

Communitarian International Relations

The epistemic foundations of
International Relations

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Communities of practice in International Relations

This introduction, written especially for this volume, suggests a theoretical communitarian approach to International Relations, one whose foundations lie in the epistemic condition of social—and thus also international and transnational—life. Most of my published and still unpublished work has explicitly or implicitly followed such an approach. I begin this introduction by differentiating between analytical and normative communitarian approaches. Toward the end of the chapter I also propose ways to synthesize between them. I then introduce the concept of communities of practice, which, suggesting a unifying and comprehensive way of understanding the role of transnational communities in International Relations, helps explain how social learning occurs and how international and transnational practices evolve.

Introduction

The present volume, which contains both selected journal articles published over the past twenty years and previously unpublished material, highlights a constructivist approach to International Relations (IR). This approach emphasizes dynamic ‘epistemic’ features of international social reality and takes social learning as an attribute of ‘communities of the like-minded.’¹ By focusing on social epistemology, the role of collective knowledge in international social life, and the communities in which knowledge originates and is then diffused, politically selected, and institutionalized, this approach helps explain where international practices and institutions—more broadly, global governance²—come from and why certain ideas congeal into human practices and institutions whereas others do not. The main thrust of this opening chapter, however, is to shed new light on the epistemic and communitarian IR constructivist school of thought by synthesizing the discipline’s understanding of international and transnational communities and consolidating it around the concept of ‘communities of practice.’³

Until a few years ago, a communitarian approach to IR existed mainly in the normative IR theoretical debate between cosmopolitans, most of whom hold a liberal theory of justice and employ a rationalist or individualist methodology,⁴

and communitarians, who take communities, groups, and societies as the key to understanding moral action.⁵ But ever since constructivism penetrated IR theory, the communitarian approach has become a leading contender in analytic IR theory.⁶ Because constructivism highlights the dynamic role played by the social construction of knowledge in the construction of social reality,⁷ the new turn to communitarian IR has meant, not only that political communities and their potential transformation are studied in more appropriate and global perspectives, but has also highlighted the ‘community-shared background understandings, skills, and practical predispositions without which it would be impossible to interpret action, assign meaning, legitimate practices, empower agents, and constitute a differentiated highly structured social reality.’⁸ In other words, the turn to communitarian IR is an attempt to make knowledge, along with the communities within which it develops and evolves and from which it diffuses, one of the leading ontological factors in the study of IR. For a communitarian IR approach, *knowledge* means not only information that people carry in their heads, but also, and primarily, the intersubjective background or context of expectations, dispositions, and language that gives meaning to material reality and consequently helps explain the constitutive and causal mechanisms that participate in the construction of social reality.

Not only is the new turn to communitarian IR, spurred by constructivism, enlivening and driving the quest for a synthesis of traditional cosmopolitan and communitarian approaches;⁹ it is also making room for a more ambitious synthesis of normative IR theory and analytic IR theory. In a nutshell, because constructivism relies in part on an argument about the co-constitution and evolution of intersubjective social structures and agents,¹⁰ a constructivist synthesis may avoid one of the problems that has divided cosmopolitans from communitarians; namely, whether agents or structures should be the starting point and focus. Communitarian IR may also help introduce to mainstream IR theory the role of knowledge communities, communities of discourse, and, more generally, ‘communities of the like-minded’ in the structuration¹¹ and dynamic evolution of social reality. Moreover, because a communitarian turn to IR theory accents the notion that similar if not identical ontological (structure and agency) and epistemological (truth, the nature of social knowledge) issues inform the disagreements and debates among normative IR theorists and among analytic IR theorists, communitarian IR could point to a synthesis that includes both normative IR theory and analytic IR theory. For example, Fearon and Wendt,¹² referring to the socially constructed nature of agents or subjects, and especially the notion that ‘one cannot be a certain kind of subject...unless others in the society make it possible,’ argue that the question of whether agents or structures are the starting point is not merely epistemological but ‘ultimately a political question of whether society can be normatively grounded on the liberal conception of the individual as some kind of natural baseline.’ Such a synthesis could accordingly be instrumental in grounding constructivism in political philosophy and in conferring on constructivism what it currently lacks most: a

theory of politics. It also could provide normative IR theory with the ontological and epistemological tools for bridging the gap between the present reality and the desired human condition.

In the next section I will describe briefly the main characteristics and problems of communitarian approaches in general, and point out how the new strand of constructivist communitarian IR has tried to overcome their inherent problems. The second section describes and compares the normative communitarian IR approach and the newer analytic communitarian IR approach, which is informed by constructivism. Its main thrust is to trace the evolution of contemporary communitarianism in the IR literature, show that the debates between the different types of communitarianism (normative and analytic) are informed by similar ontological and epistemological issues, and argue that a synthesis is possible, not only between the parties to the normative and analytic debates, but also between normative and analytic communitarian approaches in IR theory. In the third section I portray the various communities and networks featured by the communitarian turn in IR—notably security communities,¹³ epistemic communities,¹⁴ and transnational advocacy networks¹⁵—as different interpretations of communities of practice. This section also briefly describes the community of practice concept as it applies to IR. In the fourth section I revisit our understanding of collective learning through the concept of communities of practice. I argue here that cognitive evolution is the type of collective learning that best describes the evolution of practices. The fifth section analyzes the main characteristics of communities of practice, including their epistemic and normative structure, the importance of identity for their existence and evolution, and their boundaries. This chapter winds up with a brief concluding section on a communitarian synthesis.

Communitarian approaches

Communitarian approaches may share some or all of the following attributes. First, human beings are members of multiple and sometimes overlapping communities, whose lowest common denominator consists of a shared identity or ‘we-feeling,’ shared values and norms, and face-to-face interactions—or, at least, a discourse, practice, moral conviction, or some combination thereof that is shared with other people and differentiates the group from other groups. Second, from an analytic perspective, a communitarian approach assumes that individuality and subjectivity depend on the social context¹⁶ and, at the same time, that they contribute to the reproduction¹⁷ and transformation¹⁸ of communities. It also involves the notion that collective learning originates, takes place, and acquires its social import in communities of the like-minded. Furthermore, because individual cognition evolves together with intersubjective understandings, communities of the like-minded, which are the physical and practical instantiation of intersubjective understandings, constitute an ontological

bridge between individuals and their ideas, on one side, and social structures and social systems, on the other.

