

CHAPTER 9

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND PEACEFUL CHANGE

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SYSTEM-WIDE peaceful change gave birth to the mainstream constructivist international relations (IR) research agenda. The bipolar world, which most scholars working within the neorealist and neoliberal traditions predicted would be enduring and stable, collapsed at the beginning of the 1990s. While some realists expected such a systemic change to occur through hegemonic wars (Gilpin 1981, 1988), the bipolar order was dismantled without resort to large-scale physical force between the United States and the USSR.¹ Both the end of the Cold War and its largely peaceful nature constituted a puzzle for existing IR paradigms and theories.

The lack of theoretical tools to explain this largely peaceful global change provided an opening to a more socially informed study of the world and an opportunity for the constructivist paradigm to become a cornerstone of IR theorizing. In this chapter we argue that scholars working in the constructivist tradition have emphasized three theoretical building blocks that explain peaceful change and how peaceful relations can be maintained in times of upheavals and transitions: *factors* (such as culture or identity), *actors* (such as norm entrepreneurs), and *mechanisms* (such as persuasion and socialization). These help us understand and explain peaceful change on the individual, social, and global levels.

By showing how constructivist research on peaceful change is continuously expanding rather than refining existing explanations, we argue that there is no 'core' research program or approach but instead a kaleidoscope of theories that variably emphasize different factors, actors, or mechanisms. Consequently, while constructivist theorizing has contributed to our understanding of peaceful change, room for conversation between the different theories and approaches remains. We believe that such conversations are a fruitful engagement. First, given their historical momentum and proximity to liberal political thought in the 1990s, constructivist theories have implicitly focused on peaceful change and sidestepped the question of what scope conditions lead to violent or nonviolent outcomes. A second, related line of inquiry that needs more theoretical development is how

the different factors, actors, and mechanisms of existing theories interact with one another. We know that norm entrepreneurs can work towards peaceful change and that socialization is as important a mechanism as norm diffusion. However, constructivist scholars could emphasize more how these factors can strengthen each other to lead to peaceful change by looking into how different levels of analysis are related. A third challenge, not particular to theories of peaceful change, is the question of how to demonstrate empirically the purchasing power of these theories. Constructivist scholars are still to find common definitions of such concepts as *norms* or *culture*.

In this chapter, we first discuss constructivism's rise to become a major IR paradigm and the epistemology on which theories of peaceful change rest by touching upon constructivism's rich and variable research tradition, comprising conventional, critical, and postpositivist approaches. In a second step, we turn to constructivist ontologies and present the factors of change, the actors that drive change, and the mechanisms that can lead to peaceful change. Third, we discuss biases in the constructivist research agenda, such as the initial emphasis on "good," "Western" norms, identities, and values, which left the conditions of violent versus peaceful change unexplored. We conclude with a discussion on understanding and explaining the prospect of peaceful change, especially as the potentially waning global predominance of the United States drives a renewed quest to define changes in the global order.

THE ORIGINS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM: PEACEFUL CHANGE

While the end of the Cold War gave birth to the mainstream constructivist research agenda, constructivist theorizing had developed before that. Critics of the dominant, 'rationalist' theories of IR, and of international regimes in particular, showed that sociological factors matter in defining behavior, beyond the material distribution of power (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986). Actors follow rules as they simplify choices and provide templates for recurring social situations, thus facilitating overall coordination (Kratochwil 1984, 707). The role of institutions thus goes well beyond simply coordinating given interests; they constitute interests that cannot be defined independent of the context in which they are formed.

This theoretical groundwork became more prominent across IR scholarship with the end of the Cold War. Koslowski and Kratochwil (1994) argued that the end of the bipolar world is not a result of a shift in exogenous variables such as the distribution of material capabilities, but a change in domestic and international practices, beliefs, and identities. The Soviet leadership conceding to German reunification and allowing national elites to liberalize their political systems across the former Communist bloc (Risse-Kappen 1994) were significant changes in the constitutive rules of the Cold War. Such new ideas, however, were 'not floating freely'; they were embedded in interlocking domestic and

international processes such as empowering liberal internationalist groups across Europe and the United States, and within the Soviet Union (Risse-Kappen 1994, 195).

