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Promoting democratic norms? Social constructivism and the ‘subjective’ limits to liberalism

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This article argues that, since the end of the Cold War, the understanding of democratic norm promotion has shifted through three conceptually distinct and chronologically distinguishable stages: the early 1990s view that democratic norms would be universalized with the Cold War victory of liberal ideals and the spread of new global norms of good governance; the mid- to late-1990s view that barriers to the promotion of democratic norms could be understood as the product of state or elite self-interests; and the perspective dominant since the 2000s, that the promotion of democratic norms necessarily involves much deeper and more extensive external intervention in order to transform social institutions and societal practices. Through charting the shifts in the understanding of democratic norm promotion, this article seeks to highlight the problems inherent in norm promotion discourses that emphasize the importance of subjective agency, normative choices, and cultural and ideational frameworks of understanding. A key problem being that, in the downplaying of social and economic context, agency-based understandings tend to degrade the rational capacities of – and to exoticize and problematize – the non-Western subject. The social constructivist approach, which presupposes a closed or endogenous framework of societal reproduction, has thereby been a crucial paradigm through which Western democracy promotion discourses have shifted to emphasizing the subjective policy barrier posed by the allegedly ‘non-liberal’ mindset of the non-Western subject.

Keywords: norm diffusion; social constructivism; new institutionalism; statebuilding; behaviour modification

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, democracy promotion has become increasingly conceptualized in terms of the international diffusion of global liberal norms, of human rights, the rule of law, and good governance.¹ Norms are generally understood as shared meanings or expectations with regard to the standards of appropriate and acceptable behaviour.² The study of democratic norms and their diffusion entered the mainstream of international relations theory with the constructivist understanding that state interests and identities were heavily influenced through

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inter-subjective engagement within the international sphere itself. From the early-1990s onwards, it was argued that as the world became more globalized, states increasingly shared the standards of behaviour ascribed to progressive democratic liberal norms.³

In the academic discourses of the 1990s, theoretical work on the diffusion of democratic norms was understood to be successfully challenging and overcoming the realist framings of the international sphere. The classical, liberal, rationalist framework of subjects as atomized autonomous self-interested actors⁴ was dominant in international relations during the Cold War period, where it was understood that states entered the international arena with pre-formed interests which they then rationally or strategically pursued in the international sphere. Norms theorists inversed this understanding of the international sphere, asserting that states' understandings of their own interests and identities were socially – inter-subjectively – constructed: that states co-constituted themselves and the international sphere through their collective interaction.⁵ Exogenous factors and relations were removed – the structuring of the international sphere was the product of states' own inter-subjective choices and interactions. This framing freed states from the external or exogenous structural constraints of realism, allowing a much more subjectivist understanding in which ideational factors played a major role in the understanding of international change. Within this context, work on democratic norms and their diffusion became an important area of international academic and policy concern.⁶

This article first sets up the development of sociological norm-based theorizing in international relations and then seeks to draw out how this discourse of democratic norm promotion shifted to one of limits. Norm-based approaches to democracy promotion will, for analytical purposes, be broken down into three broad stages⁷: 'first generation', late-1980s to mid-1990s understandings, which highlighted the social construction of shared meanings in the international sphere; 'second generation' norm-based approaches, in the mid- to late-1990s, which emphasized the barriers of state elites and the role of non-state-based actors, in the extension and diffusion of global liberal norms; and, in the 2000s, 'third generation', more critical approaches, which stressed the importance of domestic ideational frameworks, with an emphasis on the cultural embeddedness of the non-Western subject. For this 'third generation' of norm theorizing, the global sphere is a striated and differentiated one, where democratic norm diffusion needs to be understood as a much more contingent and problematic project. Norm-based approaches have thus shifted focus from the closed framing of inter-subjective engagement in the international sphere, in which actors were understood to be collectively self-constituting – freed from the structural constraints of exogenous interests – to the frameworks of ideational reproduction within states and societies held to be resistant to liberal democratic norms. This article seeks to urge caution in transferring the endogenous norms-based approach from the international sphere to the domestic level of the non-Western state. Whereas the focus on culture, norms, and identity may be innovative for

international relations theorizing and potentially yield new insights, the non-Western state has long been regarded as a site of endogenously reproduced differences. These endogenous understandings have historically been used to explain and reproduce gross inequalities of treatment on the basis of apparently inherent cultural and societal distinctions.

In removing exogenous structural or material constraints, the constructivist or sociological institutionalist gaze understands non- or a-liberal modes of understanding through the reproduction of ideational choices, rather than as reflecting material economic or socio-political structural constraints.⁸ These choices are then either to be celebrated and supported as political resistances to Western liberal norms⁹ or seen as problematic cultural and ideational barriers which necessitate much more intrusive modes of intervention in order to 'free' populations to be able to choose liberal norms for themselves.¹⁰ This understanding of the barriers to the promotion of liberal democratic norms in increasingly subjectivist and ideational terms shrinks the liberal world view: either celebrating perceived limits and resistances, and implicitly accepting material and structural inequalities as positive choices, or condemning social and cultural norms and values as moral and rational failings. Both of these framings 'exoticize' the non- or a-liberal 'other' and, in their exaggeration of difference, either operate as an apologia for existing social relations and inequalities or as the rationale for external projects of social engineering and behavioural change in order to 'civilize' or 'free' societies from their allegedly self-imposed ignorance and backwardness.

