Can Constructivism Improve Foreign Policy Practice in an Era of Global Governance?

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Scientific inquiry entails the risk that theoretical advances outpace the updating of 'lessons' applied to policy problems. Over time, this gap between practical knowledge and the 'state of the art' widens unless conscious updating efforts are made. This paper is such an attempt. The largest recent development in IR theory has been the emergence of constructivism; yet, despite its theoretical significance, it has not yet been systematically applied to the practice of international relations. The enduring appeal of mainstream IR theories is attributable in part to their clear 'lessons' for policymakers. Constructivists argue that existing realist and liberal frameworks proceed from inadequate theoretical foundations that generate problematic 'lessons' for foreign policy. However, the question of what alternative lessons can be drawn from constructivism remains unanswered. The paper examines the 'lessons' (indicated in bold type) associated with realist and liberal theories. It then advances a set of constructivist lessons, to compare and contrast the resulting constructivist foreign policy primer with its mainstream counterparts. It assesses the degree of novel content, as well as the potential impact of a constructivist foreign policy on prospects for peaceful conflict resolution and for improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of global governance.

Realist Lessons

Before enumerating the foreign policy lessons to be drawn from realist theory, it is necessary to point out two general caveats that apply equally to my attempts to draw policy lessons from each of the theoretical traditions examined in this paper. First, it is important to avoid conflation of the explanatory and the prescriptive. My claim is not that all of the realists surveyed here believe that the world should work in the way their theories expect, that they would advocate particular policies that have been justified on the grounds of realist theory, or even that they would specify the foreign policy lessons derivable from realism in exactly the

same way that I will. Realism provides an especially vivid illustration of the difference between explanation and prescription. While the realist tradition in modern international relations claims lineage to theorists such as Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli who believed both that war was a recurrent phenomenon in world politics and that war could be a useful (and appropriate) tool of statecraft, modern realists have taken public stands against war – most recently in the 2003 Iraq War.[1] That said, it would be naïve to suggest that academics never seek the attention of policymakers, or to say that academics do not (or should not) attempt to bring their theories to the 'real world'. In international relations, particularly as it has traditionally been conceived, that 'real world' is intimately connected to state ministries of defence and foreign affairs. Prominent scholars of international relations have gone so far as to serve in government positions, particularly in the United States.[2] Furthermore, once published, academic findings can be employed by others to warrant or justify actions and policies. These policies need not be approved by the original author. Thus, foreign policy lessons can be drawn from theories of international relations independently of the original authors' participation in the process.

While it is important to take extreme care in imputing responsibility for a particular policy to a specific scholar or group of scholars, it is nevertheless possible to identify core lessons associated with different explanatory theories of international relations. In some cases, scholars working in those theoretical traditions have directly drawn these connections, and participated in policy advocacy or policy-making. In other cases, policy lessons have been drawn (perhaps, but not necessarily, erroneously) by other scholars or by non-academics. The

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[1] John J. Mearsheimer, "War with Iraq Is Not in America's National Interest," *New York Times*, 26 September 2002.
[2] The epistemic communities literature demonstrates the authority scholars have exerted over government policy by relying on their socially bestowed expert status. See Peter M. Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992).

key point is that regardless of their wisdom or academic soundness, these lessons can become socially effective if they are broadly adopted or endorsed by key decision-makers.

The second general cautionary point is that paradigmatic theories of international relations contain nodes of disagreement among the researchers that comprise the associated intellectual community. In the hope of avoiding charges that I construct 'straw men', I will endeavour to point out important debates within the three paradigmatic theories that I examine in the paper and to highlight any important consequences of these disagreements for policy lessons associated with the theory.

The enduring attraction of realism as a lens for viewing the world, and creating foreign policy, is best explained by two primary factors: (1) simplicity, and (2) compatibility with the particularly modern idea that the "moral purpose of the state", to borrow Christian Reus-Smit's apt phrase, is to protect and enhance the security of its population.[3] The ability to provide clear guidelines for action that take advantage of the deep legitimacy of the modern state as a social form helps to ensure a presumption of reasonableness for realist ideas in the popular imagination and in political discourse. If realism is about ensuring state security, and if the state is the legitimate protector of the political community, then realism is an instrument for attaining perhaps the most fundamental social good. This is a clear and powerful claim for legitimacy, and a *prima facie* explanation for the dominant role of realism in framing not only the development of international relations theory, but also the conduct of foreign policy debates.[4]

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[3] Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), Chapter 6. I do not discount the relevance or importance of the notion that the influence of realism is sustained at least in part by the confluence of political and economic interests, for example those of military leaders and defence contractors. Such claims may well have merit, but are beyond the scope of this paper. In any event, simplicity and instrumentality to a widely-valued social good do not necessarily exclude the importance of realist constituencies.

[4] Daniel Drezner has demonstrated, in my view convincingly, that the notion of an anti-realist strain in American public opinion, for example, is inaccurate. He finds that "surveys about foreign policy world views and priorities, the use of force, and foreign economic policies all reveal a strong realist bent among the mass American public."

Realist policy lessons, like realist theory, begin with anarchy. Specifically, the lesson is that anarchy is constant and unchanging. While on the surface this seems like merely a descriptive statement, it contains a critical implicit lesson: that **anarchy is not a viable object of policy**, and that in practical terms no state can alter it – at least without creating either a global empire or a supra-state authority. Insofar as realism informs policy, this lesson imparts a fundamentally conservative bias to international relations.

In addition to this basic lesson about the immutability of anarchy, realism also provides lessons for state conduct within it. Because anarchy entails the possibility that today's ally will be tomorrow's adversary, realism instructs the policymaker to **operate so as to enhance or protect the state's relative power position** *vis-à-vis* other states. This notion of relative power position stands as a proxy for whatever the state's specific interests may be, since (primarily material) power resources are taken to be fungible – that is, they can be translated relatively unproblematically into preferred outcomes, given the constraints imposed by strategic interaction with other states that have at least partially divergent interests and preferences.

Note, though, that protecting the state's relative power position is not the same as attempting to enhance it. This dispute, between so-called defensive and offensive realists, is the first major policy relevant node of internal disagreement.[5] From the perspective of policy lessons, the heart of the disagreement is about how vigilant and pro-active an effective foreign policy must be. A defensive realist policy lesson would maintain that as long as there is no state contemplating a drive for empire, it is sufficient to avoid other states making significant relative

Daniel W. Drezner, "The Realist Idea in American Public Opinion," *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 1 (2008): 63. The data Drezner examines is drawn exclusively from the United States; however, given the outsize importance of the United States both to contemporary discourses and practices of international relations, the American case is clearly of critical importance. If realism is important in American discourses of international relations, it is of general importance to the field.
[5] The classic statement of defensive realism is Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston, Mass.: McGraw-Hill, 1979); on offensive realism, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 2001).

gains. An offensive realist policy lesson would assert the need for active measures to improve

the state's relative position regardless of the policies of other states.

While a system of offensive realists would likely be significantly more war-prone than

one composed of defensive realists, and while the two variants of realism prescribe different

policies, the difference should not be exaggerated, either. Ultimately, the two variants of realism

both maintain that the core of an effective foreign policy consists in the practice of balancing.