Conventional constructivists showed that concepts such as identity, norms, and culture, long considered epiphenomenal to material variables (Keohane 1984; Mearsheimer 2003; Waltz 2010), can meaningfully influence actors' behavior (Wendt 1992; Checkel 1999; Risse-Kappen et al. 1999). Critical constructivists shifted the focus to how social phenomena are constituted in the first place (Hopf 1998; Finnemore 2004a). Postpositivist constructivist scholars, in turn, revealed the hegemonic nature of such constructs and the power relations they perpetuate, reminding us that we as scholars also need to situate ourselves first before we can understand the social fabric of the political (Laffey and Weldes 1997; Milliken 1999). Constructivist scholars emphasized not only a new ontology—akin to liberal scholars in this respect—but also a new epistemology that facilitated the study of change over time and across places.

OPEN TO CHANGE: THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE MEANINGS

Explaining the end of the Cold War gave credit to the idea that social and political order is not solely the outcome of material factors. Material attributes such as economic and military preponderance have to be interpreted in their context. “Constructivism,” writes Stefano Guzzini, “does not deny the existence of a phenomenal world,” but it opposes the idea that “phenomena can constitute themselves as objects of knowledge independent of discursive practices” (2000, 159). “What makes the world hang together” (Ruggie 1998), “a world of our making” (Onuf 1989), and “what states make of it” (Wendt 1992), in other words, are the interpretive frames, ideas, identities, norms, rules, and culture that define the attributes of social phenomena. Social phenomena, constructivists argue, ultimately rest on social conventions. These social conventions, such as the value of money or the force of law, are ultimately created and re-created based on people’s belief that they are part of social reality. Their endurance depends on conscious social actors behaving in a way that sustains that collective belief. Social phenomena are thus created in an “intersubjective” manner: in-between, and through the interactions of, self-reflexive social actors.

In situations governed by collectively held meanings, actors acquire understandings about who they are and how they should behave. These identities, or “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” (Wendt 1992, 397), often define their reasons or possibilities for action. If social and political order is not the reflection of material capabilities alone, but of those collectively held meanings and feelings of belonging that social actors attribute to them, the conditions and pathways of change are different from those in an order defined purely by material factors.

This makes constructivist scholars well placed to study change. Change happens through transforming collectively held social beliefs and meanings that sustain social institutions and conventions. If this transformation happens without resorting to force, or without leading to violence, we speak of peaceful change. Change is violent if the primary means of transforming ideational factors is force, or if their transformation results in violence. Constructivists show that both peaceful and violent changes may be legitimate if they are so defined by dominant social institutions, conventions and beliefs.

PEACEFUL CHANGE: CONCEPTS AND MECHANISMS

The constructivist research agenda has expanded widely since the 1990s. It has opened up foundational concepts of IR to scrutiny, such as anarchy (Wendt 1992), power (Guzzini 2005), regimes (Ruggie 1992, 1993), preferences (Duffield 2003; Rathbun 2004; Hofmann 2013), sovereignty (Osiander 2001; Bartelson 2014), security (Baldwin 1997; Buzan et al. 1998; Huysmans 1998), and the state (Reus-Smit 1999). It has shown that these categories are constructed both in the social world and in academic discourse, and that they are historically contingent.

The study of peaceful change has benefited from these broader theoretical and conceptual contributions. We reconstruct the constructivist contributions to debates on peaceful change in three thematic groups: the factors that constructivist research prioritizes to reveal the social construction of the world and the 'sites' where change might happen; the actors that drive change; and the mechanisms through which change happens and which are conceptualized as the theoretical combination of actors and factors. We review these aspects by asking under what conditions they contribute to peaceful change rather than change *per se*.

The review shows that, first, constructivist scholars mainly focus on 'reasonable' states and transnational 'good' actors that contribute to the spread of 'good' norms, such as human rights or democracy, as opposed to actors that openly challenge these norms. The implicit alignment with the liberal notions of progress and lack of engagement with the conditions of violence and war (Adler 1997, 346; Jackson 2008) initially formed a major blind spot in the constructivist research agenda that was only partly counterbalanced by critical constructivist contributions. Second, the constructivist research program remains in the phase of expansion rather than of consolidation when it comes to peaceful change. Through this evolving process, the paradigm accumulates more and more concepts and theories rather than solving conceptual tensions and relationships. Instead of prioritizing conceptual and theoretical comparison and working toward a 'core' of constructivist peaceful change research, constructivist scholarship presents a kaleidoscope of factors, actors, and mechanisms. This lack of consolidation is

exemplified, for instance, by constructivist writing being juxtaposed with other IR paradigms rather than with other constructivist approaches.