Social constructivism

In the wake of the unexpected and unpredicted collapse of the Soviet Union, norm-based, ideational approaches were advanced as a counter to earlier rationalist and structural materialist perspectives, which were now held to be unable to theorize transformational change.¹¹ The sociological perspective sought to demonstrate that states did not enter the international sphere with fixed identities and interests, but rather, that their attitudes to political mechanisms of rule, including democratic institutions, were shaped and constructed through inter-subjective engagement in the international sphere.¹² This framework both built on and challenged Cold War understandings of the extension of democratic norms and rights protections as a reflection of shared, pre-formed, rational economic interests.¹³ Where international relations theorists analysed shared normative understandings or the role of institutions in shaping behaviour, they tended to treat agreements on shared democratic norms (such as those emerging from the Helsinki process of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation, the Council of Europe, or the European Commission) merely as external constraints to action.¹⁴

Neo-liberal theorists¹⁵ took a rationalist perspective to the study of international regimes and institutions, which were thereby understood to develop as

part of the pursuit of existing self-interest: as minimizing transaction costs, facilitating the spread of information, and overcoming uncertainties of international cooperation. In which case, norms were secondary to exogenous interests. Constructivist approaches built upon this earlier work through challenging its underlying rationalist approach, and so freed the operation and development of shared norms from their material basis in exogenous interests:

Neoliberal institutionalists explicitly acknowledge the collective rules (norms) that constrain and enable individual choice, but they continue to treat actor identities and interests themselves as preexisting and fixed. And to the extent that they *are* considered, norms (embodied in institutions) derive exclusively from rational egoistic choice. Their origins are thus limited to the preexisting preferences of agents, and their consequences tend to reflect this constraint. Identity thus remains marginalized, even in the more expansive neoliberal institutionalist arguments.¹⁶

Social constructivism, by contrast, sought to emphasize the social environment in which states interacted and through which they constructed their self-identities and their perceptions of policy and governance needs.¹⁷ The emphasis on the international social context rather than exogenous social and political relations imposed a different understanding of the choices states made in terms of democratic norms: one that emphasized the importance of global or international 'norms, identity and culture'.

Through working backwards, by process-tracing, theorists sought to establish how norms had both 'constitutive effects' in the inter-subjective construction of actor identities as well as 'regulative' effects describing 'collective expectations for proper behaviour', including domestic behaviour.¹⁸ This framework emphasized the importance of transformative agency and ideas at the international level: reflecting upon 'how structures of constructed meaning, embodied in norms or identities, affect what states do'.¹⁹ As Martha Finnemore put it:

A constructivist approach does not deny that power and interest are important. They are. Rather, it asks a different and prior set of questions: it asks what interests *are*, and it investigates the ends to which and the means by which power will be used. The answers to these questions are not simply idiosyncratic and unique to each actor. The social nature of international politics creates normative understandings among actors that, in turn, coordinate values, expectations, and behaviour.²⁰

The two crucial grounding assumptions for this 'first generation' of democratic norms theorizing were: first, that there was an increasingly global social environment influencing states' attitudes towards democratic norms; and, second, that it was through analysing inter-subjective interaction and engagement within this environment that norm diffusion could be understood.²¹ Attention was thereby drawn to the area of norm- and identity-construction as a way of explaining liberalizing shifts towards democratic norms that appeared not to fit traditional power- or

interest-based understandings of government rationality or interests. The transitions of the Soviet bloc and the ending of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s seemed to offer strong evidence that subjective and ideational factors were much more important than material or structural understandings of fixed interests.²² The importance given to the social construction of meanings, practices, and identities in the international sphere reflected a fundamental shift in the study of international relations, which had previously understood the international sphere to be distinct from domestic society precisely because of a lack of shared meanings or interests.²³

While ‘first generation’ norms theorists often stated that the fact that interests were socially-constructed did not make them unimportant, the success of constructivism was based on the understanding that declarations of domestic, state, or national ‘interests’ could no longer be taken as ‘natural’ or ‘given’. If the structuring of ideological ‘interests’ of Soviet states in their opposition to liberal democracy could seemingly collapse overnight, it was clear that no claim of legitimate ‘interest’ could withstand the sociological ‘interpretivist’ critique of rationalism.²⁴ In this framework, resistance to democratic or human rights norms on the basis of collectivist ‘Asian values’ was roundly dismissed as illegitimate.²⁵ The prioritizing of international ‘sociological’ norms over discourses of exogenous state ‘interests’ was understood as a radical, critical stance towards the traditional framings of the state in international relations theorizing, and this assessment was questioned increasingly rarely as the sociological turn became part of the policy and academic mainstream as the 1990s progressed.

Agency and communicative norms

The ‘second wave’ of norm-based thinking on democracy promotion, which developed in the mid- to late-1990s, placed particular emphasis on the problematic agency of, largely non-Western, state elites and the transformative agency of non-state norm entrepreneurs. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink developed a model of a ‘norm life cycle’, stressing the role of policy experts and networks of non-state actors in the emergence of democratic norms and in establishing their broad acceptance: in setting off ‘norm cascades’.²⁶ This framework relied on an alternative understanding of a non-atomistic, communicative, rationality, heavily influenced by the work of Jürgen Habermas.²⁷ This endogenous framing of an emerging and inclusive international society assumed that all state regimes or actors were equally capable of engaging in the communicative global realm and had the rational (and moral) capabilities to choose to follow these emerging liberal democratic norms.²⁸

Finnemore and Sikkink referred to the development of ‘world time’, as increased global interdependence and the spread of communication and transportation links led to an increasing global interconnectedness. This increased connectedness, they suggested, had not just led to the ‘homogenization of global norms’

but also to the ‘speed of normative change’ and the success of ‘norm entrepreneurs’ in their rapid ‘cascading’ of global norms.²⁹ It was the intensity of global communicative interaction that enabled liberal democratic norms to spread through persuasion rather than coercion. Constructivist theorists stressed that:

Networks of NGOs and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) dealing with powerful states, however, are rarely able to ‘coerce’ agreement to a norm – they must persuade ... This process is not necessarily or entirely in the realm of reason, though facts and information may be marshalled to support claims. Affect, empathy, and principled moral beliefs may also be deeply involved, since the ultimate goal is not to challenge the ‘truth’ of something, but to challenge whether it is good, appropriate, and deserving of praise.³⁰