The third realist policy lesson is therefore to **engage in balancing behaviour**. Realist theory

further differentiates internal balancing (e.g., military expansion and development of national

wealth and infrastructure) from external balancing (e.g., alliances), and advises that the former is

the preferable strategy due to the inherent unreliability of commitments under anarchy.[6] While

external balancing may be unavoidable, it should be minimized.

Like the notion that states must be concerned with relative power position, the notion of

balancing has been a site of contestation among realists. Particularly, while most realists have

coalesced around the notion of balancing power, Stephen M. Walt has argued that it is far more

typical for states to 'balance threat' – that is, to make decisions about balancing not solely on the

basis of another state's raw capability, but rather on the basis of a combined assessment of

capability and intent.[7] Put another way, the question is not simply whether a state is capable of

posing a threat, but also whether it is deemed likely to actually do so. While balancing threat

instructs policymakers to be more discriminating in their assessments and calculations, and

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[6] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 168.
[7] Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985).
Walt's argument aimed to 'save' realist theory from the apparent anomaly of the lack of a countervailing coalition
against the United States and the more general observation that states often engage in 'bandwagoning' rather than
balancing behaviour. Though such a move is open to theoretical criticism on the grounds that it constitutes ad hoc
modification to protect the theory's core propositions (in this case, balancing), such arcane concerns may not
register with policymakers. On such Lakatosian criteria for theory evaluation, see Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius
Elman, "Lessons from Lakatos," in *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, ed. Colin
Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2003).

leaves open the potential for a relatively 'trusted' subset of states in contrast to a more 'pure'

realist policy of balancing power regardless of past ties and interactions, it remains possible to

identify a common core realist position: that policymakers should respond be resisting potential

threats with balancing behaviour, no matter how widely or narrowly those threats are identified.[8]

     There is one further debate among realists that I will note briefly, but without connecting

it to a policy lesson: the debate about the relative stability of international systems of various

polarities (i.e., unipolar, bipolar, multipolar).[9] Since the end of the Cold War, debates about

system polarity have focused more on descriptive considerations about determining how many

poles the system currently has, whether new poles are emerging or likely to emerge, and what

these new poles will be.[10] In light of such descriptive contestation, and given that the debate

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[8] Some realists have identified 'bandwagoning' as an alternative to balancing. While realists acknowledge the possibility, most have concluded that balancing is the modal behaviour; as far as I am aware, there are no instances in which bandwagoning has been recommended as a policy. The notion of bandwagoning was first raised in Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 136. Waltz and Walt adopt the dominant realist position, expecting a tendency toward balancing under anarchy. See, respectively: Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 126; Walt, "Alliance Formation," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 4. For an alternate argument that seeks to identify conditions under which bandwagoning should be expected, see Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994). Schweller is notable for his long-standing concern with cases in which the core realist expectation of balancing fails to hold; Schweller, though, is clear that he sees his work as consistent with realism. He has indicated that he believes the primary problem with realist research on balancing consists in "underspecified scope conditions" which his work has sought to rectify. ———, "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 1. More recently, analysts have suggested the existence of 'soft balancing' against the United States. See, for example: Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005); T.V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005). This concept remains controversial even among realists. For critical treatments, see: Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005); Kier A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005). The literature thus far is decidedly rooted in examination of a single case. While Pape asserts soft balancing efforts have been prompted by unilateralist policies of the Bush administration and are thus an argument for American restraint, the general implications of soft balancing (even if it is taken to be a useful concept) are not yet clear.

[9] Waltz famously concludes that bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar ones. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 161-63, 70-76.

[10] If there is a default position in this literature, it is most likely that the international system exhibits at least a temporary unipolarity; however, authors differ sharply on whether this unipolarity can be preserved and for how long. For an optimistic view, see William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999). More pessimistic perspectives are offered by: John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990); Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993); Charles A. Kupchan, "After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of a Stable Multipolarity," *International*

about the relationship between polarity and stability had not been decisively settled even during the Cold War, it seems to me that it is a stretch to speak here of a core realist position in the manner that I have done with respect to offensive and defensive realism or with respect to balancing behaviour. Indeed, the polarity literature provides an instructive illustration of the complexities entailed in applying theory to policy; even the most systematic theoretical research programmes in international relations contain stubborn ambiguities that provide policymakers with divergent advice, even on something as fundamental as the conditions in which major power war is relatively more likely.

The fourth realist policy lesson is that **policymakers must be prepared to trade off non-security interests to satisfy security interests**. Effectively, this amounts to a covering lesson that warns against allowing concern with any of an array of issues, from trade and investment to human rights, to lead to loss of focus on the so-called 'high politics' of national security.

Finally, realism offers two subsidiary lessons for policymakers, concerned respectively with the relevance of regime type and with the significance of international organizations.[11] The realist lesson with respect to regime type is that **regime type does not matter**; states are taken to be, in Waltz's language, "like units" with similar interests (and thus concern with relative power)

Security 23, no. 2 (1998). Among analysts expecting a return to multipolarity common expectations are for the further fragmentation of the American-led Cold War alliance and for the emergence of new great powers (especially China), at least on a regional level. On the latter, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?," *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003); Mark Beeson, "Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of Chinese and American Power," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009).

[11] These lessons are 'subsidiary' in the sense that they address questions not directly derived from realist theory. The question of regime type is an issue primarily due to the work of liberal scholars who have amassed a considerable body of work on the 'democratic peace' phenomenon, discussed more below; the question of international organizations has taken on relevance first as a critique of realist theory for its difficulty explaining such a widespread empirical phenomenon, and more recently as a more fundamental ontological critique of realism's specification of the international system.

and with similar propensities to renege on commitments.[12] One potential exception to this lesson can be found in the work of Randall Schweller, who has argued that domestic considerations are an important unexplored explanation of what he refers to as cases of underbalancing. Schweller's argument is that states will fail to balance when they are internally fragmented.[13] This proposition has clear implications both for evaluating the credibility of commitments made by actual or potential alliance partners, as well as for evaluating potential opportunities for predation. While Schweller's work makes the case for the relevance of domestic factors it is not, narrowly speaking, an examination of regime type since his cases include both democratic and non-democratic states.[14] It is more accurately described as an examination of the relationship between state power (since cohesion affects the ability of the state to marshal an effective defence) and failure to balance. His primary achievement, then, is to demonstrate that domestic societal and political factors influence state capacity, and thus to offer an improvement to realist power metrics.

Finally, the primary realist insight on international organizations is that they are the tools of powerful states. This insight leads to two potential lessons, depending on the relative power of the state. For great powers, the lesson is to attempt to **structure international organizations such that they provide lasting returns and be wary of similar attempts by other great powers**. For smaller states, the lesson is to **minimize entanglement with international organizations on the basis that they will disproportionately serve the great powers**. These

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[12] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 95-97.
[13] Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004).
[14] Schweller examines his theory of underbalancing in more detail in ———, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

lessons are consistent with the common realist position that international organizations and institutions are essentially epiphenomenal reflections of the systemic distribution of power.[15]

Liberal Lessons

Liberal international relations theory portrays the state system as more variegated and complex, as well as potentially (and often actually) less conflictual than realists expect. Liberal theories have focused on three primary factors with the potential to mitigate anarchy at the international level: trade and interdependence, democracy, and international organizations.[16] The paper will examine policy lessons drawn from each of these three liberal literatures, as well as from post-Cold War liberal discussions of the nature and role of power in foreign policy.