Factors of Change

Some constructivist work primarily focuses on what we call factors, ideational and social concepts, based on which scholars explain or understand peaceful change. Of the several factors that have been introduced to the literature, we focus here on ideas, culture, norms, identities, discourses, practices, and visuals.²

Individually held *ideas* are one factor that constructivists have emphasized to understand peaceful transitions. Craig Parsons, for example, shows that peace on the European continent followed from a particular idea of European integration that transformed former enemies such as France and Germany into partners (Parsons 2002). Ideas can play the same role on the global level. The institutional shape of the post-Second World War international order, inspired by multilateralism, could be understood in terms of the effort to preserve peaceful international relations.

Collectively held ideational factors can also help us in understanding and explaining peaceful change. One such factor is *culture*, understood by conventional constructivists as a “set of evaluative [and] cognitive standards that define what social actions exist in a system, how they operate, and how they relate to one another” (Katzenstein 1996, 6). Scholars have focused predominantly on national or organizational cultures. What prompts national security strategies and doctrine to be defensive rather than offensive, leading ultimately to a more peaceful national position? Kier (1997) answers by showing how the organizational cultures within militaries can explain whether they opt for an offensive or defensive posture. Focusing on national security cultures, the German domestic debates on whether to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO’s) operation in Kosovo (Hyde-Price 2001) or the Japanese ones on whether to engage in peacekeeping (Singh 2011) attest to the resilience of national security cultures in defining defensive or offensive foreign policy.

Another collectively held factor is *norms*. Norms, for conventional constructivists, are “collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity” (Katzenstein 1996, 5; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891). They supply understandings of what is appropriate behavior in a given situation, without determining the exact course of action (Kratochwil 2000). Peaceful change then follows when there are norms in place that rule out violence as a desirable or permissible course of action. Constructivist research has contributed widely to our understanding of how to generate norms that make violence less permissible or reasonable. The prohibition of certain weapons and the origins of violence-constraining rules such as international humanitarian law are prominent examples (Finnemore 1999). The taboo against the use of nuclear weapons, for instance, was conditioned on the perception of American administrations that their use would generate global moral outrage (Tannenwald 1999). The prohibition against using chemical weapons, on the other hand, was built on the perception that they are

uncivilized weapons. This contributed to an absolute moral prohibition against their use even if these characteristics did not single out chemical weapons from other weaponry (Price 1995).

Yet another factor that contributes to understanding and explaining peaceful change is *identity*. Similar to culture, this can be held by different collectives such as nations or social groups. Identity may be the most studied factor in terms of both peaceful and violent relations and change. Scholars have shown that identity, or actors' perceptions of who they are, can both facilitate and hinder peaceful change. The process of 'othering,' or creating the self through distinguishing it from non-self, is as present on the international level as on the domestic one. Constructivists show how particular identity constructions legitimize oppressive foreign policy practices and international hierarchies between states, as well as how they create subaltern positions that are difficult to challenge peacefully (Doty 1993; Zarakol 2011; Morozov and Rumelili 2012). On the other hand, identity might be constructed so that it reduces perceived differences and facilitates cooperation. An example is that of former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who framed the question of occupied territories in relation to Israeli identity in a way that opened the possibility of the Oslo peace process (Barnett 1999).

While conventional constructivists understand norms, culture, and identity as collectively stable, coherent, and bounded social systems, critical and postpositivist scholars have challenged this view by showing that they are "strange multiplicities" (Tully 1995) of internally contested, loosely integrated, and overall heterogeneous social products (Lapid 1996; Laffey and Weldes 1997). Therefore, through three consecutive 'turns,' critical constructivists have focused on mediums of meaning making as factors of change: discourses, practices, and most recently, visuals.

Conceptualizing language as a system of signification that is not merely descriptive but also constitutive of the reality it represents (Searle 1969; Austin 1975), constructivists understand *discourses* as "grids of intelligibility" that define social subjects, objects, and their relationship to each other (Milliken 1999, 230). Discourses, however, are essentially unstable and need to be reproduced time and again to sustain the social phenomena they constitute. The focus on discourses prompted constructivists to analyze language games (Fierke 1998), in which meaning is generated by the reliance on dominant metaphors that structure understanding. Peaceful change at the end of the Cold War, for instance, resulted from gradual changes in which the dominant metaphor of enmity was transformed into that of cooperation between the United States and the USSR (Fierke 1998).