Under these assumptions, inter-subjective engagement or communicative action enabled the spread of norms as local and parochial understandings of interests become transformed into universal, shared liberal understandings.³¹ It was upon this basis that globalization was seen to bring actors into dialogue in ways which enabled global democratic norms to diffuse as new democratic identities arose.³² The actions of any state elites, in blocking or opposing democratic reforms, were therefore held to be a product of their illegitimate, mistaken, criminal, or short-sighted perceptions of their self-interests.³³

Keck and Sikkink’s influential book *Activists Beyond Borders*³⁴ argued that to diffuse liberal norms of democracy and human rights these illegitimate state-based or interest-based barriers to communicative interaction needed to be removed. These barriers were understood, along similar lines to Habermas, that the limit to the diffusion of norms was the unwillingness of actors to engage in communicative reason.³⁵ For many constructivist theorists, the focus was less on the US resistance to the spread of democratic norms than the alleged reluctance of non-Western states, which were perceived as being most hostile because they had the most to lose from no longer being able to hide behind the ‘impunity’ that ruling elites received due to their unelected or non-democratic hold on power.³⁶

The overcoming of barriers, seen to be at the level of state government resistance, was the work of the ‘boomerang effect’, which allowed the spread of democratic norms as international actors ‘removed the blockage’ of the narrow interest-based action of repressive regimes, ‘prying open space’ for domestic civil society actors which were bearers of these democratic aspirations.³⁷

Voices that are suppressed in their own countries may find that networks can project and amplify their concerns into an international arena, which in turn can echo back into their own countries ... networks open channels for bringing alternative visions and information into international debate ... At the core of network activity is the production, exchange and strategic use of information.³⁸

In this discourse, all that was needed was the removal of narrow ‘interest’ blockages of entrenched power elites and the freeing of the agency of the rational

subject. This framing was perhaps most exemplified by those advocating international intervention in the break-up of Yugoslavia, particularly in the Bosnia War 1992–1995, which was one of the key foreign policy focuses of the mid-1990s. It was held that international interveners were acting in the support of local civil-society actors in seeking to preserve multi-cultural Bosnia against the machinations of unrepresentative nationalist elites who were acting in their own narrow and criminal interests.³⁹ Once international intervention had removed the nationalist leaders from power, through prosecutions for war crimes and the oversight of free and fair post-war democratic elections, it was assumed that the population of Bosnia would express their support for universal liberal democratic norms in voting for non-nationalist political representatives.⁴⁰

In the 1990s, the spread of democratic norms was understood on the basis that there were no insuperable barriers to an inclusive global community of communicative interaction and therefore that the only limits to democratic norm diffusion were elite- or state-based barriers to communication. In this way, it was argued that the communicative interactions of transnational activist networks could ‘bridge the increasingly artificial divide between international and national realms’.⁴¹ In many ways, this understanding of the role of Habermasian communicative interaction and the emergence of a global communicative space, mirrored the views and understandings of critical global civil society theorists, such as Andrew Linklater, Mary Kaldor, and John Keane,⁴² who similarly juxtaposed the counter-productive or irrational understandings of elite self-interest to the progressive spread of an inclusive global communicative rationality.

Norms and behavioural modification

The ‘second generation’ norms-based theorists claimed to offer a set of explanations for the 1990s triumph of liberal internationalist norms. However, they tended to be less able to explain the limits to democratic norm diffusion, which became increasingly apparent in the late 1990s and into the 2000s. From the late-1990s onwards, this ‘second generation’ approach was criticized as positing an idealistic, normative, liberal teleology where it was assumed that ‘good’ democratic ideas won out through inter-subjective discourse.⁴³ The concern with the limits of norm diffusion reflected an increased disillusionment with democracy promotion – expressed in the set-backs and extensions to international protectorates in Bosnia (and later in Kosovo) and the disappointing democratic outcomes of the wars fought under the rubric of the global war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴⁴ In these states, it seemed that removing elites through war crimes prosecutions or regime change had not ‘freed’ society’s civil or democratic forces, enabling populations to freely accept or choose universal liberal norms. The focus inevitably shifted from the elite- or state-level to that of the society itself and the problem of individual and societal capacities and capabilities.⁴⁵

Critical or ‘third generation’ democratic norms research has tended to focus upon the differential ideational frameworks of domestic states and societies: the

historical experiences and community and culture of the norm-receiving subject.⁴⁶ This discussion of the limits of democratic norm diffusion shifted the emphasis from the external diffusion of norms in the communicative space of global civil society to the internal reception of norms in the domestic institutional context, particularly that of the post-conflict or fragile or failing non-Western state. Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink's *The Power of Human Rights* was one of the first books to stake out this shift in sociological perspective.⁴⁷ Rather than celebrating the power of global norms to have a transformative democratizing impact, regardless of the 'geographic, cultural, and political diversity' of the countries studied, they choose instead to focus on the problematic limits to democratic norms in countries where it appeared that the democratic rights situation had worsened in the 1990s.⁴⁸

Making an important move, Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink argued that the process of norm diffusion was more problematic than just facilitating free communicative links through removing irrational or illegitimate elite blockages.⁴⁹ Communicative engagement was not necessarily enough if the institutional frameworks shaping the understanding and behaviour of actors did not enable them to be open to communicative reason. Where this was the case, these institutions, and the understandings and behaviours associated with them, first had to be changed. Here, they argued, understanding the 'spiral effect' was key: the process through which modes of behaviour and understanding could be changed through external pressure, and the changing of institutional structures, eventually enabling democratic liberal norms to be accepted through free communicative interaction.⁵⁰