The notion that increasingly dense transnational ties are reconfiguring the international system is not a new one. Michael W. Doyle noted the Kantian heritage of this idea in an influential 1986 article, and prominent scholars of the 'democratic peace' have referred to interdependence as one leg of a 'Kantian tripod' sustaining lasting peace between liberal democracies.[17] The concept of interdependence, and the idea that it contained the potential to mitigate international conflict, was central to liberal efforts to call into question the discipline's realist orthodoxy in the 1970s. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye suggested that the international system increasingly more closely resembled the ideal type of complex interdependence than the ideal-typical anarchic system identified by realists. In a system

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[15] The classic statement of this view is John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1995).

[16] Andrew Moravcsik provides the most systematic attempt to date to articulate liberal IR theory as a social scientific research programme; he demonstrates that liberalism offers hypotheses capable not only of explaining cooperation but also of explaining conflict. Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997). While this approach broadens the potential impact and relevance of liberal IR theory, it remains an outlier. Accordingly, while I draw on it where relevant, I draw lessons from liberal IR theory in a more pluralistic manner reflecting the overall state of the literature.

[17] Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986); Bruce R. Russett, John R. Oneal, and David Davis, "The Third Leg of the Kantian Tripod for Peace: International Organizations and Militarized Disputes, 1950-85," *International Organization* 52, no. 3 (1997).

characterized by complex interdependence, multiple channels connect societies and there is an absence of hierarchy among issues in large part because of the declining utility of military force.[18] These claims directly contradict at least two of the core realist policy lessons identified above (namely: that statesmen must operate so as to protect or enhance relative power; and that in doing so they must be prepared to trade off non-security interests to satisfy security interests), at least under some empirical conditions.[19] Liberal scholarship on interdependence thus leads to two primary lessons for foreign policy. First, that **absolute gains are often available and can typically be pursued without fundamentally endangering state survival**.[20] Second, **pursuing absolute gains can impose costs and vulnerabilities but can also provide increasing returns over time in the form of a lower incidence of violent conflict**.[21] While these returns are not

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[18] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd ed. (New York, N.Y.: Longman, 2001), 21-22.

[19] The limited, circumspect nature of modern liberal claims is a clear contrast with the more ideological nature of some early twentieth century liberal authors, perhaps most notably Sir Norman Angell, who were criticized by realists in the wake of the Second World War for their 'utopian' beliefs. Sir Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (New York, N.Y.: Putnam, 1913). The realist critique is most famously articulated in Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 3rd ed. (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001). This shift is primarily a matter of conforming with methodological expectations within political science. Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 515.

[20] Moravcsik is clear that the availability of absolute gains and the potential to safely pursue them are functions of the system-level "configuration of interdependent state preferences". Varying patterns of 'policy interdependence' (defined as "the pattern of transnational externalities resulting from attempts to pursue national distinctive purposes") generate one of three strategic situations. In situations where externalities are nonexistent or positive "there are strong incentives for coexistence with low conflict." When externalities are negative, states "face a bargaining game with few mutual gains and high potential for interstate tension and conflict." Finally, in cases of mixed externalities, "states have an incentive to negotiate policy coordination." ———, "Taking Preferences Seriously," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 520-21. Moravcsik's argument is consistent with the consensus that concluded the relative gains debate, in which neorealist and institutionalist scholars mutually agreed that whether states could be expected to pursue relative or absolute gains depends on the 'strategic context'. See Joseph M. Grieco, "Understanding the Problem of International Cooperation: The Limits of Neoliberal Institutionalism and the Future of Realist Theory," in *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. David A. Baldwin (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1993); Robert O. Keohane, "Institutional Theory and the Realist Challenge after the Cold War," in *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. David A. Baldwin (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[21] On the notion that interdependence entails potential asymmetries and thus constitutes a potential power resource, see the discussion of sensitivity and vulnerability in Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 10-17. For a discussion of empirical evidence that interdependence is correlated with a reduction in the incidence of militarized interstate disputes (MIDS) see, among many others, Zeev Maoz and Bruce R. Russett, "Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946-1986," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993); John R. Oneal et al., "The Liberal Peace: Interdependence, Democracy, and International Conflict, 1950-1985," *Journal of Peace*

always realized, liberal theory points out that sub-optimal results are not purely the product of anarchy; instead, they may also be the product of distributional conflict at the domestic level, as well as of domestic or international differences regarding "the nature of legitimate socioeconomic regulation and redistribution."[22]

In addition to emphasizing the potential for realizing absolute gains and the potential impact of interdependence on the probability of violent conflict, liberals have sought to demonstrate the existence of a 'democratic peace'.[23] While this insight contradicts the realist lesson that regime type is irrelevant, it should not be mistaken for the empirically false claim that democracies never fight wars. Liberal scholars have consistently been clear that they expect the democratic peace to obtain only between pairs of democracies. In fact, Doyle went so far as to assert that liberalism contains "two legacies"; namely, "the pacification of foreign relations among liberal states" coupled with "international 'imprudence'", or the willingness to fight ideologically motivated wars against illiberal states.[24] Similarly, Russett, Oneal and Davis found that, for the period 1950-1985, "although two democracies are much less likely to fight each other than are two autocracies, democratic-autocratic pairs engage in the most disputes."[25]

Despite the impressive stature of the democratic peace as an empirical regularity, the policy lessons to be drawn from it are unclear. First, the causal mechanisms underlying the democratic peace are not completely understood. Classical liberal scholars attributed the pacific effect of democracy to an array of causes. Doyle shows, for instance, that Immanuel Kant regarded popular suffrage, a 'pacific federation' among liberal states akin to "a mutual

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Research 33, no. 1 (1996); John R. Oneal and Bruce R. Russett, "The Classical Liberals Were Right: Democracy, Interdependence, and Conflict, 1950-1985," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1997); Russett, Oneal, and Davis, "The Third Leg of the Kantian Tripod," *International Organization* 52, no. 3 (1997).

[22] Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 528.

[23] For a partial introduction to the extensive literature on the democratic peace, see *supra*, note 21.

[24] Doyle, "Liberalism," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986): 1155-56.

[25] Russett, Oneal, and Davis, "The Third Leg of the Kantian Tripod," *International Organization* 52, no. 3 (1997): 457.

nonaggression pact" or "perhaps a collective security agreement", cosmopolitan international law, and the existence of "crosscutting transnational ties that serve as lobbies for mutual accommodation" as individually necessary factors in explaining the democratic peace.[26] More modern studies have converged around two causal models, articulated by Maoz and Russett. Their normative model "suggests that democracies do not fight each other because norms of compromise prevent their conflicts of interest from escalating into violent clashes", while their structural model "asserts that complex political mobilization processes impose institutional constraints on the leaders of two democracies confronting each other to make violent conflict unfeasible." Their study finds that "both the normative and structural models are supported by the data" but that "support for the normative model is more robust and consistent."[27]

John M. Owen, noting that "statistical tests of these two theories have yielded no clear winner", goes on to argue that adjudicating between them "requires looking at the actual processes in historical cases." After conducting case research, Owen concludes that both causal mechanisms are relevant to explaining the democratic peace, while adding a third factor – the role of perception, particularly of whether or not an adversary state is a democracy.[28] Unfortunately, Owen does not probe deeper to ask what determines those perceptions. In order to be socially effective, such perceptions must operate at the collective level; that is, they must take the form of intersubjective knowledge about which states are legitimately categorized as democracies. Such common knowledge is, in turn, presumably based on socially understood standards for determining the regime type of another state. When coupled with the norm-following logic of the normative model and the emphasis on routinized democratic practice on the basis of social rules and institutions evident in the structural model, it becomes clear that any