From a normative perspective, a communitarian approach stresses the moral integrity of communities and the notion that, by becoming part of and identifying with communities, ‘subjects are included within moral calculations or within the range of moral considerateness.’¹⁹ Thus if, along with normative IR theorists, we take moral calculation or considerateness as one of several paths to individual and collective knowledge of the world and other people, and at the same time, along with (analytic-oriented) constructivists, we take social institutions as the result of the co-constitution of subjectivity and community by means of practice and discourse, it follows that we may also conceive of communities as fields of practice and discourse in which humans learn their social, political, and moral meanings and their capacity to act as social and moral agents.

Communitarian approaches, however, are not without problems.²⁰ They suffer from vagueness as to the nature, shape, and extent of the communities under study.²¹ This problem is complicated by the notion that people simultaneously participate in various overlapping communities whose boundaries are sometimes indistinct. In addition, the argument that communities constitute individuals is not always made clearly.²² What is constituted, individuals’ identities and interests or the content of their thinking? If the latter, what room is left for subjective cognitive factors, such as individual beliefs, motives, and emotions? And even though it is true, as communitarians argue, that individuals enter a previously existing society and draw on its understandings to know how to be agents, society is nevertheless constituted by human beings. Hence, as in methodological individualism²³ and liberalism,²⁴ they must be taken as the basic units of analytic and moral inquiry. Again, communitarian approaches necessarily raise the prospect of relativism; that is, that values are relative to community and that truth exists only within communities. Finally, communitarian approaches emphasize the differences that divide people, rather than the physical, ideational, and moral factors that bring them together as humans.

These are serious criticisms that cannot be dismissed. What I hope to demonstrate in this book, however, is that the new communitarian turn in IR is aware of and receptive to most if not all of the above criticisms. What is more, constructivism aspires and to some extent has managed to find a middle ground²⁵ between a rationalist perspective that focuses on individuality and universality and an interpretive perspective that takes contextual knowledge, contingency, and human interpretation to be the hallmarks of social reality. This middle ground can be found in constructivists’ attempts to highlight: (a) the role of agency (individuals and states) in the construction of social reality;²⁶ (b) the global or cosmopolitan context within which transnational communities develop;²⁷ (c) the importance of general normative principles that can be learned by communities through the logic of communicative argument and persuasion;²⁸ (d) the notion that even though, as Ashley²⁹ has argued, the practical community in

IR may be the transnational community of realists, it is also true that in the last several decades a competing community of liberals has arisen (mainly in Europe) that opposes the realists and endeavors to make liberal international practice a self-understood reality; and (e) the argument that social practice³⁰ helps bridge between the ideational and discursive world and the material world.

Normative communitarian approaches and constructivist-led communitarianism in IR theory

Normative IR theory

The main question posed in the debate between cosmopolitans and communitarians in normative IR theory concerns the possibility of a moral community beyond the state and the qualities and characteristics of such a community.³¹ In liberal discourse, the question deals with the possibility of international justice and the debate is whether justice can be explained,³² as it is by liberals,³³ from the perspective of individuals who rationally choose among neutral and universal principles of justice or, as it is by communitarians,³⁴ from a context-dependent perspective of differing cultures and communities.

Liberals, according to Morrice, 'stress individualism as against collectivism; self-interest as against the common good; government limited to protecting individual rights and liberties as against a strong state; and the role of the market and consumer choice rather than state regulation in the distribution of goods.'³⁵ Behind this political and economic doctrine lies liberalism's assumption that individuals possess 'an identity and value prior to, and independent of, society,'³⁶ its model of voluntary or contractual association or '*gesellschaft*,'³⁷ and its commitment to explaining macro-social phenomena or 'wholes' in terms of micro-level phenomena or 'component parts' and of universal principles of causation or determination.³⁸ From a liberal perspective,³⁹ morality makes sense only within the bounds of a cosmopolitan and thus universal community of the human species, in which individuals make a rational choice to pursue universally applicable principles of justice. States are free to pursue their interests as they care to define them, but only as long as they abide by 'universal' (Western liberal) principles of justice.⁴⁰

Communitarians, on the other hand, because they defend the view that the 'common good or community interest...is greater than individual goods and interests,'⁴¹ argue that justice is possible only within the boundaries of a differentiated community. This view, which usually means that individuals can fulfill themselves as moral subjects only within states, relies on several assumptions. First, 'communitarians argue that individuals are constituted by the communities in which they live, and [that] the values which influence individuals' behavior, together with the meanings by which they make sense of their lives, derive from their community.'⁴² Second, the normative

communitarian perspective rests on a notion of association based on solidarity or *gemeinschaft*.⁴³ Third, subjectivity and the content of individuals' beliefs do not exist in isolation from communities and their conventions.⁴⁴ Finally, social knowledge stresses interpretation over determination.⁴⁵ Although communitarians portray the state as the sphere in which moral community can best be expressed,⁴⁶ some communitarian IR scholars have argued that communities and citizenship may be able, through open dialogue and persuasion, to expand to the transnational level (or are already in the process of doing so).⁴⁷

Despite the apparent differences between liberal cosmopolitanism and communitarianism, in practice it is difficult to establish a clear distinction between them.⁴⁸ For example, some communitarians accept the notion that moral community has a potential beyond the Westphalian state;⁴⁹ other communitarians stress the importance of the state for the evolution of a moral global community.⁵⁰ Post-modern communitarians like Richard Rorty⁵¹ identify themselves as liberals but do not accept liberal individualist methodology and objective epistemology. Theorists of the English school⁵² maintain that, at the international and global levels, common norms and values are mediated by conceptions of international society and world society, which represent a mixture of *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* types of association.⁵³ In light of the problematic dichotomy⁵⁴ established by the debate between liberal cosmopolitans and communitarians, some scholars have sought a synthesis between the two approaches, which highlights individuals and universality on the one hand, and communities and particularity on the other. To show that a synthesis in normative IR theory is related and similar to the middle-ground analytic approach I advocate in this book, let us look briefly at attempts at such a synthesis by Mervyn Frost and Richard Shapcott as well as by Mark Neufeld, Andrew Linklater, and Richard Ashley (all of them with a critical-theory orientation).