Rather than the power of ideas alone, Risse and Sikkink argued that 'domestic structural changes' were in some cases necessary to enable the spread of democratic norms.⁵¹ With the shift in emphasis to why 'such norms and principled ideas "do not float freely"' (an emphasis largely avoided in earlier discussions of 'global' norms)⁵² the focus shifted to the 'very different domestic structures' and 'rationalities' of states and societies having problems receiving or taking democratic norms.⁵³ In discussing the limits to democratic norms, there was increasing sensitivity to blockages not at the level of the state but at the level of broader society. Mere communicative interaction with international democratic norm-givers was no longer adequate for norm diffusion if the norm-takers lacked adequate 'existing collective understandings' or adequate 'political cultures'.⁵⁴

This framework of understanding internal cultural or ideational differences as preventing inter-subjective dialogue from diffusing democratic norms should not be understood as a return to earlier understandings of rationalist or economic perspectives with fixed interests and identities playing the determining role. In dealing with these 'blockages', Risse and Ropp argued that external pressure was necessary to get not just governments but societies to change their normative expectations of behaviour. Recalcitrant non-Western elites had to be coerced in order to take up democratic norms: 'Norm-violating governments tactically adjust to the new international discourse in order to stay in power, receive foreign aid, and the like'.⁵⁵

However, the coercive understanding of the need for intervention to remove or transform the behaviour of domestic elites is not in itself the solution. The important point about the ‘spiral approach’ is that the focus is upon the coercive or top-down transformation of social ideational frameworks.

Here there is no assumption of ‘freeing’ the non-Western subject from elite- or state-based constraints: the emphasis is upon the transformation of the mindsets of target societies or populations. The coercive intervention, to transform the actions or behaviour of elites, becomes important but only as a means to effect state policy changes that seek to change the behaviour and expectations of society itself. Societal ideational change becomes the goal rather than changing the self-understanding of state elites.⁵⁶ Most importantly, however, there is an assumption that societal ideational change will not be a matter of engagement in communicative reason – that is, will not be merely a matter of freeing or liberalizing domestic economic and political frameworks – but rather a matter of enforcing behavioural change as the precondition for the later or subsequent ‘free’ acceptance of global democratic norms:

... we find that a different logic of interaction incrementally takes over and at least supplements strategic behaviour. This logic emphasizes communicative rationality, argumentation, and persuasion, on the one hand, and norm institutionalization and habitualization, on the other. We feel that social constructivism, which endogenizes identities and interests of actors, can accommodate this logic more easily, in conjunction with sociological institutionalism ...⁵⁷

This shift to the emphasis on ‘norm institutionalization and habitualization’ is of fundamental importance for understanding how social constructivist frameworks have facilitated and legitimated much more coercive and interventionist practices of democratic norms promotion. When endogenously generated norms (at the global level) were understood as progressive and transformative, actor agency was celebrated and seen as morally courageous. However, once endogenously generated norms were seen as barriers to progress (at the local level) agency then became problematized and actors were seen to be choosing and reproducing ‘immoral’, ‘reactionary’, or ‘non-liberal’ norms.⁵⁸

In these frameworks, the institutionalization or habituation of problematic norms necessitates external intervention to engineer different ideational possibilities or subject capabilities. Institutional interventions to change ‘everyday’ practices and ideas are thus understood as a precondition for changes in agents’ receptiveness to global liberal norms. It is only once institutional changes are made, and domestic actors transform their modes of understanding, that democratic norms become the subject of communicative rationality – or ‘true dialogue’ – and can become institutionalized as a new habitual practice.⁵⁹ It is at this point that the liberal values, asserted to be essential to enabling peace and progress, can be understood as ‘sustainable’ and self-reproducing. It is important to emphasize this flipside to the constructivist emphasis on the relationship of discursive equality – held

to be in play to explain the transmission and spread of liberal democratic norms. This is that the barriers to the spread of these norms are then understood to legitimize a shift from communicative reasoning to external intervention. This external intervention is not understood to be oppressive but as emancipatory: the basis upon which the non-Western subject can be enlightened and placed in a position of self-liberation.⁶⁰

One clearly formulated example of this approach, arguing for behavioural changing interventions in order to create the conditions for ‘true dialogue’ and thereby for the sustainability of democratic norm reproduction, is that of Roland Paris’ conception of ‘Institutionalization before Liberalization’.⁶¹ Paris maintains the constructivist understanding of the inter-subjective construction of subject identity but argues that liberal internationalists have underestimated the societal blockages to rational choice-making and self-government. Rather than liberal democratic frameworks of governance and market social relations ‘freeing’ the non-Western subject, he argues that their introduction is highly problematic in societies held to lack the right ideational and cultural pre-conditions. In effect, liberal freedoms are held to be problematic and counter-productive in societies understood to be non- or a-liberal. In these cases, the promotion of democratic norms, involves the initial limiting of political and economic freedoms. External interventions have to act to restrict and regulate the political, social, and economic spheres until behavioural and attitude changes allow the social acceptance of liberal norms.

For the ‘third generation’ of democratic norm promoters, the liberal subject has to be externally constituted before they can be ‘free’ to choose liberal values. The lessons of the Balkans, the Middle East, and of Africa are increasingly interpreted as the problem of too much democracy rather than too little.⁶² The title of Paul Collier’s 2010 book *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places*,⁶³ sums up the increasing awareness that democracy promotion has to be done gradually and under the guidance of external interveners pursuing the new international statebuilding agendas of behavioural and ideational change, through extensive processes of societal intervention. Here, international relations theorists often pose the need to join with anthropologists to understand the societal reproduction of particular cultural institutional barriers to liberal norm diffusion.⁶⁴