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[26] Doyle, "Liberalism," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986): 1157-62.
[27] Maoz and Russett, "Normative and Structural Causes," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 624.
[28] John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces the Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (1994): 91-93.

convincing explanation of the democratic peace owes more to constructivism than to liberalism.[29] Owen's own argument suggests just such a conclusion. In addition to his attribution of the democratic peace to "liberal ideas" he notes that, in crises, elites in favour of war "must persuade public opinion that war is necessary." According to Owen, "in democracies, this persuasion typically includes arguments that the adversary state is not democratic."[30] Where the adversary was previously publicly identified as a democracy, Owen finds that such efforts are virtually always unsuccessful. This indicates robust, independent, socially accepted criteria for evaluating the regime type of an adversary state, as well as the existence of a norm against war between democracies. Such a process is analogous to what I have elsewhere identified as a social practice of institutional politics, or a practice of making and interpreting social rules.[31] While Owen is correct that liberal ideas produce the democratic peace, they do so by means of social practices that enable the reproduction and instantiation of norms and rules – processes of central concern to constructivists.

The misspecification of the causal mechanisms underlying the democratic peace as liberal rather than constructivist matters because, to the extent that ideas about the democratic peace have become influential in policy circles, they are likely to be taken to bolster the authority of liberalism. When liberal and constructivist policy lessons diverge there may be a pre-existing bias in favour of liberal theories on the basis of their ostensible past success. If I am right that the democratic peace is actually driven by constructivist logics, this will inhibit the formulation of effective foreign policy – at least in instances where the constructivist lessons can be

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[29] As far as I am aware, Emanuel Adler was the first scholar to point out the amenability of the democratic peace to a constructivist explanation. See Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 347.

[30] Owen, "How Liberalism Produces the Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (1994): 88, 100-01.

[31] Mark Raymond, "Social Change in World Politics: Secondary Rules and Institutional Politics" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2011), Chapter 2.

reasonably expected to offer superior performance. Intellectual housekeeping exercises such as the one undertaken in this paper seek not only to ensure that cutting-edge ideas are available to policymakers, but also that existing ideas are portrayed accurately in policy debates, and in proper context.

More problematic, the democratic peace has been pressed into service to justify a variety of foreign policies. Most notably, it has been used to justify European integration, international attempts at democracy promotion in the developing world, and the Bush administration's attempt to engender democratic transition in the Middle East via the 2003 Iraq War.[32] The democratic peace is a rare case in which political leaders across the ideological spectrum, especially in the United States, have been demonstrably eager to explicitly draw policy lessons from international relations theory, albeit with mixed consequences at best. While the ultimate motives for the Iraq War are beyond the scope of this paper, even the possibility that IR theory contributed to such a controversial policy simultaneously highlights the significance of ensuring that the gap between the state of the art and the knowledge applied to policy remains as small as possible, as well as the importance of exercising caution in applying theory to policy. The most responsible lesson for foreign policy that can be drawn at present is that **while democratic leaders can be reasonably confident of resolving disputes with other democracies via peaceful means, statesmen in other situations must remain vigilant and especially committed to avoiding violence**. Although evidence indicates that regime type matters, there is little evidence that political forms and structures can be effectively imposed even if policymakers are inclined to accept the legitimacy of such practices.

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[32] On the use of democratic peace arguments in justifying democracy promotion, see Owen, "How Liberalism Produces the Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (1994): 87. For an example of Bush administration attempts to leverage the democratic peace, see The White House, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2002), 21-24.

The third primary focus in liberal international relations scholarship is on the importance of international organizations. In contrast to realist theories, which see them as epiphenomenal reflections of state power, liberals maintain that international organizations have important autonomous effects. Such arguments can be divided into two groups. The first, unproblematically liberal group focuses on the classical liberal notion that international law and organizations, like interdependence and democracy, are linked to peace.[33] The second group, known either as neoliberal institutionalists or simply institutionalists, is more broadly concerned with the effects of international institutions on the prospects for interstate cooperation under anarchy.[34] Both institutionalists and non-institutionalists have questioned whether such studies are appropriately classified as liberal due to their acceptance of crucial realist assumptions about the basic nature of anarchy, the rational unitary conception of the state, and the notion that states can be productively treated as 'like units'. Constructivist critiques have also linked neorealist and institutionalist scholarship on the grounds that both employ narrow and asocial ontologies

[33] Doyle, for instance, indicates that international law contributes to peace by virtue of both "material incentives" and "moral commitments"; see Doyle, "Liberalism," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986): 1160-61. Russett, Oneal and Davis report that, after controlling for alternate explanations, during the period 1950-1985, "increasing the number of shared memeberships in IGOs by a standard deviation reduces the incidence of militarized disputes by 23 percent from the baseline rate for the typical dyad." Russett, Oneal, and Davis, "The Third Leg of the Kantian Tripod," *International Organization* 52, no. 3 (1997): 462.

[34] The institutionalist literature is extensive. The vital early theoretic statement is Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984). Other useful works include: Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," in *Cooperation under Anarchy*, ed. Kenneth A. Oye (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Liliana Botcheva and Lisa L. Martin, "Institutional Effects on State Behavior: Convergence and Divergence," *International Studies Quarterly* 45 (2001); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); Lisa L. Martin and Beth A. Simmons, "Theories and Empirical Studies of International Institutions," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998); Kenneth A. Oye, "Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies," in *Cooperation under Anarchy*, ed. Kenneth A. Oye (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986). While the institutionalist literature has been primarily concerned with demonstrating the autonomous impact of international institutions contra the realist claim of epiphenomenality, two special issues of the journal *International Organization* have attempted to extend institutionalist research by examining institutions as dependent variables and attempting to determine under what conditions states are likely to select or design various kinds of institutions. For reasons of space I provide citations only for the theoretical anchor article in each special issue; interested readers may also wish to consult the additional articles accompanying them. The citations are: Judith Goldstein et al., "Introduction: Legalization and World Politics," *International Organization* 54, no. 3 (2000); Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal, "The Rational Design of International Institutions," *International Organization* 55, no. 4 (2001).

that exclude intersubjectivity, and thus truncate the possible effects of ideas and institutions in such a way as to render constitutive effects impossible.[35]

The intellectual arguments for classifying institutionalism with realism are formidable, and the broad consensus on this point from scholars representing disparate perspectives is also impressive. There is much to be said, as well, for taking the self-identification of institutionalists seriously. That said, there are three primary reasons I will include institutionalism under the liberal heading for the purposes of this paper. The simplest reason is that, despite the resolution of the relative-absolute gains debate, the inclusion of institutionalism in the realist research programme would likely remain deeply controversial among realists, many of whom continue to maintain that institutions are epiphenomenal.[36] Further, as I will argue below, institutionalist scholarship suggests quite different lessons for foreign policy than do mainstream variants of realism. Second, though agreement that institutionalism is most closely related to realism is robust and perhaps even approaches consensus, the Kantian research community investigating the democratic peace continues to maintain that international organizations are a central concern of liberal international relations theory. Third, I treat institutionalism as a subset of liberalism for the purpose of this paper because I suspect that it is still understood as such by a majority of policymakers familiar with IR theory. This is because institutionalism was initially understood as a subset of liberalism – hence the original appellation 'neoliberal' – by scholars, who would have reflected this understanding in their pedagogy. Given the time lags inherent in the

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[35] For acknowledgment of the convergence with neorealism by institutionalists, see Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, "Institutional Theory as a Research Program," in *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2003). For a liberal argument classifying institutionalism as realist rather than liberal, see Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997). Finally, the constructivist critique is best articulated in John Gerard Ruggie, "What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge," in *Constructing the World Polity: Essays on International Institutionalization* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1998).
[36] It is difficult to imagine, for instance, that Mearsheimer could be convinced to accept the notion that institutionalist scholarship is part of the 'realist tradition', however broadly conceived.

application of theory to policy as a result of incremental promotion into major policymaking roles and the probability that former students of international relations invest little time in remaining current with theoretical debates once they begin bureaucratic careers, it seems reasonable to conclude that most continue to categorize institutionalist research as liberal rather than realist.