Relying on insights from analytic constructivist theory about the socially constructed nature of subjectivity, Frost used 'an universalized account of agency and subjectivity'⁵⁵ to argue that people reason and engage in moral argumentation when they participate in communities of discourse in which language and normative understandings are shared. According to Frost, individuals 'are constituted within a system of mutual recognition which includes within it the institutions of the family, civil society, the state and the system of sovereign states.'⁵⁶ Although the national society is the most important community for realization of the individual, the state, which is the highest form of community in which individual realization occurs, is also constituted intersubjectively within a society of states.⁵⁷ Thus, just as domestic communities help constitute the normative understanding of individuals within states, the community of states helps constitute normative discussion among states. From this perspective, a discourse of rights—which 'are envisaged as what people come to recognize one another as having within the context of a community with

specified social and political institutions'⁵⁸—and a discourse of sovereignty are complementary and together constitute the individual's subjectivity.

Shapcott has also tried to incorporate the best from liberal-cosmopolitan and communitarian conceptions into an approach that 'requires the attempt to conceive of the 'we' as a potential community of concrete agents engaged in a search for understanding.'⁵⁹ In Shapcott's view, expanding the boundaries of community to the universal level depends on a practice and ethics of communication that

takes from the...Kantian tradition the project of universal community, to treat all others in a moral fashion regardless of natural or communal boundaries. From the communitarian position it takes the premise that treating others in a moral fashion requires paying attention to their particularity and that such particularity may place (flexible) limits on the possible 'thickness' of any larger community.⁶⁰

Following H.G.Gadamer's hermeneutic account of communication,⁶¹ Shapcott's synthesis holds that mutual recognition, taken to be the key to justice, is most successfully achieved through acts of communication and understanding. A generalized practice of communication and conversation may make it possible to expand the community to the universal level, with no need to diminish or eliminate 'the other' in the process. While communication may not be able to achieve universal community, to which liberals aspire,⁶² by achieving mutual recognition, it may still create a community thick enough to solve the problem of justice in world politics. Moreover, inasmuch as Shapcott's approach⁶³ suggests the possibility of expanding the realms in which conversation and learning can take place and reason be applied to the universal level (on which just relations founded on mutual recognition are based), it addresses the important notion that creating a cosmopolitan order that does not exclude membership in particular communities is predicated on the evolution of community practice and discourse.

Probably more than any other approach, critical theory has left its mark by attempting to build a synthesis based on both cosmopolitan and communitarian considerations. For example, Neufeld defended the Aristotelian view that the normative task in IR is to enlarge the *polis*—a political space within which the 'good life' can take place through persuasion and through the pursuit of liberty and equality—to the global level.⁶⁴

Andrew Linklater,⁶⁵ probably the theorist who has gone the farthest toward a compromise between cosmopolitan and communitarian approaches, argues that the 'key problem of community in IR is how to promote universality which respects difference, and how to give expression to cultural differences without encouraging and unleashing extreme particularism.'⁶⁶ In his view, achieving this requires reconstitution of political community by a learning process that involves open dialogue.⁶⁷ Far from being utopian, this process may have already begun. Globalization-led pacification in the industrial world and increased sensitivity to

the moral problem of the use of force show that like-mindedness can become the basis of political community at the international and transnational levels.⁶⁸ These developments point in the direction of the expansion of community and citizenship and of the concomitant transfer of authority to the transnational and sub-national levels.⁶⁹

Linklater, who follows Jürgen Habermas' critical approach,⁷⁰ in which communicative action makes the existence of a universal dialogical community possible, considers that a 'post-Westphalian cosmopolitan community' will be 'constituted discursively as one in which all humans have the opportunity for equal participation in a conversation, and thereby of determining their own lives.'⁷¹ Thus, according to Linklater, 'a post-Westphalian framework can develop where like-minded societies are keen to establish closer forms of political cooperation to integrate shared ethical norms into the structure of social and political life.'⁷² Linklater's critical approach further exemplifies the crucial importance of community in IR. Not only do learning and the fixation of meaning occur within expanding communities of discourse and practice; what is more, a cosmopolitan order may be achieved thanks to the transformation of political community at the transnational and sub-national levels.

One of the earliest (and most successful) attempts by critical theorists to change the terms of the normative debate in IR was Ashley's argument that the sole existing international community is the community of realist practitioners. Its members accept the Western rationalist conception of community as universal and timeless, while denying the possibility of its existence at the international level, thus denying their own existence and identity as a real and practical transnational realist community. According to Ashley, the

dominant mode of international political community is already present ... in the dispositions, techniques, skills, and rituals of realist power politics. It is present, in other words, on the surface of a transnational discourse of power politics whose every breath denies the positivity of international community as such. That we do not or cannot recognize it as international community is not proof of international community's absence. It is a testament to the power of a realist community of statesmanship.⁷³

Thus the challenge faced by critical theory is to emancipate the theory and practice of the 'double move' of realist practitioners and to move toward international (security) communities, which can advance the cause of justice and peace. In addition to his critical-theory message, Ashley has made points that are of profound importance for communitarian IR; namely, that transnational or international communities are communities in, and of, *practice*, that there can be more than one transnational or international community, that transnational or international communities carry the collective understandings that may eventually become the patrimony of all mankind, and that they are accordingly learning communities. It is from this practical, contextual, and discursive

perspective that we can reasonably consider the possibility of the evolution of a liberal community of practitioners to universal proportions.

Constructivism and the analytic move to communitarian IR

Constructivism describes the dynamic, contingent, and culturally based condition of the social world. Unlike positivism⁷⁴ and materialism,⁷⁵ which take the world as it is, constructivism sees the world as a project under construction, as *becoming* rather than *being*. Unlike idealism⁷⁶ and post-structuralism and post-modernism,⁷⁷ which take the world *only* as it can be imagined or talked about, constructivism accepts that not all statements have the same epistemic value and consequently that there is some foundation for knowledge.

