

# The Postcolonial Perspective: Why We Need to Decolonize Norms

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## The Postcolonial Perspective: Why We Need to Decolonize Norms

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CHARLOTTE EPSTEIN, JAN 19 2017

This is an excerpt from the forthcoming introduction to the edited collection *Against International Relations Norms: Postcolonial Perspectives*.

Norms have become part of IR's established tool-kit for analysing the behaviour of international actors that is driven, not merely by a concern for self-interest maximisation, but by a 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen 1998). Norms, or, in Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink's (1998, 894) classic definition, 'shared ideas, expectations and beliefs about appropriate behaviour' are 'what gives the world structure, order and stability'. They oil the workings of international cooperation. In the history of the discipline, norms, along with its conceptual counterpart, identity, have played a crucial role in moving IR beyond its narrow focus upon material understandings of power and interest-maximising behaviours. Norms is a hallmark of 'conventional constructivism' (Hopf 1998, Wiener 2004), and the driving concept of its highly successful empirical research programme, now into its third decade.[i]

Constructivism's merit is to have opened up the ideational dimension of one of the discipline's oldest questions: what are the ordering processes undergirding the anarchic international system? Or to phrase it differently, why, despite the absence of a centralised authority to enforce them, do international actors consistently appear to observe common, implicit or explicit rules – the behaviour, that is, that makes international cooperation possible?[ii] Whether practically (they sustain cooperation), or for their theoretical contribution (bringing ideational and social dynamics into sight), norms, then, would appear to be good things for international politics. This may explain an enduring bias in the constructivist empirical research programme towards 'good' international norms (such as human rights or anti-whaling), notwithstanding a recent corrective by way of attention to some of the less felicitous international norms, such as the bearing of arms (see for example Bob 2012). Even the more critical strands of norms analysis, which have apprehended these as not merely benignly diffusing, but rather as operating specific exclusions in the international system (see notably Adler-Nissen 2014, Zarakol 2011, and indeed Epstein 2008), have fallen short of considering what these might look like from a postcolonial perspective. And yet the ideational mechanisms regulating this system have been a driving interest of postcolonial research for a long time.[iii]

Indeed, concerns with 'global order' were increasingly salient in the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial project, notably as it was articulated by John Stuart Mill (Bell 2010). *La mission civilisatrice* (the civilizing mission), to use the consecrated term of the French colonial state, held a dual ordering function, internal and external. Internally, it aimed to bring the languages, moors and norms of civilisation to 'barbarian' populations (Lecour-Grandmaison 2005). Externally, it played a key role in the emergence of international law in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Anghie 2005). Moreover, the twin processes of colonization and decolonization have constituted crucial historical shapers of our contemporary international system, in which postcolonial states comprise a majority. These have been key drivers of the 'diffusion', to use constructivism's term, of the very institution that yielded its unit, the state, and the norms of sovereignty it is bound with, which the contributions by Sarah Philips, Anthea Vogl, Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ulrik Pram Gad engage with directly from postcolonial perspectives. Insofar, then, as they both seek to apprehend the normative matrices underwriting the behaviour of international actors, or the *nomoi* of the international system, as I have called them elsewhere (see Epstein 2012c), constructivist and postcolonial scholars would appear to be on the same page.

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Constructivism's shortcoming, however, is to have neglected the power relations running through these normative matrices and the specific exclusions they enact and enable – power, that is, still understood in its immaterial, relational dimensions. This line of critique was developed from the late 1990s onwards by the 'critical constructivist' and 'poststructuralist' quarters of the discipline; here I use the two terms interchangeably, insofar as they share a common understanding of what constitutes the duty of critique. It is to 'denaturalise the taken-for-granted' social constructs that were built on and further entrench unequal power relations, to invoke the introductory essay by Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson and Raymond Duvall (1999) to a seminal collection in the emergence of a postcolonial IR. It brought together a group of critical constructivist scholars who all turned to postcolonial empirics, and all eschewed the concept of norms to apprehend them. Norms are the taken-for-granted of IR that the contributors to this volume aim to denaturalise.

## Orders of Knowledge-Power: The Epistemological Duty of Critique

Our critical task is to understand how norms constitute powerful ordering mechanisms of international politics that are enabled and sustained by particular forms of knowledge. In this duty of critique, the ethical commitment differs from that at work in norms constructivism in ways that David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah further expound in their chapter. The role of the normative consists not in determining the 'ought' that political actors or 'norm entrepreneurs' should orient themselves upon in order to make the world a better place (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). In that scenario, the normative is a guide to political practice or *praxis*. Here, instead, the duty of critique is necessarily epistemological, insofar as practices are always sustained by specific forms of knowledge (see also Shilliam 2014). To engage with the normative at the level of practices, as norms constructivism does, is therefore to leave untouched the orders of knowledge that sustain them.

Returning power relations to the analysis makes this no longer viable, or at least sufficient, as an ethical commitment. Or to put it differently, apprehending the normative merely at the level of *praxis* is not enough, once one recognises that orders of practice are regulated by epistemological orders, which in turn are always suffused with power. 'Knowledge-power' (*savoir-pouvoir*) is the term Michel Foucault coined to capture this constitutive and mutually reinforcing relation between forms of knowledge and powerful normative orders. Re-examining the epistemological categories that both sustain practices on the one hand, and scholarly analysis on the other, then becomes the duty of critique. The contributors to this volume seek to explore the specific forms of knowledge-power that have become institutionalised as a result of conventional constructivism's success in adding norms to IR's established toolkit. What is it about the concept itself, its underlying logic, that can account for the erasure of the workings of power in the international system'?