All three of the above points are essentially sociological in nature; they deal more with what people collectively *believe* about IR theory than with its objective state (if indeed such a state exists). While I realize that this may be less than compelling to some readers on purely 'scientific' grounds, my purpose in this paper is to a significant extent pragmatic. Effectively engaging in an effort to bridge the gap between the state of the art and the knowledge accessible to policymakers requires engaging the understandings of public officials as much or more than those of scholars. Put another way, such updating exercises must start from policymakers' initial understandings in order to update them.

The remaining question is what policy lessons can be drawn from this broad understanding of liberal scholarship on international organizations. The three most important liberal insights about the impact of institutions are that they can: (1) change state incentives to overcome enforcement problems (such as the Prisoners' Dilemma) and allow the realization of Pareto-optimal outcomes under anarchy; (2) serve as 'focal points' that suggest certain 'natural' outcomes in situations with multiple equilibria; and (3) improve the quality of information available to actors, thereby reducing uncertainty and transaction costs. In general**, institutions facilitate the realization of joint gains, including lowering the probability of violent conflict**. The second major liberal policy lesson is that **international organizations are susceptible to design (and redesign) by states, and certain institutional features are more likely to**

perform well in resolving certain kinds of problems.[37] Finally, although institutions are

susceptible to redesign, in practice they are 'sticky'. The propensity of institutions to lag

changes in the distribution of power suggests that **institutional design outcomes are likely to**

have significant consequences, and should be regarded as important.[38]

The end of the Cold War prompted a re-evaluation of international relations theory in the

wake of the apparent failure of major theories to anticipate the peaceful dissolution of communist

rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.[39] In this context, Joseph S. Nye proposed the

concept of 'soft power' as an overlooked component of the foreign policy toolkit that would

become increasingly important for the United States in the absence of a common external threat

to generate cohesion in the democratic world, and in ensuring the successful integration of the

post-communist states into an expanded western international order. Soft power refers to

attaining foreign policy goals, or national interests, via co-option and attraction rather than

coercion.[40] The argument was that the United States could leverage the normative value attached

to the ideals and institutions of democratic governance with which it was associated and the

array of international institutions it had sponsored after 1945 to resolve the problems of a post-

Cold War world in a cost-effective manner. In many ways, soft power is an example of how

liberal IR theory can be applied to foreign policy. Though Nye's arguments have been presented

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[37] For more detail on institutionalist arguments about the design of international institutions, see Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal, "The Rational Design of International Institutions," *International Organization* 55, no. 4 (2001); Kenneth W. Abbott et al., "The Concept of Legalization," *International Organization* 54, no. 3 (2000).

[38] Keohane, *After Hegemony*, Chapter 6. This point is also central to the argument in Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*.

[39] The most influential articulation of this argument was John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 17, no. 3 (1993). Realists, however, sought to counter Gaddis's argument; see, for example, William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1995).

[40] Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1990). Nye expanded on the concept of soft power in ———, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, N.Y.: Public Affairs, 2004). Most recently he has advocated a similar concept, 'smart power', in a co-authored report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies. See "Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America," (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007).

specifically in terms of American foreign policy, the general lesson is essentially that **legitimacy reduces the costs of maintaining social order**.[41]

Constructivist Lessons

The central question in this paper is whether constructivist IR theory offers significant 'value-added' for the formulation and conduct of foreign policy. Before identifying constructivist foreign policy lessons, however, it is necessary to address Fred Chernoff's claim that constructivism is congenitally incapable of producing policy-relevant knowledge. Chernoff maintains that policy-relevant theories "must be capable of prediction" because "policy decisions require expectations about the future – a certain sort of justified belief about future events". In his assessment of the predictive capacity of various kinds of international relations theory, Chernoff groups constructivism with so-called 'reflexivist' theories. On his view, these theories (which also include critical theory, postmodernism and poststructuralism) all "reject the idea that IR can be predictive."[42] Chernoff, however, is mistaken with respect to his reading of constructivism – an error which leads him to incorrectly conclude that constructivist theories are incapable of supporting the circumscribed, probabilistic 'prediction' that he himself identifies as the proper aim for social science.

Chernoff's decision to group 'constructivism' with 'reflexivist' theories is problematic, in that it ignores long-recognized differences among constructivists over precisely the kind of epistemological issues with which Chernoff is concerned.[43] Simply put, most constructivists (particularly in North America) are less radical in their understandings of causation and

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[41] A similar argument can be found in Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*.

[42] Fred Chernoff, "Conventionalism as an Adequate Basis for Policy-Relevant Ir Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2009): 159, 67.

[43] Such differences were recognized as early as 1998, when Ruggie distinguished three variants of constructivism: neo-classical, post-modernist, and naturalistic. Ruggie, "What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge," 35-36.

prediction than Chernoff suggests. Equally puzzling, Chernoff summarily dismisses a major

example of such constructivism on the basis that Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics*

"barely even mentions 'prediction'" and does not explicitly endorse it.[44] While Wendt does not

discuss prediction in direct detail he does dwell at length on the related question of causation,

advancing an argument for an ecumenical approach inclusive of constitution alongside

traditional notions of causation. Most important, he is clear that "the ideational structure of

social life does not make it impossible to approach social kinds as scientists". While Wendt

recognizes that "there are many theories that we think explain things in the world but which

cannot predict", rejecting complete symmetry between explanation and prediction does not imply

the *impossibility* of prediction.[45] That *many* theories are incapable of it does not mean that *all*

are. Wendt clearly endorses causal theorizing, as well as partial symmetry between explanation

and prediction. If Wendt believes we can reach at least provisional conclusions about cause and

effect, and if there are instances in which knowledge about cause can be translated into

prediction, then Chernoff is wrong to say that Wendt's theory is incapable of prediction.