The shrinking of the liberal world

As noted above, in the early 1990s, sociological constructivists argued that they had made a fundamental break from rationalist or structuralist understandings of the limits of democratic norms, through positing the transformative nature of norm construction through communicative interaction.⁶⁵ Now, it appeared that norm-based approaches could be just as useful in explaining the limits to change. However, introducing norms as a causal explanation for understanding the reproduction of ideational differences clearly lends itself to judgements made independently of the socio, economic, and political contexts in which

norms are established. The concern with 'irrational' cultural or ideational mindsets, as the explanation for differences in economic, social, and political developments,⁶⁶ had been a preoccupation of norm-based approaches outside the discipline of IR since, at least, the work of John R. Commons in the 1930s.⁶⁷ For Commons, it was the system of shared understandings and behavioural expectations – norms – which explained the success of some countries and the lack of development of others.⁶⁸

Sociological approaches, bringing a variety of endogenously constructed frameworks of explanation to bear on the reproduction of cultural and ideational barriers to the diffusion of democratic norms, have increasingly come to dominate the academic and policy agendas in the 2000s. This has particularly been the case in the fields of international peacebuilding and international statebuilding, where the discourse of democracy has shifted from that of 'freeing' the subject from authoritarian regimes of regulation, to transforming the subject itself through a broad range of societal interventions under the rubric of the promotion of 'good governance'.⁶⁹ These multi-level and multi-stakeholder initiatives are held to be necessary to enable the behavioural and ideational transformation of subjects through their participatory engagement in a wide range of policy activities.⁷⁰ Other academic commentators have similarly focused on the 'hybrid' outcomes when there are attempts to impose global democratic norms on non- or a-liberal societies, arguing, in effect, that the process of 'norm socialization' becomes blocked by countervailing practices and institutions.⁷¹

Here, critical international relations theorizing, about democratic norms and the barriers to their promotion, lays stress on the cognitive and sociological institutional context in which shared meanings are produced and transmitted.⁷² The call for more attention to the 'local' and even 'local-local' communicative transactions⁷³ and to the specific cultural values and 'modes of life' of those in non-Western states and societies, may seem a radical departure from traditional theorizing in international relations, but there are difficulties associated with the rejection of the universal rationalist assumptions of traditional liberal political science. Rationalist approaches tended to see ideas and choices as a product or reflection of rational interests, and therefore saw the structural or material socio-economic context as the key to understanding and addressing problems of difference and ideational contestation. Constructivist and other norms-based approaches, which eschew rationalist explanations, tend to explain differences in economic wealth or political institutions as the product of ideational structures and choices. In these approaches, the reproduction of difference is more likely to be understood as a product of agential social or inter-subjective construction than as shaped by material or structural social relations. As Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast put it:

The task of social science is to explain the performance characteristics of societies through time, including the radical gap in human well-being between rich countries

and poor as well as the contrasting forms of political organization, beliefs, and social structure that produce these variations in performance.⁷⁴

For endogenous, norms-based approaches to social differentiation, the operation of market forces is no longer part of any causal explanation because material differences and social relations (though obviously important) are not, in themselves, adequate for explaining change but are often the product of pre-existing social institutional frameworks. Rather than economic orders, endogenous frameworks of thinking understand the world in terms of 'social orders' as they allege that social norms or social institutional frameworks are key to shaping individual behaviours and beliefs which contribute to the perpetuation of differences and inequalities.⁷⁵ The key research questions then become the different patterns of social order, which enable theorists to explain the 'sociological' mystery of the political and economic limits of liberalism: why democratic norms are hard to promote, and 'why poor countries stay poor'.⁷⁶

The endogenous norms-based approach to the problems of liberal limits was influentially articulated in development economics from the early 1970s.⁷⁷ One outstanding theorist in this area was Douglass C. North, the Nobel prize-winning economist and leading World Bank policy advisor. Perhaps his best known book, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (1990), emphasized the importance not of formal government institutions (which were seen as relatively easy to change through external assistance) but informal institutions, particularly 'attitudes and ideologies'; concluding, in good sociological institutional fashion, that: 'Informal constraints matter. We need to know much more about culturally derived norms of behaviour and how they interact with formal rules to get better answers to such issues [of how social orders evolve].'⁷⁸

In many ways, international relations was a disciplinary latecomer in rejecting rationalist framings, which is part of the reason why the transition away from realism (in many academic centres) occurred so rapidly and with relatively little disciplinary reflection.⁷⁹ The shared theoretical frameworks with other endogenous or institutionalist approaches in sociology, history, and economics has meant that social constructivist theorizing has been easily accommodated in mainstream institutional policy perspectives regarding democracy promotion. This can be usefully highlighted by surveying the dominance of endogenous perspectives concerning democracy promotion and the ways in which these approaches operate to analyse the social-construction of limits to democratic norms.

At the *international level*, endogenous frameworks assert that state institutional arrangements cut off their societies from access to the benefits of globalization.⁸⁰ The need for international statebuilding as a framework of democracy promotion is largely established on the basis that changes in state institutions can enable the mediation of the domestic and the international so that dysfunctional states can gain from global liberal norms and international institutional frameworks rather than being a threat to them. In fact, weak and failing states are often seen to constitute the major threat to the international order.⁸¹ Democracy promotion through

statebuilding, as carried out by every major international institution from the European Union to the United Nations and the World Bank, is seen to be capable of extending democratic norms through institutional behavioural modification, through the use of incentives and conditionalities: such as the compacts proposed by a range of authors from Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart to Paul Collier.⁸²

On the *state level*, endogenous approaches argue that culture and values – often agentially framed in the terminology of ‘civil society’ – are key to understanding the problems of the spread of democratic norms. Many of these arguments were cohered in the 1990s, in the discussion of the problem of ‘transition’ in the newly independent states in Central and Eastern Europe, where it was alleged that external assistance for institution-building was necessary to allow democracy and the market to work without conflict and disruption.⁸³ The problems of facilitating change or ‘transition’ are central to endogenous approaches to international development, where institutional path-dependencies are held to prevent easy transitioning to liberal ‘open-access’ social orders.⁸⁴ In this framework, it is the ideas, values, and social institutional culture of a society that appear to matter much more than economic wealth or socio-economic relations.⁸⁵