Another medium constructivists focused on as a site of reproducing collective meanings is *practices*, sets of situated knowledge (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014) that characterize professional communities. These sets of knowledge are habitually enacted as deep-seated beliefs about what things are and how things are done. Practitioners thus inhabit and reproduce the social world based on such sets of situated knowledge that are the subject of constructivist theorizing (Neumann 2002; Adler and Pouliot 2011). The study of practices took constructivism in new directions (McCourt 2016), including theorizing peaceful change as a change either in the subjectivity of practitioners, the

practices themselves, or in the broader social orders they constitute (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 18).

Studying the politics of representation outside the medium of language led to a so-called aesthetic or visual turn in critical constructivist scholarship (Bleiker 2001). *Visual representation* is often beyond the scope of discourse analytical methods, due to the idiosyncratic ways in which it generates meaning (Saugmann Andersen et al. 2014; Bleiker 2015). What becomes visible potentially generates a more powerful impact on spectators than words do. Security, war, and violence, which remain the main focus of studying visuals in IR, are often represented by images, which are destined not only to show, but also to exert strong emotional responses (Bleiker 2018). International icons, that is, internationally circulated, freestanding images, intervene in the course of international politics as they are appropriated in international discourses and change their meanings (Hansen 2015). The images from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, for instance, induced widespread condemnation and moral outrage over torture in American detention centers in the context of the war on terror, mobilizing toward a change in these practices.

Finally, constructivist scholars turned the gaze of the discipline upon itself, showing that the analytical categories of IR are far from being neutral descriptions of an ‘objective’ reality (Guzzini 2000; Hamati-Ataya 2012). The discipline is therefore also a factor of change, as it supplies the analytical vocabulary through which scholars and practitioners create the world. Feminist constructivist scholars, in particular, have shown that the emphasis of mainstream theories on deterrence, war, self-help, survival, rule, and domination encapsulate a worldview in which violence and destruction is an ever-present occurrence (Cohn 1987; Tickner 1992). They point to alternative vocabularies and ontologies of IR, which, by looking at human resilience and the capacity to heal, are more conducive to peaceful change. Elina Penttinen, for instance, documents the female experience of war beyond suffering and advocates focusing not on “what is going wrong” but on “what is working” (Penttinen 2013, 14). By embracing such positive ontologies, IR and IR scholars themselves are potentially agents of peaceful change (Ingersoll 2016; Penttinen 2019; Choi et al. 2020).

Actors of Change

If the factors of change responded to the question of what, in constructivist thinking, can be changed or contributes toward peace, it is also important to consider the kinds of actors that can elicit change in a peaceful direction. Constructivist ontology is open to a wide range of actors and identifies agency beyond and within the state, and most recently even in inanimate objects. Here we pay particular attention to norm entrepreneurs, epistemic communities, international bureaucracies, transnational and subnational actors, pivotal states, and images/objects. Agency is where social interaction creates and sustains politically influential ideas that potentially drive peaceful change.

On the individual level, constructivists have introduced *norm entrepreneurs* (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) as actors that can generate change toward peace. They can do so by developing policy proposals, mobilizing wide-ranging support for such proposals, commissioning expert input, and disseminating knowledge (Ratner 1999). Constructivist accounts of the peaceful end of the Cold War included the role of Mikhail Gorbachev's conviction of pursuing cooperation and the trust he developed with Ronald Reagan (Lebow 2010).

This crucial role of individuals, however, is predicated upon the right context, which often means being surrounded by like-minded individuals or institutional structures. The cessation of forcible sovereign debt collection in the early twentieth century is a case in point. What facilitated stopping the practice was not only Argentinian norm entrepreneurship but also the gradual replacement of military officials by international lawyers as representatives of the state at international negotiations. This *epistemic community* of international lawyers shared an understanding of the value and meaning of state sovereignty and of forcible debt collection as a practice breaching that sovereignty. In contrast to military professionals, lawyers were more predisposed to rule out force as a means of settling sovereign debt (Finnemore 2004b). Another example of epistemic communities inducing peaceful change is that of American defense intellectuals, who were instrumental in providing technical expertise and policy options for nuclear arms control. Institutionalizing these ideas in both policy and academic circles and thus strengthening their legitimacy, they created the conditions for nuclear arms control both domestically and internationally (Adler 1992).