One need not adopt Wendt's constructivism in order to accept that constructivism is

capable of prediction, or something very much like it. For instance, Steven Bernstein *et al.* have

advocated a form of process-tracing that entails "the development of scenarios, or narratives with

plot lines that map a set of causes and trends in future time."   While they maintain that

"scenarios are not predictions", the authors insist that scenarios "tell alternative stories of how

the future may unfold."[46] That is, they allow social scientists to reason about the future in a

structured manner, despite the complexity inherent in a social world comprised of open systems

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[44] Chernoff, "Conventionalism," *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2009): 168.
[45] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77, 80.
[46] Steven Bernstein et al., "God Gave Physics the Easy Problems: Adapting Social Science to an Unpredictable World," *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 1 (2000): 53-54.

with nonlinear characteristics. Confronting such a world requires a probabilistic understanding of causation, and thus also of prediction. Ironically, this commitment to a probabilistic approach is also shared by Chernoff.[47] The dispute here is essentially semantic in nature, foundering on the parties' relative willingness to embrace the word 'prediction' in a discipline still struggling to move beyond behaviouralism. What is more important for the purposes of foreign policy than a debate about what constitutes a proper 'prediction' is whether a given theory allows us to reason about the future.

The important point for my purpose in this paper is that constructivist theories are perfectly capable of engaging in reasoning about the future on the basis of a probabilistic understanding of causation. Indeed, they are often *superior* to mainstream IR theories in this regard, because constructivism employs an ontology inclusive of both material and social factors and is explicitly committed to employing process-tracing in order to investigate causal mechanisms. This fine-grained approach permits the consideration of path-dependent, multi-stage scenarios (with multiple possible outcomes at each stage) that are more useful to policymakers than single-stage, binary predictions.

What, then, are the major lessons offered by constructivism for the conduct of foreign policy? The first critical lesson addresses the foundational notion that foreign policy is a field of human endeavour driven virtually exclusively by considerations of interest, or a logic of appropriateness. Instead, constructivists have demonstrated that states act as they do for a variety of reasons, and that **factors other than interest matter for determining behaviour**.

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[47] On probabilistic understandings of causation, see ibid., 45; Chernoff, "Conventionalism," *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2009): 160. Chernoff, however, seems not to realize the extent to which Bernstein *et al.* share common ground with his argument. He treats them as asserting a strong position regarding "the indeterminacy of social theory" incompatible with a probabilistic understanding of causation and therefore also with coherent efforts to reason about the future (in more formal terms, to 'predict'). In fact, they advocate sophisticated attempts to make probabilistic assessments of a range of potential outcomes. For Chernoff's discussion of prediction-scepticism in 'reflexivist' theory, including Bernstein *et al.*, see ibid., 168-70.

The most well-recognized alternate basis for behaviour is the 'logic of appropriateness', which highlights the important observation that states and other social agents often act on the basis of their internalized understandings of the behaviour appropriate to their self-identity in a particular situation.[48] A wide range of empirical studies have established the existence of this kind of behaviour in the modern state system, even if specific scope conditions have not been conclusively identified.[49] In addition to behaviour driven by the logic of appropriateness, constructivists have more recently begun exploring other significant logics of action. The first is a logic of practice, in which actors engage in "competent performances" or "socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world." Such practices are "socially developed through learning and training."[50] They involve actions chosen not on the basis of consequences or on the basis of norms, but rather on the grounds that the action is socially intelligible. The second (and related) additional logic of action

[48] The classic work on the logic of appropriateness is James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998). More recent work has suggested that the logic of appropriateness may matter even in bargaining situations. See Harald Muller, "Arguing, Bargaining and All That: Communicative Action, Rationalist Theory and the Logic of Appropriateness in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 10, no. 3 (2004).

[49] Among many others, see Martha Finnemore, "Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention," in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1996); ———, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear and Chemical Weapons Taboos," in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1996); Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999); Audie Klotz, "Transnational Activism and Global Transformations: The Anti-Apartheid and Abolitionist Experiences," *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 1 (2002). Despite the absence of a clear, well-accepted understanding of the circumstances under which logics of appropriateness are determinative of behaviour, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have proposed that transnational advocacy networks (TANs) are most likely to be effective where political issues involve "bodily harm to vulnerable individuals, especially when there is a short and clear causal chain" or questions of "legal equality of opportunity." Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 27.

[50] Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, "International Practices," *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (2011): 4-5. For empirical applications of the logic of practice, see Iver B. Neumann, "Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of 'Diplomacy'," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 31, no. 3 (2002); Raymond, "Social Change in World Politics: Secondary Rules and Institutional Politics".

constructivists have begun to explore is the logic of habit. Ted Hopf defines habits as

"unintentional, unconscious, involuntary and effortless" behaviour that does not "consume

limited cognitive processing capacity."[51] Further, he differentiates the logics of practice and

habit by noting that "the logic of practice is more reflective and agential than the logic of habit

and, consequently, expects far more change in the world."[52] The logic of habit is thus deeply

structuralist, and points mainly to an explanation of stability in the social world. Habits, and

circumstances created by habits, persist because they are taken for granted.

As Hopf notes, the conditions under which the various logics of action operate remain

poorly understood; much research remains to be done. However, even at this early stage, the

payoff for foreign policy is clear. Policymakers will often misunderstand the behaviour of other

actors if they attribute their actions solely to carefully considered calculations of utility and risk.

This is not to say such calculations never take place; rather, it is to point out that the range of

cases in which they do appears to be much smaller than mainstream theories of international

relations lead policymakers to expect. Further, the same problem of misattribution will arise in

attempting to forecast other actors' responses to a change in policy or circumstance. While

international relations theory is clearly underdeveloped in this respect, constructivism has

already made an important contribution by broadening understanding of the range of motivations

exhibited by social actors in international politics.

The second constructivist lesson for foreign policy is that **power consists of social as**

well as material dimensions. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall have developed a useful

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[51] Ted Hopf, "The Logic of Habit in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010): 541.
[52] Ibid., 544.

taxonomy of four kinds of social power: compulsory, structural, institutional and productive.[53]

The overwhelming focus among mainstream IR theories on the first of these varieties of power

has created a situation in which the discipline "fails to develop sophisticated understandings of

how global outcomes are produced and how actors are differentially enabled and constrained to

determine their fates."[54] Whereas the first constructivist lesson focused on the existence of

multiple motives and bases for action, the second lesson is strategic in nature – that is, it relates

to the ability of actors to accomplish their goals under constraints presented by other actors. The

payoff of a broader, social understanding of power is that it permits policymakers to more

accurately assess the resources at the disposal not only of their own state but also of other states

and non-state actors. Thus, constructivist theory offers the potential to improve the quality of

information available in processes of strategic planning.[55]

A social understanding of power suggests a key corollary lesson: **talk is not 'cheap'**.

Actors may say things cynically or strategically; they are not always sincere. This is as much a

problem in international relations as it is among family, in the workplace or in any other realm of

social life. However, it does not follow that all talk is therefore a mask or pastiche covering

nakedly material interests and can be largely discounted in the study of international relations.

While rationalist analyses may leave some role for talk as part of signalling, they do not account

for the constitutive role of talk in creating, maintaining and stabilizing identities, norms, rules

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[53] Michael N. Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 48.

[54] Ibid., 39.

[55] Former United States Vice President Dick Cheney's failure to anticipate the Iraqi public reaction to American intervention in 2003 (encapsulated by his claim on Meet the Press that U.S. troops would be "greeted as liberators"), for instance, suggests that he considerably overestimated American 'soft power'. The Bush administration also failed to appreciate the full international consequences of being seen to violate key international humanitarian norms. These mistaken assessments were likely at least partially due to an underestimation of the power of international norms and an overestimation of American ability to rapidly change them to suit the interests of American policy. While this is not to say that a constructivist, or a policymaker versed in constructivism, could not make similar errors, the point is that social power resources exist in the world and that improving information about them has the potential to improve policymaking in the same manner that improving information about other states' military assets can.

and institutions.[56] Indeed, talk can still be instrumental in creating and maintaining

intersubjectivity even when actors speak strategically; creating 'common knowledge' is an

intensely political and power-laden social process.[57] Skilful talk and action, as well as the ability

to interpret such talk, can constitute crucial resources for policymakers in a wide range of

situations, not simply in ostensibly rare cases where actors are motivated by logics of

appropriateness.