Constructivism stresses the reciprocal relationship between nature and human knowledge. It suggests a view of the social sciences that is contingent, partly indeterminate, nominalist,⁷⁸ and to some extent externally validated.⁷⁹ All strands of constructivism converge in an *ontology* that depicts the social world as intersubjectively and collectively meaningful structures and processes. In this world, subjectivity is constituted by social structures; consequently, ‘material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded.’⁸⁰ This means that social facts, because they depend on the attachment of collective meaning to physical reality and thus on human consciousness and language, are real objective facts only by human agreement.⁸¹ It also means that, although individuals carry knowledge, ideas, and meanings in their heads, they also know, think, and feel only in the context of and with reference to collective or intersubjective understandings, including rules and language.

Constructivists consider the mutual constitution of agents and structures, or structuration, to be part of constructivism’s ontology. Structuration theory, as sustained by the principle of the ‘duality of structure,’ maintains that ‘structures, as rules and resources, are both the precondition and the unintended outcome of people’s agency. ...People draw upon structures to proceed in their daily interaction.’⁸² Thus, when people act, they reproduce these structures. ‘Structure allows for agency, which in turn makes for the unintended reproduction of the very same structures.’⁸³ Unlike structuration, the theory of cognitive evolution, which I feature in this book, is not only about the co-reproduction of agents and structures, in a vicious circle, but is also about transformation—in particular, the institutionalization of novel ideas and knowledge as social practices. The key point to remember about the co-constitution of agents and structures, however, whether in the structuration or the cognitive-evolution version, is that it occurs in and through practice. Communities of practice, therefore, play a crucial role in the mutual constitution of agents and structures.

Constructivists share, at least to some extent, an *epistemology* in which interpretation is an intrinsic part of the social sciences and emphasizes contingent generalizations. Contingent generalizations do not freeze

understanding or bring it to closure; rather, they open up our understanding of the social world. Moreover, most constructivists agree that, even if it were possible to grasp social reality's minimalist foundations and thereby inch toward truth, theories would remain far from being true pictures of the world.

In addition, constructivists eschew the 'methodological individualism' on which most other approaches to politics are based—for example, rational choice, bureaucratic politics, social-psychological decision-making models, and so on—which reduces political analysis to its micro foundations, i.e., individuals and their relationships. Instead, constructivists adopt the 'methodological holistic'⁸⁴ view that individuals' identities and interests do not make sense outside the communities to which they belong and thus apart from the collective understandings, discourse, and practice by virtue of which communities exist and their members' subjectivities are constituted. Taking a methodological holistic view also means not only searching for causal mechanisms (e.g., socialization) that enter into the construction of social reality, but also, and in particular, establishing the 'conditions of possibility for objects and events by showing what they are made of and how they are organized. As such, the object or event in question is an "effect of the conditions that make it possible, but it does not exist independent of them,"⁸⁵ as in causal theory.

This ontology and epistemology shapes distinctive features of the constructivist approach. First, constructivism considers communities' intersubjective knowledge and ideas to have constitutive effects on social reality and its evolution. When individuals draw on collective understandings and discourse to give meaning to the material world, consciousness is awakened, reasons emerge, and people act intentionally on behalf of these reasons.

Second, constructivism does not share the conservative outlook with which the communitarian normative view is usually identified. On the contrary, constructivism takes a dynamic view of social life in which new practices, institutions, identities, and interests emerge with new constitutive rules⁸⁶ and newly evolving social structures.⁸⁷ Moreover, constructivism's attention to sociocognitive changes, along with its critical theory component,⁸⁸ emphasizes the notion that the study of change, including change for the better,⁸⁹ is central to the constructivist research program.

Third, constructivists do not accept the notion that rationality means only instrumental rationality.⁹⁰ As a result, they advance the notion of *practical* or *communicative rationality*, which, though sometimes calculating and choice-related, is also sensitive to historical, social, and normative contexts and emphasizes the communicative and persuasion logic of social theory.

Fourth, constructivism takes language as the vehicle for the diffusion and institutionalization of ideas within and between communities, as a necessary condition for the persistence over time of institutionalized practices, and as a mechanism for the construction of social reality. Moreover, the communities around which knowledge evolves, which play a crucial role in the construction of social reality, are constituted by language. First and foremost, therefore, they

are ‘communities of discourse’; that is, ‘communities of competing producers, of interpreters and critics, of audiences and consumers, and of patrons and other significant actors who become the subject of discourse itself. It is only in these concrete living and breathing communities that discourse becomes meaningful.’⁹¹ Thus discourse and practice cannot easily be separated.⁹²

Constructivism and normative communitarian IR compared

Eight differences can be enumerated between constructivism and the normative communitarian approach. First, unlike the latter, constructivism is agnostic about whether there is a community interest that is greater than the individual interest and whether the state should uphold this common good rather than remain neutral.⁹³ Instead, constructivism takes community interests and individual interests as ontologically complementary; that is, community interests require the fulfillment of individuals’ interests and vice versa.

Second, the analytic community turn does not establish the priority of good over right, or vice versa. It posits rather that good and right are mutually constituted and inseparable.

Third, although the two communitarian approaches share the epistemological view that objectivity is unachievable and that the epistemological task accordingly depends on interpretation rather than proof, constructivism adopts the notion that pragmatic and contingent knowledge is achievable and desirable and that, in association with conditions that can be clearly specified and understood, the communities within which knowledge develops may become transnational or even global.

Fourth, constructivism has yet to provide clear statements about the quality and content of the knowledge that enters into the construction of social reality and about whether the construction of governance institutions and practices should aim, as Hedley Bull⁹⁴ argued, at maintaining international order or, as Beitz⁹⁵ held, at achieving global justice. On the other hand, it has been developing the analytical tools—dealing, for example, with causal socialization and constitutive mechanisms involving narratives,⁹⁶ discourse,⁹⁷ and practice⁹⁸—without which it would be difficult for normative IR theorists to envision a way to bridge between the present situation and a desired future reality.