International bureaucracies share the constitutive function of epistemic communities in the sense of creating and institutionalizing discursive categories and practices that sustain social phenomena. The authority of bureaucracies derives from four main characteristics: they are hierarchical, they provide a continuity to the categories and activities they define, they generate expertise, and they impersonally represent the reality they create (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 18). While this kind of organizational form displays its own pathologies (Barnett and Finnemore 1999), international bureaucracies can also push for peaceful change through creating a social environment in which differences are being tolerated and socialization is possible over time (Johnston 2001). International bureaucracies, for example, can foster peaceful change through three roles: as knowledge brokers, negotiation facilitators and capacity builders (Andler et al. 2009, 47–49).

An achievement of constructivist scholarship is to have shown that nonstate actors, such as *transnational nongovernmental organizations*, have agency in international politics. Some have followed transnational civil society actors in fighting for a ban on anti-personnel land mines and cluster munitions or the regulation of small and light weapons (Price 1998; Petrova 2016). Price, for example, shows how an unlikely alliance of diverse groups managed to successfully convince decisionmakers that antipersonnel land mines are costly and indiscriminate weapons that do not advance military goals (Price 1998). More broadly, Keck and Sikkink, as well as Risse-Kappen and his colleagues, show the instrumental role of transnational advocacy networks in eliciting compliance with

international norms (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse-Kappen et al. 1999). These scholars have demonstrated that transnational groups can achieve peaceful change even vis-à-vis powerful states by generating and disseminating information, organizing networks, fashioning their normative proposals in accordance with accepted normative standards, and forcing governmental actors to publicly account for their conduct.

Constructivists have also shown that the constellation of *subnational actors*, such as the relationship between the civilian political elite and the military, can help us explain how war prone or offensive a state is (Kier 1997). Others, like Brian Rathbun and Stephanie Hofmann, have looked into the role of political parties and showed that depending on these actors' value constellations—carried by the party but also constructed by party leadership—we can point to which party will be more interventionist in power (Rathbun 2004; Hofmann 2013, 2019).

Many constructivists have pointed to *pivotal states* and their potential to change normative discourses. Canada and Norway played such a pivotal role in shaping the notion of human security (Paris 2001). Constructivists often emphasized that small states, which according to rational IR theories should not have much bargaining power on the international scene, contribute to the social construction of meaning, prompting other actors to rethink security (Ingebritsen 2002). The case of Sweden in promoting norms of conflict prevention through norm construction, agenda shaping, coalition building, and supporting institutionalization both at the United Nations (UN) and the European Union is such an example (Björkdahl 2013).

Most recently, scholars of the visual turn have proposed to think about the materiality of the world as an actor in its own right. Moving away from both discourses and practices enacted by human actors, scholars have drawn our attention to the power of *images and objects* that in and of themselves can have agency and impact social interactions, because they structure what humans perceive as possible or permissible. Adler-Nissen and Drieschova (2019) focus on the role of internet and communication technologies as structuring diplomatic documents; Anna Leander shows the inescapable questions drones pose for legal expertise (Leander 2013); and, drawing on psychological work, Jonathan Austin argues that prison cameras restrain prison guards (Austin 2019).

Mechanisms and Processes of Peaceful Change

The actors and factors identified in the preceding discussion combine into mechanisms of change. We can distinguish among micro-, meso-, and macro-level mechanisms. Many of these mechanisms have been analyzed in isolation, often through case studies, paying less attention to how they interact with each other across time and space. In the following we present a few of the most prominent mechanisms of peaceful change, with a particular emphasis on persuasion, norm life cycle and norm localization, norm contestation, socialization, systems change, and hegemonic transitions, eliciting the particular factors and actors they combine.