   Not only does constructivism highlight the importance of talk and of meaningful social

gestures, it also emphasizes the role of institutions in ways that other theories of international

relations do not. I will conclude my specification of constructivist foreign policy lessons by

identifying and briefly discussing three lessons about institutions; first, however, some

comments on definitional matters are required. Social institutions, defined as sets of norms and

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[56] On rational choice theory and signalling, see James D. Morrow, "The Strategic Setting of Choices: Signaling, Commitment, and Negotiation in International Politics," in *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, ed. David A. Lake and Robert Powell (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jack L. Goldsmith and Eric A. Posner, "Moral and Legal Rhetoric in International Relations: A Rational Choice Perspective," *Journal of Legal Studies* XXXI (2002). The notion that talk plays a critical role in creating, maintaining and changing intersubjective knowledge is commonplace among constructivists; however, it is especially central to linguistic constructivists. On the 'linguistic turn' in IR constructivism, see K.M. Fierke, "Links across the Abyss: Language and Logic in Ir," *International Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2002).

[57] On processes and practices for creating and altering intersubjectivity, see Raymond, "Social Change in World Politics: Secondary Rules and Institutional Politics", Chapter 2. The relevant point is that much of the constructivist literature consists of potentially complementary theoretical and empirical accounts of the creation and alteration of intersubjectivity. Though the literature remains in an early stage of development, in which the relationships between different theoretical mechanisms are not completely understood, virtually all accounts highlight the importance of power. Among the mechanisms proposed by constructivists for the creation of intersubjectivity are: social learning, strategic social construction, norm entrepreneurship, socialization, Habermasian persuasion, argumentation, cognitive evolution, legitimacy contests, and localization. See, respectively: Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Why Comply? Social Learning and European Identity Change," *International Organization* 55, no. 3 (2001); Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders* ; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998); Alastair Iain Johnston, "Treating International Institutions as Social Environments," *international Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2001); Thomas Risse, "'Let's Argue!': Communicative Action in World Politics," *International Organization* 54, no. 1 (2000); Neta C. Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Emanuel Adler, "Communities of Practice in International Relations," in *Communitarian International Relations: The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (2005); Mlada Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and Power Politics: The American and French Revolutions in International Political Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004).

rules that constitute actors as socially competent agents and regulate behaviour,[58] serve as

intersubjective structures. This definition highlights a vital point of clarification regarding the

difference and the relationship between international institutions and international organizations.

The neoliberal institutionalist literature exhibits a tendency to conflate the two, I believe largely

as a result of the truncated, minimally social ontology it adopted from neorealism.[59]

Operationalizing institutions in terms of organizations (in IR, typically IGOs and NGOs) avoids

ontological and methodological problems associated with conclusively identifying and precisely

measuring the intersubjective knowledge that constitutes institutions. Unfortunately, this comes

at the price of operationalizing structures as agents. Although the relationship between agents

and structures is unresolved, beyond the rudimentary insight that they are mutually constitutive,

such an elementary error demands correction. Organizations, as collectivities, often instantiate

related institutions – for example, virtually all modern IGOs instantiate bureaucracy as well as

multilateralism – but this does not entail an identity between the institution and a particular

organization. While colloquial references to the "Bretton Woods institutions" (the World Bank

and the International Monetary Fund) are thus misappellations, the point is not that IGOs and

NGOs are unimportant; rather, it is that we can understand them (and understand institutions)

properly only if we appropriately classify them.

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[58] The definition here is drawn from Christian Reus-Smit, who in turn elaborates on Stephen Krasner's definition of regimes. Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations*, 12-13. Krasner's definition can be found in Stephen D. Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables," in *International Regimes*, ed. Stephen D. Krasner (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 2.

[59] For an example of such conflation, see Keohane and Martin, "Institutional Theory as a Research Program," 78. Keohane and Martin write that "institutions are defined as 'persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioural roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations'." The embedded quote is drawn from earlier work by Keohane. The problematic move is contained in the next sentence, which asserts that institutions "can take the form of formal intergovernmental or nongovernmental organizations, international regimes, and informal conventions." Properly understood, IGOs and NGOs are agents (like states) rather than structures.

Institutions, properly conceived, do more than mainstream IR theories allow. **Institutions not only constrain behaviour by acting as incentives or identifying focal points; they also shape actor identity and interest**. On a diagnostic level, this suggests that assessments of another actor's likely behaviour can be aided by high quality information about the state of international institutions coupled with information about individual actors' subjective attitudes to those intersubjective structures. This is essentially a more theoretically developed basis for several lessons drawn from both realism and liberalism, in that it can account for the degree of hostility and concern with relative versus absolute gains in a particular situation as well as for the relationship between legitimacy and the costs of maintaining social order identified by liberals. Simply put, constructivism can be understood as subsuming realist and liberal theories and as accounting for their apparent explanatory power.

Despite their constitutive effects, it is also clear that **institutions (including anarchy) *are* viable objects of policy, although they cannot be accurately regarded as products of 'rational design'**. Drawing policy implications from this lesson is admittedly fairly difficult. Changes in social institutions tend to be gradual and unintentional. Further, purposively altering institutions to create desired effects is virtually impossible in most cases – as well as potentially ethically questionable.[60] Such a cautionary note is, in my judgment, the most responsible conclusion to be drawn from a constructivist understanding of the role of institutions in social life. While Wendt's observation that 'anarchy is what states make of it'[61] is an important corrective to older theories of IR that reminds policymakers not to regard current states of the social world as immutable, constructivism is only beginning to make progress on understanding

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[60] For important statements highlighting the complexity of institutional dynamics, see March and Olsen, "Institutional Dynamics," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998); Bernstein et al., "God Gave Physics the Easy Problems," *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 1 (2000).
[61] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992).

the dynamics of social institutions. I have argued elsewhere that social change occurs via a structured social practice of institutional politics – that there are 'rules for changing the rules'.[62] If I am correct, my argument implies that it is important for policymakers and state officials to understand these rules and practices if they want to achieve goals that entail advocating or resisting change in international institutions. However, the complexity of social practices and the importance of other causal factors (for instance, domestic politics) means that even perfect knowledge of and compliance with such rules would be insufficient to ensure success in a particular case – to say nothing of the near certainty that an intended change may have unintended effects. Although constructivism has already generated policy relevant insights on social dynamics and on institutional variation in the international system,[63] and there is every reason to believe that it contains significant additional promise, the social world simply resists elegant, parsimonious theory. The world is a complex place.

Conclusion: Constructivist Contributions to Improving Foreign Policy

In order for constructivism to contribute meaningfully to the formulation and practice of foreign policy, it must meet two primary standards: it must offer lessons distinct from those generated by alternative theories, and these lessons must be at least plausibly able to assist policymakers seeking to solve significant problems. The constructivist foreign policy lessons elaborated here clearly meet the first standard. The notion that state behaviour is regularly motivate by logics other than consequentialism is distinctly constructivist; realist and liberal theories have no theoretically grounded basis on which to explain such acts. Constructivist

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[62] Raymond, "Social Change in World Politics: Secondary Rules and Institutional Politics".