Fifth, constructivism’s community turn is more explicit than was the ‘old’ communitarianism about the role of power in changing the international and transnational reality. By ‘power’ I mean not only the possession of material capabilities, but also the ability to impose meanings, status, or functions on material objects by collective agreement. One can also find power in speech acts,⁹⁹ hegemonic discourses,¹⁰⁰ dominant normative interpretations and identities,¹⁰¹ and moral authority.¹⁰²

Sixth, constructivism takes the possibility of moral dialogue and communication as part of a wider and intricate process of social communication through which community meanings are selected and institutionalized. Through

social communication, communities expand and enlarge their membership, perhaps to global proportions. Expanding community provides a foundation for the diffusion of normative and political principles and thus for the achievement of normative cosmopolitan objectives.

Seventh, unlike the normative communitarian project, which privileges differences of national identity, the new community turn points to the dynamic attributes of identity, which may lead to the creation of transnational identities and security communities¹⁰³ of various sizes and composition. Moreover, constructivism emphasizes humanity's common traits, such as trust and learning, which can trigger the development of security communities. Although people may not trust other people, under certain conditions they can probably recognize one another as potentially trustworthy and capable of trusting.

Finally, although the construction of social reality entails a community or *gemeinschaft* type of association, in which people are bound by solidarity links and 'we-feeling,'¹⁰⁴ as in the oft-cited 'logic of appropriateness,'¹⁰⁵ constructivism also highlights conditions that make certain contractual or *gesellschaft* types of association possible, as well as the role of self-interested purposeful actions aimed at constructing social reality in ways that serve instrumental goals.

New communitarian IR: communities of practice

With the help of the concept of communities of practice, I endeavor to make explicit what constructivists have so far left mostly implicit; namely, that IR constructivism is not only a sociological critique of rational choice approaches or a synonym for norm-oriented research, but also the epistemological and ontological foundation of a reformulated IR 'communitarian approach.' This approach does not herald the end of the nation-state or underscore the unimportance of individuals and agency in international life. Rather, it argues that what mediate between state, individuals, and human agency, on the one hand, and social structures and systems, on the other, are communities of practice.

The IR literature includes various interpretations of communities of practice: 'epistemic communities'¹⁰⁶ and 'security communities,'¹⁰⁷ which I have studied in the past, as well as 'transnational advocacy networks'¹⁰⁸ 'networks of knowledge and practice,'¹⁰⁹ 'critical communities,'¹¹⁰ and 'communities of discourse.'¹¹¹ Other communities described in the social sciences may be taken as conceptual variants of communities of practice. These include 'imagined communities'¹¹² in political science, 'communities of print'¹¹³ in sociology, and 'interpretive communities' in literary studies¹¹⁴ and legal studies.¹¹⁵

Communities of practice

Communities of practice ‘consist of people who are informally as well as contextually bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice.’¹¹⁶ More specifically, they are a configuration of a *domain of knowledge*, which constitutes like-mindedness, a *community of people*, which ‘creates the social fabric of learning,’ and a *shared practice*, which embodies ‘the knowledge the community develops, shares, and maintains.’¹¹⁷ The knowledge domain endows practitioners with a sense of *joint enterprise* that is constantly being renegotiated by its members. People function as a community through relationships of *mutual engagement* that bind ‘members together into a social entity.’ Shared practices, in turn, are sustained by a *repertoire of communal resources*, such as routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, symbols, and discourse.¹¹⁸

‘Communities of practice,’ says Wenger, ‘are everywhere. We all belong to a number of them—at work, school, at home, in our hobbies. Some have a name, some don’t. We are core members of some and we belong to others more peripherally.’¹¹⁹ Moreover, communities of practice have no fixed membership; people ‘move in and out’ of them.¹²⁰ Wenger, who, together with anthropologist Jean Lave, introduced the concept of community of practice more than a decade ago,¹²¹ has dealt mainly with domestic or national communities of practice. There is no reason, however, why we should not be able to identify transnational or even global communities of practice. The closer we get to the level of practices, in fact, the more we can take the international system as a collection of communities of practice; for example, communities of diplomats, of traders, of environmentalists, and of human-rights activists.

Communities of practice cut across state boundaries and mediate between states, individuals, and human agency, on one hand, and social structures and systems, on the other. It is within communities of practice that collective meanings emerge, discourses become established, identities are fixed, learning takes place, new political agendas arise, and the institutions and practices of global governance grow. Communities of practice are not international actors in any formal sense, but coexist and overlap with them. In fact, state and other non-state actors do or practice what communities of practice first bring to collective consciousness and attention. Because people do what they do partly because of the ‘communities of practice’ they happen to form and sustain, when communities of practice expand across institutional and national boundaries, their own intersubjective knowledge and identity help structure an ever-larger share of people’s intentional acts at the regional or global level, thereby sustaining practices that are institutionalized across time and space. Normative ideas diffuse the same way. Hence explaining the evolution of practices and institutions requires identifying how, in and through communities of practice, ideas become attached to physical objects, are diffused across national borders,

and, after having been subjected to authoritative cultural and political selection, become discursively and institutionally established.

Any discussion of communities of practice raises several obvious points about structure and agency, change and stability, and boundaries.

First, communities of practice are intersubjective social structures within which meaning is fixed, learning takes place, and practices evolve. Because they are structures, communities of practice constitute the normative and epistemic ground for reasoned political action. At the same time, communities of practice are also agents, consisting of real people who affect the course of political, economic, and social events via network channels, across national borders, over organizational divides, and in the halls of government. Therefore, when IR scholars study communities of practice they have a firm basis in actual communities of people, their material and institutional resources, and their reasoned actions.

Second, as persistent patterns or structures, communities of practice retain their collective understandings, despite the constant turnover of members, as long as social learning and evolutionary processes do not lead to the replacement of the patterns or structures.

Third, the boundaries of practices are directly related to the scope of the community's expansion.