## Norming and Re-norming the Study of International Politics

Restoring power relations to the ideational analysis of norms beckons two crucial referents for beginning to think about international norms differently, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Norms are a key modality of the operation of *discipline*, which constitutes Foucault's historic contribution to understanding the ideational workings of power. In his 1975-1978 lectures on power Foucault (2003, 38-39) draws a first distinction between the power of laws and that of norms. Both hold a prescriptive power, over what is allowed and what is right, respectively. Laws, however, are encountered as external limits; they shape behaviour from without, through the threat of sanctions. Norms, on the other hand, require no such threat. They operate as 'natural rules' (Foucault 2003, 38). They work political actors from within, as a set of internalised prescriptions that are experienced as 'chosen'.<sup>[iv]</sup> This naturalness explains a key source of the power of norms, which is this taken-for-granted, unquestioned quality they command. From an IR optic, which is grounded in a topological distinction between the 'inside' of the state and the 'outside' of the international (Walker 1989), the latter is where the law ceases to apply. Norms, on the other hand, fully folded as they are into actors' behaviour, are not contained in the state. They can travel or indeed diffuse, to use the language of norms constructivism.

Foucault (2009, 57) then draws an additional distinction between 'normation' and normalization'. 'Normation' helps to locate precisely where the prescriptive power of norms lies. The 'primacy of the norm' (Foucault 2009, 57) in relation to the normal is that it draws the original boundary between acts that are deemed appropriate (suited

# The Postcolonial Perspective: Why We Need to Decolonize Norms

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constructivism's logic of appropriateness) and those that are not. 'The determination and the identification of the normal and the abnormal becomes possible in relation to this posited norm' (Foucault 2009, 57). 'Normalization' constitutes the battery of means then deployed to obtain that deviant actors toe the line:

Disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely what can confirm to this norm. (Foucault 2009, 57).

Building on Foucault's insights, Judith Butler (1997) has shown how individual desires, far from being innate or natural, are regulated by deeply entrenched normative matrices; for example (Butler 2006), the heterosexual *nomos*.<sup>[v]</sup> The genealogical approach is key to both Butler and Foucault setting into relief the disciplinary effects of norms. Genealogies unsettle the fixity and naturalness of norms, by drawing out how they constitute specific historical constructs, pertaining to a particular set of social relations, rather than containing universal truths about human behaviour.

'Normation', 'normalization', and '*nomos*' all offer important concepts for denaturalising norms. Indeed, constructivism's analytical logic consists in starting from an established international norm, one that can be shown to have a tangible effect upon the behaviour of international actors.<sup>[vi]</sup> For example, and to draw on a few that the contributors engage with, human rights (Chowdhury), racial equality (Smith), anti-whaling (my own). The norm is then tracked as it is 'diffused' through the international system, generally by 'norm entrepreneurs'; and then as it is 'internalized' by local actors who are more less successfully 'socialized' into it, to run through the gamut of constructivist terms, which are analysed in detail in Charmaine Chua's and my chapters.

Instead, these concepts provide new starting points for apprehending (1) the power that inheres in international norms, (2) the extent to which they constitute the actors of international politics, and (3) the regulation of possibilities for acting 'appropriately'. They shift the focus from treating a norm as 'given' to considering its initial constitution, so as to lay bare the dynamics that underwrite it; to account for the particular form that a norm takes, and for how it authorizes certain forms of behaviour and not others.

## Notes

[i] Conventional constructivism's wielding of 'identity' has been the subject of extensive critique elsewhere (Zehfuss 2002; Epstein 2011; Epstein 2013a and 2013b).

[ii] This question, of course, was also one of the defining questions of the English school. Norms, however, has not constituted their primary concept; hence insofar as these concern us, constructivism is our main site of engagement with the discipline.

[iii] To frame things in this way is also to locate this volume to rehearse the (very coarse) distinction between material and ideational strands of postcolonial research, on the ideational 'post-structuralist' strand; as distinct from the former, 'historical materialist' or 'Marxist'. See, however, Scott (1999) for both a good exposition of these differences, and a good discussion in how these categorizations rapidly limit postcolonial enquiries.

[iv] This is why norms also represent a highly economical form of power, much more than laws, which require being enforceable.

[v] Butler (2006 [1990] and 1997) shows how the 'heterosexual matrix' sustains heterosexual relations as the normal mode of relations between the sexes, rendering other forms of relating deviant. *Nomos* is my term rather than hers, drawing on Bourdieu and Foucault. For recent uses of Butler in IR, see Weber 2016.

[vi] This is also bound up with an interest in capturing change (see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Change can be identified when international actors can be shown to have modified their behavior to align with a norm

# The Postcolonial Perspective: Why We Need to Decolonize Norms

Written by Charlotte Epstein

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# The Postcolonial Perspective: Why We Need to Decolonize Norms

Written by Charlotte Epstein

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