[63] My own work is only one example; in addition to the numerous constructivist causal mechanisms discussed above (*supra*, note 57), see: Kalevi J. Holsti, *Taming the Sovereigns: Institutional Change in International Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* ; Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Perspective* (London, U.K.: Routledge, 1992); Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

insights on the social nature of power are likewise novel. Modern, structural realism sees power in material terms.[64] Although the notion of 'soft power' articulated by liberals includes non-material factors, the concept sits uneasily with the rationalist underpinnings of most modern liberal IR theory, since it seems likely that people may be attracted to ideas for reasons other than gain; nationalism may be an important example here, as may religious faith. An alternate line of argument would posit that the attractiveness of American ideas and institutions is less a matter of rational expectation of gain than of the intrinsic attractiveness of liberal democracy.[65] This argument remains unable to explain the enduring attractiveness of illiberal beliefs. Thus, the notion of 'soft power' is not convincingly grounded in liberal theory. Just as constructivists have suggested that they are better able to explain the 'democratic peace', the notion of 'soft power' is better explained by constructivism. With respect to the third and fourth constructivist lessons, the constitutive roles of talk and of social institutions are central constructivist concerns neglected by both realist and liberal theories; constructivism thus clearly offers distinct lessons in this regard.

Assessing the novelty of constructivist contributions with respect to institutional dynamics is more complicated. Realist and liberal theories clearly have positions on whether or not institutions are potentially changeable, so constructivism is not obviously novel in this regard. However, both realist and liberal positions are somewhat compromised by the failure to distinguish clearly between institutions and organizations. The realist position, for example, maintains that anarchy is virtually immutable, but that lower-order 'institutions' (often, in

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[64] Admittedly, recent work on 'neo-classical' realism may allow more space for social conceptions of power; however, neo-classical realists certainly do not wholly reject the importance of material power, and not all realists accept neo-classical realism as a positive development.

[65] One such argument can be found in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, N.Y.: Free Press, 1992).

practice, IGOs) are epiphenomenal reflections of the systemic distribution of state power.[66]

There is no inherent problem in maintaining that different 'levels' of institutions may respond to

difference causal mechanisms.[67] The problem is that conflating institutions and organizations as

like kinds elides the distinction between structures and agents. The liberal position is that

institutions (again, often operationalized as organizations) are rational responses to overcoming

the cooperation and collaboration problems posed by anarchy.[68] While the confusion of agents

for structures is a serious theoretical issue, it may be of minimal concern to policymakers,

especially if realist and liberal theories seem *prima facie* plausible. Even if a policymaker is

inclined to think this way, however, he or she would still face the issue of discriminating

between realist and liberal theories. The question, whether posed as a two-way dispute or as a

three-way dispute including constructivists, is thus an empirical one. The important point for

now is that the constructivist position, that institutions are constructed by purposive agents

(though not necessarily procedurally rational actors) via discourse and social practice, is novel in

the sense that it offers a competing viewpoint. The empirical accuracy of these competing

viewpoints bears directly on the second standard for assessing their contributions to foreign

policy: problem-solving utility.

To conclusively demonstrate that the constructivist lessons I have proposed here are

'correct' is impossible, for at least three reasons. First, philosophy of science is generally

sceptical about whether theories can be proven 'correct'. While less agreement exists on how to

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[66] On the immutability of anarchy, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. The argument that institutions are epiphenomenal is made in Mearsheimer, "False Promise," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1995).

[67] Christian Reus-Smit, for example, makes a constructivist argument that could potentially be read this way. Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations*.

[68] Among many other studies, see: Keohane, *After Hegemony* ; Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal, "The Rational Design of International Institutions," *International Organization* 55, no. 4 (2001); Abbott et al., "The Concept of Legalization," *International Organization* 54, no. 3 (2000); Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*.

proceed in light of this handicap, a wide range of scholars agree that definitive establishment of capital-T 'truth' is impossible.[69] It should be noted, however, that this problem is applicable equally to foreign policy lessons derived from any theory of international relations. Second, conclusively evaluating constructivist lessons is difficult because constructivism remains sufficiently new to the study of international relations that there simply are not well-articulated, unified constructivist propositions with an extensive record of empirical testing. Again, however, the lack of testing compared to theorizing in international relations is something of a disciplinary bad habit; constructivism is not uniquely guilty in this regard. For both of the above reasons, and for the additional reason of space constraints, I will instead adopt the more limited goal of offering some preliminary remarks on the plausibility of expecting constructivism to offer problem-solving utility in two specific areas: (1) conflict resolution; and (2) enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of global governance.

The intractability of civil wars (which often last decades despite staggering human costs to all parties) suggests the need for better explanations of these conflicts, along with mechanisms for ending them peacefully. Further, conflicts – civil and international – routinely have crucial ideational dimensions. This may indicate that they are about more than what can be captured by consequentialist logics.[70] To the extent that conflicts are motivated by goals other than increasing power or amassing utility, it is plausible to expect that constructivist theories may shed light on the causes and dynamics of conflicts and therefore be of use to policymakers in

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[69] This scepticism is shared, albeit on different grounds, by Lakatosian, Kuhnian and postmodernist perspectives. See, respectively: Elman and Fendius Elman, "Lessons from Lakatos," ; Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Yosef Lapid, "The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era," *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1989). While these certainly do not exhaust the menu of options with respect to the philosophy of science in international relations, I believe that they serve to illustrate the broad acceptance of this point. I am not aware of a significant perspective on the philosophy of science that accepts the possibility of conclusively establishing a theory to be correct.

[70] This observation is neither new, nor uniquely constructivist. See, for example, David A. Welch, *Justice and the Genesis of War* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

ending them. Further, my own work suggests that a particular class of conflict has been systematically overlooked by theories of international relations: namely, conflicts about determining the content of international rules and institutions. Here, again, constructivist theories are of at least potential utility, for example in aiding policymakers to understand what their counterparts are attempting to do when they engage in talk and practices of institutional politics and in responding to those attempts in a socially competent manner.

Such conflicts are of direct relevance to efforts to improve the legitimacy (and therefore the effectiveness) of global governance. As noted above, liberal scholars of international relations have already advanced the idea that legitimacy reduces the costs of maintaining social order. However, as I have argued, constructivist theories provide a more satisfying theoretical basis for this sensible observation. That is, constructivism is better able to explain why some ideas are regarded as legitimate and others are not. Constructivist theories (such as my theory of institutional politics) direct attention to intersubjectively shared standards for rightful conduct – in particular, to procedural rules for making and interpreting rules that govern behaviour. This is useful information for policymakers because it offers advice on how to most successfully pursue or resist changes to the institutional architecture of the international system.

The primary findings of this paper are that there are *prima facie* reasons to expect that constructivist foreign policy lessons can be useful to policymakers, and that in a significant range of situations they may be superior to those derived from realist and liberal theories. To the extent that realist and liberal lessons constitute dominant worldviews for the formulation and practice of foreign policy, such policies may often be based on outdated and sub-optimal information. In the same way that medical doctors or environmental scientists have professional

ethical obligations to bring their best available understandings to policymakers and regulators, so too do constructivists have obligations to communicate the policy relevance of their findings.

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