Epistemic communities, security communities, critical communities, and global policy networks as communities of practice

Most of the transnational communities described in the IR literature—for example, epistemic communities, security communities, and critical communities—are in fact species of communities of practice. The argument that security communities¹²² are communities of practice is simple but noteworthy. To understand this argument, however, we must begin by viewing security communities as transnational regions whose members/ inhabitants *practice* peaceful change; in other words, whose collective understanding that conflicts in the region should be solved by peaceful means and that the use of force has become unimaginable has been internalized by individuals and embedded in practices. From this perspective, peace is neither the absence of war, as realists maintain, nor an idealistic goal to which nation-states aspire but never achieve. Rather, peace is the practice of a security community. In other words, security communities are communities whose members have learned to practice peaceful change, have internalized a peaceful identity (unlike the ‘other fellows out there,’ who make war), and who accordingly practice peace. Security communities are marked by a domain of knowledge, a community of people, shared practices, and a sense of joint enterprise, all of them sustained by a repertoire of ideational and material communal resources.

The concept of epistemic community makes little sense unless it is understood as a vehicle of new scientific interpretations that serve as the basis for the construction of new practices. Although all communities of practice engage in knowledge exchange, diffusion, selection, and institutionalization, not all of them also engage in knowledge validation.¹²³ Hence epistemic communities should be considered to be a special kind of community of practice. Epistemic communities are actors or agents; they make things happen. But they are also communities of practice, which, starting from small and local beginnings—sometimes only a few persons—may expand to global proportions (e.g., the ban on landmines¹²⁴), thus becoming a vehicle for global consciousness and practices.

Epistemic communities are important not only as catalysts of change in political behavior or as the workers of ‘policy coordination’ between states.¹²⁵ Rather, their most far-reaching effect is cognitive evolution, i.e., the constitution of new practices that may be used by both present and future generations of practitioners and may constitute the basis of the transformation of the identities and interests of an increasing number of people.

Like all other communities of practice, epistemic communities bargain about meanings and thus socially construct knowledge, including scientific knowledge. In fact, the interesting question about epistemic communities is not whether the scientific knowledge on which they base their action is objectively true: much of what passes for the scientific knowledge of epistemic communities can hardly be considered objective, because it is usually amalgamated with social knowledge that can rarely allege truthfulness. The interesting question is this: what difference does it make for political and social reality that the socially constructed knowledge applied to reality by communities of practice is scientific—i.e., produced in the laboratory by people wearing white coats and enjoying firm social legitimacy—rather than normative or ideological?

If we want to think about epistemic communities as communities of practice, then we should view science not only as understandings of cause-effect relationships in nature, but also as a constitutive norm that socially constructs the practices, identities, and interests of modern rulers. Consequently, modern rulers rely increasingly on science not so much out of calculated choice but rather because science has become part of their modern identity. On those occasions when epistemic communities diffuse, through the institutions of state and society, a new scientific orthodoxy—for example, about the global environment—both the new norms and their carriers may help work a transformation of environmental practices, identities, and interests.

All of this means that the difference between epistemic communities and what Rochon has called ‘critical communities’¹²⁶ is one of emphasis rather than of substance. According to Rochon, the main differences between critical communities and epistemic communities are that the former help develop alternative knowledge frameworks, may increase policy uncertainty, and do not exhibit some of the formal and informal links characteristic of epistemic

communities.¹²⁷ Epistemic communities, however, are also ‘critical,’ because their members act with the conviction that their actions will change something in the world for the better, making it more just or more efficient. In fact, both epistemic communities and critical communities are communities of practice, because they are characterized by social communication, learning, and the construction of new identities around particular practices.

It is social communication—i.e., the transmission of meanings,¹²⁸ rather than the mere transmission of information—that allows communities of practice to evolve and interact with other communities. This feature helps differentiate communities of practice from networks. Whereas networks are the interpersonal, intergroup, and inter-organizational relationships through which information flows, communities of practice, in addition to their networking capacity, also involve social communication through which practitioners bargain about and fix meanings and develop their own distinctive identity and how to practice it.¹²⁹

So a case can be made that distinctive types of transnational networks that have been prominently featured in the IR literature, such as ‘global public policy networks’¹³⁰ and TANs,¹³¹ are also communities of practice¹³² whose identity derives from their capacity for learning, social communication processes, and practices. For example, the Global Development Network, a global association of researchers, think tanks, and other institutions, established by the World Bank around the idea of promoting global development,¹³³ is in the business not only of transmitting information, but also of teaching economic development practices to people in developing societies, who lack the knowledge required to engage in these practices.

Moreover, TANs are really communities of practice because a knowledge domain—for example, human rights—constitutes their like-mindedness and practices. True, the network metaphor lends itself to describing how otherwise unrelated units or actors interrelate and are mobilized by and for a common purpose.¹³⁴ But TANs consist of individuals, who converge on governmental offices, street rallies, and Internet chats not only because of what they believe, but also because of what *they do*, sometimes in close personal interaction. Second, the practices of TANs are sustained by a repertoire of communal resources and their members have a sense of joint enterprise.

Third, as with epistemic communities, TANs are not only agents that persuade or socialize other agents to see the world their way; they are also the builders of an ‘episteme’¹³⁵ on which future agents will draw to get their bearings. Fourth, TANs ‘influence discourse, procedures, and policy’ by becoming part ‘of larger policy communities that group actors working on an issue from a variety of institutional perspectives.’¹³⁶ Finally, because TANs can ‘talk’ only about, rather than for, science, their growth and expansion must include scientific experts who lend scientific legitimacy to their norms.

Communities of practice and collective learning in a social context

According to Richard McDermott,

knowledge belongs to communities. The idea that knowledge is the stuff ‘between the ears of the individual’ is a myth. We don’t learn on our own. We are born into a world already full of knowledge, a world that already makes sense to other people.... We learn by participating in these communities and come to embody the ideas, perspectives, prejudices, language, and practices of that community.¹³⁷

In the following pages I will show how this view can contribute to our understanding of social change in general and of IR change in particular. I will argue that learning occurs in and by means of communities of practice. Construing practices¹³⁸ as a learning process makes communities of practice emergent structures, which, ‘neither inherently stable nor randomly changeable,’¹³⁹ evolve with new knowledge, discourses, and identities. The reified products of communities of practice, such as diplomatic practices, warfare practices, global financial practices, and transnational human-rights practices, cannot be separated from the learning processes that produced them.¹⁴⁰

There are almost as many understandings and definitions of learning as there are dimensions and factors that enter into the constitution of social action and social change.¹⁴¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that few concepts in the social sciences are as contested and multifaceted as learning.