The micro-level mechanisms that potentially elicit change in the behavior of individuals range from coercion through social influence to affective mechanisms (Finnemore 2004a). Among them, a peaceful mechanism that excludes not only violence, but also any form of coercion, is *persuasion*. What makes persuasion an outstanding mechanism of peaceful change is the conditions in which it unfolds. It is predicated upon a social setting in which participants—norm entrepreneurs, (pivotal) states, international or transnational organizations—come together as equals, irrespective of the differences in their relative power (Johnstone 2003; Ratner 2012). Having access to deliberation on an equal basis, they can all in principle put forward a better argument in order to change other participants' ideas, norms, or those evaluative and cognitive standards that constitute their culture. Persuasive arguments often change underlying beliefs by being emotionally appealing, accounting for evidence better than competing arguments, or being articulated by persons of authority or expertise. Crawford demonstrates this empirically with the examples of decolonization and the abolition of slavery (Crawford 2002, 35). Constructivists are aware of the difficulty of empirically discerning genuine persuasion (Krebs and Jackson 2007), and they theoretically distinguish between persuasion (Checkel 2001; Payne 2001; Deitelhoff 2009) and strategic adjustment of behavior, such as rhetorical entrapment (Schimmelfennig 2001; Risse 2004; Petrova 2016). However, we can observe persuasion when states agree to an outcome at the end of the negotiation process that they opposed beforehand, a tangible example of which is the creation of the International Criminal Court (Deitelhoff 2009).

Mechanisms that connect the micro to the meso level are the *norm life cycle* model and *norm localization*. Norm entrepreneurs can contribute with normative proposals for peaceful change. Once a sufficient proportion of a relevant audience, whether states, transnational actors, or international bureaucracies, accepts this new normative proposal, norms reach a tipping point and “cascade” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895). A different understanding of norm life cycles derives from the logic of adjusting generic rules to specific circumstances, then learning from specific cases and adjusting the generic rules accordingly (Sandholtz 2008). In this latter model, the relevant actors that shift normative understandings are major states, whose agreement is necessary for norm change. Norm localization concerns not the creation but the spread of normative standards among different contexts. Constructivists have shown the prominent role of transnational actors in this context. In the process, global standards are often reinterpreted to the extent of modifying their normative content (Acharya 2004; Kurowska 2014a; Zimmermann 2017a). Neither norm localization nor the mechanism of norm diffusion is, however, limited to transnational actors. Norm diffusion implies an actor, individual or collective, that actively promotes its normative standards, and other actors emulating norms on the receiving end (Börzel and Risse 2012, 5; Winston 2018).

To problematize the concept of emulation at the receiver's side, constructivist scholars showed that normative and cultural standards are re-evaluated at every encounter between different actors. The research program on *norm contestation* theorizes this as the default mode of all norm application (Wiener 2018). For constructivists, the contestation involved in the previously mentioned mechanisms—persuasion, norm life

cycles, norm localization, and norm diffusion—is not an indicator of violent and illegitimate change. Instead, it is a process through which different socially stratified groups negotiate and interact with one another (Wiener 2018). For this to happen peacefully, contestation needs to unfold under certain conditions, through frequent and sustained interaction between participants and in an established institutional setting. This way, participants become aware of their normative baggage and can resolve their issues even under conditions of global diversity (Zimmermann 2017b). In other words, contestation has to be inclusive and regular enough to accommodate dissenting views.

On the meso level, collectives such as international bureaucracies or epistemic communities can pass on their prevalent norms by socializing actors into their standards and practices. *Socialization* means that an actor—often a new member state in an international organization, or its officials joining an epistemic community or international bureaucracy—learns to comply with the dominant ideas, norms, cultural standards, discourses, and practices of a community and adopts them as the appropriate course of action in that social environment (Checkel 2005, 804). Institutions are primary sites of socialization, the site of generating peaceful change in the beliefs and/or in the behavior of old- and newcomers by initiating them into various roles and standards of behavior. For example, Alexandra Gheciu shows how former enemy countries were socialized into the Western understanding of civil-military relations before entering NATO (Gheciu 2005). NATO is also an example of a particular kind of socialization that happens through the continuous articulation of security communities. Adler and Barnett (1998, 30) define a pluralistic security community as a “region of states whose people maintain dependable expectations of peaceful change.” Based on continuous interactions, for example in organizations, actors establish mutual trust and a collective identity over time, and security communities sustain themselves in changing structural conditions. This is why NATO persisted after the end of the Cold War, even if its primary *raison d'être* had vanished.

