fact, a civilizational approach to foreign policy is probably the surest way to get diverse foreign cultures to coordinate their actions and could even bring several civilizations together against us. In this sense, The Clash of Civilizations offers a dangerous, self-fulfilling prophecy: The more we believe it and make it the basis for action, the more likely it is to come true, [some] would no doubt feel vindicated, but the rest of us would not be happy with the results (Walt 1997, 189).

References

Adler, E. -Imagined (Security) Communities: Cognitive Regions in International Relations. l
Lebow, R. N. -The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism. l

---

1 For an interesting article that explains how ideas can shape the boundaries of possible behavior see Yee (1996).
2 If students are interested in going further on sovereignty, see, e.g., Barkin and Cronin (1994); Jackson (1990); Krasner (1988).
3 At least one realist observer thought that this was likely. See Mearsheimer (1990).
4 Especially when a dominant power like the US is providing a good deal of the external security for these nations.
5 If students would like to go further on the European Union, see, e.g., Moravcsik (1998); Symposium (1999).
6 Liberal analysis is more appropriate for economic issues, and liberals tend to avoid security issues like the chemical weapons ban. Thus, in this section we contrast the constructivist explanation with the realist argument alone.
7 Huntington did not focus on the West–Islam conflict to the neglect of other potential conflicts. He argued that conflict would come at the fault lines between eight major civilizations (West, Islam, Confucian (China, for the most part), Japanese, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and African.