Most common is the ‘*bucket*’ view of learning,¹⁴² in which people add knowledge and skills to the mind as if it were a bucket.

From a behaviorist perspective, learning means both: (1) modification of behavior in response to some stimulus or change in the environment; and (2) selective reinforcement. This, in brief, is how IR realists and rational choice scholars view learning—as the responses by states to environmental changes or as an adjustment of their behavior to suit changes in the pay-off matrix.¹⁴³

Trial-and-error learning amounts to a variation of the same ‘tune’; people learn as a result of failed behaviors.¹⁴⁴

Learning-by-doing (or Bayesian learning) emphasizes the ability of people to modify a course of action on the basis of experience.¹⁴⁵

Although its name may indicate otherwise, *social learning* emphasizes individual social-psychological changes, the result of people’s interactions with other people.¹⁴⁶ Although the most popular *psychological* understanding of learning in IR has been as changes in individual beliefs,¹⁴⁷ a *cognitive* learning perspective, which focuses on changes in cognitive structures and their effects on information processing, has been making inroads in recent decades.¹⁴⁸ Closely connected to the latter perspective is *constructivist* learning, an approach made

famous by Jean Piaget.¹⁴⁹ This emphasizes how people construct new mental structures when they interact with their environment.

Sociological learning perspectives have highlighted socialization and organizations. *Socialization-based learning*,¹⁵⁰ which IR constructivists have used lately,¹⁵¹ focuses ‘on the acquisition of membership by newcomers within a functionalist framework, where acquiring membership is defined as internalizing the norms of a social group.’¹⁵² The view that people are socialized and in fact persuaded when they interact and argue with other people assumes a mechanism by which ideas somehow jump from mind to mind. *Organizational learning theories* ‘concern themselves both with the ways individuals learn in organizational contexts and with the ways in which organizations can be said to learn as organizations.’¹⁵³ Even here, however, scholars treat organizations as if they were individuals or an aggregation of individuals.¹⁵⁴

It follows that none of these conceptions of learning is truly collective or social. None of them takes learning as a change in background knowledge, which, residing not only in people’s minds, but also in human practices, constitutes the communities people belong to, as well as their identities.

Hence the notion of communities of practice may shed new light on processes of social change in general and on the concept of learning in particular. In short, learning means participation in¹⁵⁵ and engagement with the meanings, identities, and language of communities of practice and their members.¹⁵⁶ To put this another way, learning is ‘what changes our ability to engage in practice, the understanding of why we engage in it, and the resources we have at our disposal to do so.’¹⁵⁷

For individuals, learning means redefining reality by means of contextual ‘community’ knowledge, from which they borrow in order to get their bearings. Practitioners arrive at their outlook and do what they do, consciously and knowledgeably, because they draw upon the community’s collective knowledge. They also contribute to the practices of their communities.¹⁵⁸ As such, individuals acquire their knowledge when they learn to participate in the knowledge of others.

From the perspective of a community of practice, learning means the evolution of background knowledge (intersubjective knowledge and discourse that adopt the form of human dispositions and practices) or the substitution of one set of conceptual categories that people use to give meaning to reality for another such set. Learning thus requires the creation, diffusion, selection, and institutionalization of new knowledge. It takes place as a result not only of the internalization of new knowledge by individuals, but also, and mainly, when a growing number of individuals become acquainted with and disposed to use a new practice. Thus understood, we may see organizations as the venues used by members of communities of practice in order to institutionalize their practices.

This interpretation of social learning has a number of implications. First, although social change begins and takes place in people’s minds, it also resides in and is an attribute of the background knowledge that constitutes communities

of practice and their specific practices. As the background knowledge on which individuals draw changes, they modify their understandings of reality and their discourse and thus may be able to participate in new practices. Communities of practice thereby help create, diffuse, select, and institutionalize knowledge that becomes the background of new practices. To put this another way, when individuals draw on background knowledge that has cognitively evolved, their dispositions and skills— indeed, their practices and behavior—also evolve. Preferences in general and national interests in particular are socially constructed on the basis of what communities of practice have become through learning.

Second, a ‘communitarian’ interpretation of social learning also means that not only present-day but also future individuals can draw upon an evolving structure of background knowledge in order to formulate their own individual expectations, dispositions, and intentional acts. This means that the capacity for rational thought and behavior is not only an individual, but also and above all a background, capacity.¹⁵⁹ Rationality lies less in the act of instrumental choice between alternatives on the basis of true theories than in acting in ways that ‘stand to reason’ given people ‘s background expectations and dispositions.

Third, most of the background knowledge that ends up informing individuals how to organize political units, what goals they should pursue, what rules of engagement should exist between them, and so on, begins as critical knowledge generated by communities of practice, sometimes quite small, which then expand, sometimes to global proportions. In proportion as a community of practice has more members and its selectively retained institutionalized collective knowledge is taken for granted, knowledge is increasingly represented in the material world as practices and these practices selectively survive in individuals’ minds. I call this interpretation of social learning *cognitive evolution*.

Cognitive evolution may be defined as a collective learning process that constitutes the practices of social and political communities. In contrast to the individual-oriented concepts of ‘learning’ I have reviewed above, cognitive evolution takes social change as the innovation, diffusion, political selection, and institutionalization of collective intersubjective structures or ‘epistemes,’¹⁶⁰ which congeal in human practices and constitute agents’ transformed expectations and dispositions to act. Cognitive evolution, therefore, means not only learning something new, but also altering ‘the conceptual categories with which we give meaning to reality.... What was unthinkable is now seen as thinkable.’¹⁶¹ Thus, we can best understand the innovation, diffusion, political selection, and institutionalization of collective understandings as the growth or expansion across time and space of communities of practice. To become international practices and constitute national interests, ideas must not only be granted social legitimization and taken as part of ‘the natural order’ within states; they must first gain control over communities of practice and the institutional and material resources associated with them.