On the *individual level*, endogenous approaches argue that individuals are poorly equipped to deal with change and therefore tend to act on the basis of existing sociological institutional understandings and practices and individually shaped past experience. Douglass North, for example, draws heavily on the work of leading neo-liberal theorist, Friedrich Hayek,⁸⁶ to argue that evolutionary psychology provides the best framework for understanding the differential social construction of meaning and therefore the inequality of market economic outcomes:

Culture not only determines societal performance at a moment in time but, through the way in which its scaffolding constrains the players, contributes to the process of change through time. The focus of our attention, therefore, must be on human learning – on what is learned and how it is shared among the members of society and on the incremental process by which the beliefs and preferences change, and on the way in which they shape the performance of economies through time.⁸⁷

It therefore may seem that a note of caution is called for when transferring calls for greater attention to culture, identity, and values from the international level, where there had traditionally been little attention to these aspects of agency, to the level of the non-Western state. The idea that the barriers to liberal democratic norms are endogenous, cultural, or ideational has a long tradition of being used to argue that differences cannot be easily overcome. Either this framing can easily result in an apologia for gross inequalities of outcomes or, just as problematically, for gross inequalities of treatment, justifying coercive interventions with the goal of social or ideational engineering. Social constructivism, along with other ‘new institutionalist’ approaches, has sought to eschew the racialized and culturalized framings of traditional ‘institutionalist’ sociological and historical approaches of the colonial era, which focused on the endogenous reproduction of societal

difference.⁸⁸ I wish to suggest that a complete break with former colonializing approaches, which essentialized difference, may well not be possible within the framework of endogenous theorizing: that, in fact, the problems with this approach cannot be overcome by substituting the discourse of ‘norms’ for that of race and culture. This is because the problematic of endogenous approaches necessarily involves certain shared methodological assumptions, which are drawn out in the conclusion below.

Conclusion

The foregoing work has sought to highlight problems that are integral to endogenous frameworks of understanding the limits to democratic norm promotion. It has highlighted these problems by specifically focusing on the most widely accepted framework for interrogating the spread of democratic norms: social constructivism. Endogenous approaches share two core problematic attributes, which have enabled social constructivism to act as a methodological framework through which policy and academic understandings of norm promotion have been able to shift from agential understandings of the international sphere (seen to be radical and progressive) to the potentially less radical and progressive problematization of non-Western societies as producing or choosing to constitute barriers to the universalization of liberal norms. These attributes are, first, epistemological and, second, ontological.

The epistemological attribute which norm-based sociological understandings share with other new institutionalist approaches, which also lack the foundational grounds of universalist rationalist and materialist approaches, is that they can only work backwards to explain the present. Norm-based understandings can easily account for both continuity and for change.⁸⁹ This all-purpose explanatory framework may not have seemed so problematic when democratic change, perceived as progressive, was being analysed with the fall of the Soviet Union and the ‘domino-effect’ of democratic change in Central and Eastern Europe.⁹⁰ However, it is certainly much more problematic when we are dealing with post-hoc cultural, value, and identity-based understandings of the reproduction of different ideas and policy preferences.⁹¹ Part of this problem is that efforts to identify norms suffer from a bias toward ‘the norm that worked’.⁹² In the agency-based framings of constructivism, ‘the norm that worked’ is another way of saying ‘the agency that worked’, for this reason agency was ascribed to non-state actors and norm entrepreneurs, well beyond their representative political influence or socio-economic power. Once the focus shifts to understanding the perpetuation of non-liberal norms, ‘the norm that worked’ gives agential power to those choosing, holding, and reproducing non-liberal norms – often those with the least social, economic, and political weight in non-Western states. In this case, it is not surprising that societies are seen to freely ‘choose’ and to be complicit in the reproduction of their own frameworks of subjection and subordination.

The ontological attribute shared by both mainstream constructivist norms-based approaches and other new institutionalist approaches is that they can only

explain change (and the limits to change) as internally generated.⁹³ In early constructivist approaches, this process inevitably marginalized or excluded the 'exogenous' processes taking place outside the global sphere of inter-subjective communicative exchange between global actors. The barriers between the domestic and the international were held to be increasingly blurring and this facilitated an understanding of a shared closed system, which increasingly approximated to a dematerialized and discursive global level. From the globalizing of the international into a closed system capable of extending and reproducing liberal norms and values, the problematizing of democratic norm promotion has led to the construction of a conflicting and differentiated understanding dividing the international into liberal and non-liberal worlds. One world is held to choose the reproduction of liberal norms and ideas and the other world is held to choose the reproduction of non-liberal norms and ideas. It is here the focus on agency, rather than structure, forces constructivist understandings to see non-liberal values as a 'choice'.

This subjectivization of the limits of liberalism leads theorists to then either see these choices as morally problematic, and thereby an indication of subjective threat to be dealt with through policies of intervention, or alternatively as a chosen subjective political act of resistance to be offered solidarity and understanding. In either perspective the endogenous framework of agency-based understanding fits unerringly into the neo-liberal framing that political, social, and economic inequalities are a product of free choice making, that to paraphrase Wendt⁹⁴: 'capitalism is what states make of it' or 'social welfare is what states make of it' or 'democracy is what states make of it'. Once the limits to democratic norm promotion become understood as subjective products of non-liberal subject choices, there is no longer any rationale for the promotion of democratic norms. Either democracy has to be imposed through interventions aimed at behaviour modification and social and ideational engineering, which necessitate the limiting of democratic and liberal freedoms of choice, or we have to express solidarity with, accept, and learn from, the non-liberal other and apparently appreciate that they choose not to have, are not ready for, or are too 'other' for liberal democratic freedoms.