Moving to the macro level, constructivist researchers distinguish between “systems change,” or the transition from one international system to the other, and “systemic change,” a shift in actors’ relative positions under the same organizing principle (Reus-Smit 2013, 198–202)—as realist scholars such as Gilpin have done before them. *Systems change* is understood in terms of process rather than mechanism, because it unfolds over a longer time (Reus-Smit 2013, 200; Nexon 2009), and involves interlacing mechanisms on different levels and multiple sites. Instead of an episodic and radical disruption, constructivist scholars view systems change as gradual and reconfigurative (Phillips 2016, 488). Within this multilayered process, however, they point to concrete mechanisms of peaceful change. One example is the transition from colonial empires to the community of sovereign states. Although decolonization was not peaceful on all levels, Reus-Smit argues that the main mechanisms of bringing about this change were the radicalization of subject peoples’ elites to demand statehood instead of reforms, combined with the newly independent states’ rhetoric at the UN to frame self-determination as the extension of individual civil and political rights (Reus-Smit 2011, 234–235). Systems change can therefore be the result of subnational actors addressing legitimacy claims not only through armed conflicts and revolts but also through institutionalized forums.

Elsewhere, and drawing on constructivist, English school, sociological, and anthropological insights, Reus-Smit defines systems as “diversity regimes,” which legitimize certain units of political authority on the one hand and recognized categories of cultural difference on the other (Reus-Smit 2017, 876). Just as in the case of decolonization, diversity regimes are challenged by grievances of unequal recognition. Change follows especially if an actor with sufficient material power sets out to have its cultural difference recognized, although we need more theorizing on when this unfolds peacefully. Challenging existing diversity regimes is a mechanism of systems change, which also involves transforming ideas, identity, norms, discourses, and practices of recognition within that regime. The challenge is more significant if the actor is materially powerful; in this mechanism, therefore, the key actors will be states, especially great powers.

Constructivist scholars have also addressed existing realist and liberal theories such as *hegemonic stability and transition* theory. Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf have argued in favor of a thicker understanding of hegemony (Hopf 2013; Allan et al. 2018). They argue that the systemwide distribution of identity among great powers matters for our understanding of peaceful change. They combine identity with pivotal states (in this case great powers) as well as the mass public to formulate their mechanism of hegemonic transition and stability. They argue that we can expect peaceful relations when an emerging hegemonic ideology is consistent with the distribution of identity at both the elite and public levels among great powers. Should a rising state—in terms of material power—challenge the distribution of identity with a counterhegemonic discourse, it is unlikely to succeed. This theory, for example, can explain the peaceful change from *Pax Britannica* to *Pax Americana*. Kori Schake argues that the declining Great Britain and the rising United States came to perceive each other as being politically alike. While Allan et al. do not theorize how identities can change and accommodation occur, Schake demonstrates empirically nine political encounters over a century, in which Britain gradually became more democratic, while the United States became more imperial, and the resulting “unique sense of political sameness” played a role in avoiding a major conflict (Schake 2017, 271). Schake’s theory would thus foreclose the possibility of China’s accommodation in the current international order as long as it does not buy into its dominant ideological discourse. This is just one of the many examples in which an interaction and elaboration of scope conditions of several mechanisms—such as socialization and normative contestation—could benefit a broader picture of peaceful change.

BIASES: ARE ALL CHANGES PEACEFUL?

Given the major impact of the end of the Cold War on the constructivist research agenda and that of the “golden” 1990s, in which some proclaimed the end of history (Fukuyama 2006) and heralded the international liberal order (Deudney and Ikenberry

1999), constructivist scholarship emphasized peaceful change over other dynamics and outcomes. This led to at least two analytical biases. The first is a focus on progressive, unidirectional change; the second, related bias is the initial focus on ‘good’ norms often associated with Western and supposedly universal values such as democracy or respect for the rule of law.

The emphasis on progressive change is exemplified in the concept of norm cascade of Finnemore and Sikkink or in the focus of norm diffusion literature and socialization as a top-down process, in which actors around the globe become more alike with time. Some scholars addressed these biases and introduced localization mechanisms (Acharya 2004; Lenz 2013) or postcolonial resistance (Anghie 1999; Anghie et al. 2003; Morozov 2013) to our understanding of change.