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Notes

1. See, for example, McFaul, 'Democracy Promotion as a World Value'; Carothers, *Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion*; Youngs, *The European Union and the Promotion of Democracy*; Thomas, *Making EU Foreign Policy*.
2. A common definition of norms in the international relations (IR) literature is that forwarded by Peter J. Katzenstein, as a description of 'collective expectations for the

- proper behaviour of actors with a given identity'. Katzenstein, 'Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security', 5.
3. Finnemore, 'Norms, Culture and World Politics'.
 4. The understanding of classical liberal theory as being blind to social and associative connections has been authoritatively challenged by authors as diverse as C.B. Macpherson, see *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, and Amartya Sen, see, for example, *On Ethics and Economics; The Idea of Justice*.
 5. Wendt, 'Anarchy is what States Make of it'.
 6. For a good overview see Cortell and Davis, 'Understanding the Domestic Impact of International Norms'.
 7. I follow Wesley Widmaier, although, for heuristic purposes, the analytical framing of these stages differs. See Widmaier, 'Taking Stock of Norms Research – From Structural, Cognitive and Psychological Constructivisms to Intellectual Irony and Populist Paradox'.
 8. Checkel, 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory'. See also, Hay, 'Constructivist Institutionalism'; Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science*, 107–22; Scott, *Institutions and Organizations*.
 9. See, for example, Richmond, 'Resistance and the Post-liberal Peace'.
 10. For more on the problematic of universalism and the overcoming of difference in the Enlightenment conception of 'free' and autonomous subjects, see the treatment by Michel Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others*, 6–39. See also the insightful work of Laura Zanotti, for example 'International Security, Normalization and Croatia's Euro-Atlantic Integration'; and *Governing Disorder*.
 11. See, for example, Barnett, 'Social Constructivism'; Jackson and Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, 159–80; Reus-Smit, 'Constructivism'.
 12. See Wendt, 'Anarchy is what States Make of it'; and Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.
 13. Katzenstein, 'Conclusion: National Security in a Changing World', 528.
 14. See, for example, Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power*; Krasner, *International Regimes*.
 15. Neo-liberalism in IR theory, refers to theorists who worked in the same methodological tradition as realist theories but who argued that the pursuit of rational self-interest could lead to cooperation rather than conflict.
 16. Kowert and Legro, 'Norms, Identity, and Their Limits', 458–9; see also Katzenstein, 'Introduction', 11–17.
 17. Katzenstein, 'Introduction', 4.
 18. *Ibid.*, 5. See also the influential work of Anthony Giddens in developing the endogenous approach of 'structuration theory' in Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*; and the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.
 19. Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, 'Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security', 66.
 20. Finnemore, 'Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention', 157.
 21. Katzenstein, 'Introduction', 26.
 22. See for example, Harrison, 'State Socialization, International Norm Dynamics and the Liberal Peace'; Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect*; Black, 'The Long and Winding Road'.
 23. See, for a good overview of the problematic, Bull, *The Anarchical Society*.
 24. See, for example, Hollis and Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*.
 25. For example, Sen, 'Human Rights and Asian Values'; Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*; Donnelly, *International Human Rights*, 131–5.
 26. Finnemore and Sikkink, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', 902–4.

27. See Chris Brown for a useful discussion of Habermas in this context: Brown, “‘Turtles All the Way Down’”.
28. For example, for the sociologically informed authors of the United Nations instigated ‘Responsibility to Protect’ Report, the domestic socio-political context or preconceived geo-political interests were no excuse for not choosing to behave according to global liberal norms: ‘The behaviour of states is not predetermined by systemic or structural factors, and moral justifications are not merely after-the-fact justifications or simply irrelevant’. International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 129.
29. Finnemore and Sikkink, ‘International Norm Dynamics and Political Change’, 909.
30. *Ibid.*, 900.
31. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*.
32. For the relevance of this framework to international institutional understandings see, for example, the 2011 World Bank publication, authored by Johanna Martinsson, *Global Norms: Creation, Diffusion, and Limits*.
33. This was reminiscent of the ‘universalist’ reasoning of Vitoria, regarding the Spanish conquest of the New World, where refusal to open up to *liberum commercium* and the communicative engagement of Papal missionaries was held to be a violation of Spanish rights justifying suppression. See Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 108–13.
34. Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 12–13.
35. See, for example, Habermas, *The Divided West* for his critique of US foreign policy resistance to global liberal norms.
36. See, for example, Robertson, *Crimes Against Humanity*.
37. Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 12–13.
38. *Ibid.*, x.
39. See, for example, Burg, ‘Bosnia Herzegovina’; Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*; Fine, ‘Fragile Stability and Change’.
40. For this reason the international administrative mandate was initially intended to last only until the first elections, held in September 1996. For more information, see Chandler, *Bosnia*.
41. Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 4.
42. See, for example, Acharya, ‘How Ideas Spread’; Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community*; Kaldor, *Global Civil Society*; Keane, *Global Civil Society?*
43. Hopgood, ‘Reading the Small Print in Global Civil Society’; Palan, ‘A World of their Making’; Chandler, ‘Universal Ethics and Elite Politics’; Chandler, *Constructing Global Civil Society*.
44. See, for example, Newman, Paris, and Richmond, *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*; Richmond and Franks, *Liberal Peace Transitions*; Tadjbakhsh, *Rethinking the Liberal Peace*; Campbell, Chandler, and Sabaratnam, *A Liberal Peace?*
45. In shifting policy concerns to the societal rather than the state level, democratic norms discourse followed similar international discourses concerned with security and development, where the emphasis on ‘human’ individual and social capacities and capabilities was intellectually cohered through the work of Amartya Sen and others, see particularly, Sen’s *Development as Freedom*; and the UN Development Reports, annually from 2004. For a critique, see, for example, Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*.
46. A good example is Acharya, ‘How Ideas Spread’.
47. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights*.
48. Risse and Sikkink, ‘The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction’, 3.
49. Previously, Thomas Risse-Kappen had argued that domestic institutional structures had blocking affects, in terms of preventing communicative engagement with