As democratic movements accompanied the end of the Cold War and democratic transformations happened around the globe, constructivist scholars emphasized the liberal repertoire of norms and values that shaped identities and cultures. The research agenda then expanded to ‘good’ norms and values, such as conventional and nuclear disarmament; humanitarianism; and the abolition of slavery, colonialism, or apartheid. However, nothing in the constructivist research program forecloses the study of ‘bad’ norms and ‘bad’ actors. Indeed, the rise of populism or the cruelty in the conduct of extremist groups triggers more and more scholarly reflection on normative changes that move away from universally agreed upon standards (Welsh 2016). To correct the bias toward liberal values as global values, constructivists inquired about the violent implications of liberal practices (Geis and Wagner 2011; Zehfuss 2011) or showed that peaceful social standards are not unique to liberal ideologies but are also found in collectives whose priorities are different (Crawford 1994).

A last potential bias that should be mentioned briefly here is methodological. Early on, many scholars criticized constructivist scholarship for being primarily conceptual and theoretical and for supporting their arguments with only qualitative methods, often focusing on a few and selective cases (Keohane 1988; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Chernoff 2008)—and this criticism arguably still lingers. While this might strike some as a problem, we argue that the use of crucial and hard cases as well as macro-historical processes has significantly contributed to IR’s understanding of peaceful change. In addition, some constructivist work is built on large-N studies (see, e.g., Allan et al. 2018), trying to combine interpretivist methods with large-scale data collection. As Brigden and Gohdes (2020) have shown, it is possible to “study violence across methodological boundaries.” The same should be possible for studying peace. And if we focus on peace and violence, theories’ scope conditions will be refined in the process.

CONCLUSION

As outlined in this chapter, one of the achievements of constructivism (i.e., conventional, critical, postpositivist approaches) has been to ‘denaturalize’ the discourses and

practices that make up the world's social fabric but arguably overemphasize the potential for peaceful change compared to violent change.

Constructivism accords a genuine role to ideational actors and factors and acknowledges both the benefits of following them and the social costs of breaching them. Given also its epistemology, which embraces reflexivity both concerning the objects of study in IR and in knowledge production by practitioners of IR theory, it opens potential avenues for change, peaceful or not, in the world and in our scholarly communities. As constructivist scholarship is able to address traditional questions asked in liberal and realist schools of thought, postpositivist and critical constructivists can also help us understand how core-periphery relations lead not only to change but to peaceful change that might not be universal.

What does the constructivist paradigm say about the world of today and tomorrow? The preponderance of the United States is challenged by, among other factors, the rise of China and the Russian contestation of liberal practices and norms. Populist and nationalist ideas around the world challenge ideas of peaceful coexistence and change. With the change or demise of the so-called liberal order (Ikenberry 2018; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2019), many normative 'advancements' appear to be contested and reversible. The emerging research programs on normative contestation (Wiener 2018), regional specificities and interwoven global-regional dynamics (Acharya 2017; Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2020), and cultural diversity (Reus-Smit 2017; Phillips and Reus-Smit 2020) enable constructivist researchers to make sense of these dynamics. Future theoretical developments could spell out more precisely the conditions of peaceful versus violent change.

As constructivism is agnostic to units and levels of analysis, it exhibits a certain theoretical openness and flexibility that enriches our understanding of the cultural and normative diversity that unites and divides the globe. However, while scholars have identified various actors, factors, and mechanisms, they have paid less attention to how these interact with one another. It might well be that global changes are peaceful in some regions but less peaceful in others. Or changes might initially be violent but later consolidate into peaceful change. The constructivist research agenda on peaceful change is in full bloom; it has been host to many theories that variably emphasize factors, actors, and mechanisms that contribute to peaceful change. It is time to think about possible cross-fertilization, as well as about specifying the exact scope of constructivism's various branches.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Erna Burai and Stephanie C. Hofmann's research for this chapter was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant number #100017_172667).

NOTES

1. This is not to say that no violence occurred. The disintegration of the USSR at first involved peaceful movements, but the tidal wave that followed was accompanied by civil wars, displacement, and ethnic cleansing (Beissinger 1993).

2. Power is omnipresent in these factors. Depending on the theory, these factors comprise structural, diffuse, or institutional power (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Katzenstein and Seybert 2018). Power can be, inter alia, institutional position, access to information, membership in an epistemic community, access to a set of situational knowledge, or the capacity to change language games or to organize an alliance to achieve a particular normative purpose. In these various reincarnations, power is primarily wielded in a peaceful manner.

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