- international norm entrepreneurs or transnational non-state actors from accessing domestic political systems and domestic actors. See, for example, Risse-Kappen, 'Ideas Do Not Float Freely'; Risse-Kappen, *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In*.
50. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights*.
 51. Risse and Sikkink, 'The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction', 4.
 52. Ibid.
 53. Ibid.
 54. Risse and Ropp, 'International Human Rights Norms and Domestic Change: Conclusions', 271.
 55. Ibid., 273.
 56. It is in this context that concerns are often expressed in terms of the limits of the European Union's 'normative power' beyond the periphery of states involved in the accession process, see for example, Laïdi, 'European Preferences and their Reception', 15.
 57. Ibid.
 58. There is no methodological necessity for social constructivists to argue for the globalization of liberal norms rather than focus on the barriers to their acceptance – the only difference is the level of focus for the endogenous understanding of the operation of societal inter-subjective framings. Whereas earlier norms-based approaches focused on global social interaction, overtly challenging rationalist approaches at the international level, later norms-based approaches have focused on the domestic level of failing or post-conflict states and have tended to present endogenous frameworks of understanding in terms of institutionalist frameworks of reasoning, which equally challenge traditional rationalist frameworks of understanding in economic and political social science.
 59. Risse and Sikkink, 'The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction', 34.
 60. As Lord Paddy Ashdown, the former international High Representative with administrative ruling responsibilities for Bosnia, explained informally to me in January 2011, external rule was only necessary until the Bosnian people were judged to be capable of freely making their own rational governmental decisions. See also Ashdown, 'The European Union and Statebuilding in the Western Balkans'.
 61. Paris, *At War's End*.
 62. See, for example, Zaum, *The Sovereignty Paradox*; Paris and Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding*; Hawksley, *Democracy Kills*.
 63. Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes*.
 64. See, for example, Fukuyama, 'The Primacy of Culture'; Weldes et al., *Cultures of Insecurity*; Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace*.
 65. Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner argue that: 'Constructivists seek to understand how preferences are formed and knowledge generated, prior to the exercise of instrumental rationality.' See, Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 'International Organization and the Study of World Politics', 681.
 66. See, for example Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*; North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*.
 67. Commons, generally seen to be the father of new institutionalism, argued against the classical rationalist assumptions of the universal interest-seeking individual, insisting that no individual's understanding or behaviour could be understood outside a sociological institutional context: 'Even the individual of economic theory is not the natural individual of biology and psychology: he is that artificial bundle of institutes known as a legal person, or citizen. He is made such by sovereignty which grants to him the rights and liberties to buy and sell, borrow and lend, hire and hire out, work and

- not work, on his own free will. Merely as an individual of classical and hedonistic theory he is a factor of production and consumption like a cow or slave. Economic theory should make him a citizen, or member of the institution under whose rule he acts (Commons, 'Institutional Economics', 247–8).
68. Foucault traces the institutionalist turn in social theorizing back to Husserl's critique of phenomenology, which influenced the Freiburg School of neo-liberal economic thinking as much as it did the critical sociologists of the Frankfurt School; see Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 101–6; see also Chandler, *International Statebuilding*, 66–84.
 69. Chandler, *International Statebuilding*.
 70. Belloni, 'Civil Society in War-to-Democracy Transitions'; Chandler, 'Democratization in Bosnia'; Paffenholz, *Civil Society and Peacebuilding*.
 71. See, for example, Richmond, *A Post-Liberal Peace*; Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*; Roberts, 'Hybrid Politics and Indigenous Pluralities'; Barnett and Zürcher, 'The Peacebuilder's Contract'.
 72. See, for example, Acharya, 'How Ideas Spread'; Tadjbakhsh, *Rethinking the Liberal Peace*; Campbell, Chandler, and Sabaratnam, *A Liberal Peace?*
 73. See, for example, Richmond, 'Resistance and the Post-Liberal Peace'.
 74. North, Wallis, and Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders*, 1.
 75. See for example, the best-selling neo-liberal institutionalist critique of classical liberal framings of *homo economicus*, Taler and Sunstein, *Nudge*.
 76. North, Wallis, and Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders*, 3.
 77. Davis and North, *Institutional Change and American Economic Growth*; North and Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World*.
 78. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, 140.
 79. Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science*, 139.
 80. Ghani and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*.
 81. See, for example, the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.
 82. Ghani and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*; Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes*.
 83. For example, Fukuyama, 'The Primacy of Culture'; Schmitter and Karl, 'What Democracy is...and is Not'; O'Donnell, 'Illusions about Consolidation'; Gunther et al., 'Debate: Democratic Consolidation: O'Donnell's "Illusions": a Rejoinder'.
 84. See, for example, North, Wallis, and Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders*.
 85. Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes*; Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*; Zakharia, *The Future of Freedom*.
 86. In particular upon Hayek's seminal work on the phenomenological social construction of meaning, Hayek, *The Sensory Order*.
 87. North, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change*, viii.
 88. See Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science*, 1–24.
 89. Kowert and Legro, 'Norms, Identity, and their Limits', 483.
 90. Macdonald, 'Communist Bloc Expansion in the Early Cold War'; Jervis and Snyder, *Dominoes and Bandwagons*.
 91. This danger was articulated well by Keohane, in a defence of rationalist understandings that encouraged researchers 'to look beneath the surface' rather than merely focus on 'post hoc observation of values or ideology', Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches'. Or, as Karl Marx put it: 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided', Marx, 'The Trinity Formula'.
 92. Kowert and Legro, 'Norms, Identity, and Their Limits', 485.
 93. Kratochwil, 'Constructing a New Orthodoxy?', 97.
 94. Wendt, 'Anarchy is what States Make of it'.

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