The main characteristics of communities of practice

To better understand communities of practice as learning communities and the role they play in cognitive evolution we should describe their main characteristics. The following discussion, however, is no more than a first step in the conceptualization of communities of practice in IR. For it is one thing to describe and explain, for example, the evolution of claim processors¹⁶² and another to show how global anti-terrorist practices evolve around one or several (probably competing) communities of practice. Hence this introductory description will have to be supplemented not only by additional theoretical analysis, but also by empirical research. In a few places I will illustrate some of my conceptual points with examples drawn from global governance practices, especially international security.

The epistemic and normative nature of communities of practice

The joint enterprise of members of a community of practice does not necessarily mean a common goal or vision, although in most cases it does. ‘In fact, in some communities, disagreement can be viewed as a productive part of the enterprise.’¹⁶³ Members of a community of practice, however, must share collective understandings that tell their members what they are doing and why. In some cases, as in epistemic communities, the episteme may be primarily scientific. In other cases, such as TANs and security communities, the episteme may be primarily normative. At the same time, communities of practice may be either national or transnational, which can make for interesting combinations. In [chapter 5](#), for example, I describe national communities of practice that I call ‘anti-dependency guerrillas.’ Drawing on an episteme that combines technical and normative, as well as tacit and explicit, knowledge, intellectual ‘guerrillas’ created the necessary conditions for the development of the technological and industrial sector in Argentina and Brazil. [Chapter 6](#) describes a community of US strategic and arms control experts whose cause-and-effect and normative interpretation of the arms race was transmitted to the Soviet Union, thus creating the structural basis for arms control treaties during détente and, eventually, the end of the Cold War. [Chapters 7 and 8](#) describe security communities that, being transnational and constituted primarily around a normative episteme, help explain the stable peace in Europe since World War II and the nature of the practices that Europe is now keen to apply in the Mediterranean region.

Although peace, happiness, and harmony need not characterize communities of practice¹⁶⁴—which are neither necessarily about good practices nor about socially deplorable practices—some global-governance communities of practice have cognitively evolved to practice ‘good practices.’¹⁶⁵ In this respect communities of practice, which embody collective understandings of fairness and legitimacy, differ from epistemic communities and TANs and may

accordingly be called ‘communities of (good) practice.’ In recent years, with the aim of empowering communities in the Third World, communities of good practice have developed within the World Bank, which has actually adopted the term ‘communities of practice.’¹⁶⁶ The practices of these communities not only embody a moral critique of the status quo, they also turn fairness, responsibility, and justice into self-evident reasons for action. Although to date the discourse of good practice has been restricted mainly to international political economy, it would not be difficult to find a desire for practices that are not only efficient, but also fair and legitimate, in the security field. For example, cooperative security practices,¹⁶⁷ which developed in the last fifteen years in Europe and later in other regions, are intended not only to enhance state security most efficiently, but also, and primarily, to achieve a level of human security and international cooperation that is based on mutual accountability and transparency, mutual responsibility, and fairness.

Identity

According to Wenger, building an identity ‘consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities,’¹⁶⁸ which is achieved mainly through processes of engagement,¹⁶⁹ imagination,¹⁷⁰ and alignment.¹⁷¹ Engagement is what allows individuals to conform to the norms of the community and to negotiate their participation in it. Imagination allows its members to link their experience with that of others. Alignment, in turn, allows them to combine their material and ideational resources for the sake of what they jointly practice. Regardless of other types of identification practitioners may have with, for example, their family or nation, their engagement in a common practice makes them share an identity and feel as a ‘we.’ At times, some very strange bedfellows may align themselves to create a ‘we.’ A movement such as environmentalism, for instance, is constituted by a collection of motivations, beliefs, and passions that may have different origins for different participants. Yet the act of imagination, which leads disparate groups of people—such as scientists, holistic fundamentalists, and anti-globalization demonstrators—to believe they are a ‘we,’ and alignment behind the idea of preserving the environment created a vast community united by a common purpose.¹⁷² As communities of practice grow or diminish, members’ joint notion of ‘we’—who is inside and who is outside—also expands or contracts. Forty years ago, one could find only the seeds of global environmental practices, and only in a few developed countries in North America and Europe. Today, global environmental practices reach all corners of the world and there is hardly a state that does not have a ministry of environmental affairs.

Boundaries

People belong to many communities of practice; some of them overlap, while others stand in a hierarchical relationship. Since the boundaries of communities of practice are determined by people's knowledge and identity and the discourse associated with a specific practice, communities of practice are not necessarily 'congruent with the reified structures of institutional affiliations, divisions and boundaries.'¹⁷³ For example, although members of a security community, who practice cooperative security, may not share the same national or bureaucratic allegiances and may never meet one another, they nonetheless all know about Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) or multilateral humanitarian intervention, talk the language of cooperative security, identify with other practitioners who talk the way they do, and apply their knowledge when considering courses of action.

As boundaries form in and around practice,¹⁷⁴ communities of practice link up with their social environments and with other communities of practice. For example, in order to halt the flow of money used by global terrorist networks, security strategists cooperate with banking communities to develop capital-transfer practices and money-laundering controls. We may be able to document overlapping communities of practice—such as diplomats and security analysts or brokers and financial consultants—that produce distinctive community constellations,¹⁷⁵ as in the security field. The practice of cooperative security in Europe, for instance, helps sustain a contemporary constellation of regional military, economic, political, and cultural practices. Moreover, communities of practice may be hierarchically related to one another. For example, during the Cold War, the nuclear-arms control community was embedded in a community of nuclear deterrence practice.¹⁷⁶

Structure

Communities of practice may be viewed as being composed of three concentric circles.¹⁷⁷ Practices are brought into existence in the first or inner circle. For example, a look at cooperative security and the role of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in the evolution of this practice shows that the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent normative injunctions and practices, such as CBMs, were developed in the inner circle of CSCE practitioners. In an intermediate circle we find people, who, due to expertise or normative commitment, help diffuse the practice. This would include the CSCE experts, the Helsinki Human Rights groups, and European political leaders, who assimilated cooperative practices, diffused them more widely, and brought them to their respective domestic systems.¹⁷⁸ The outer circle is made up of all those experts, practitioners, and activists who adopt and help implement such practices beyond their original functional and geographical boundaries. In our case, this includes people from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) or Barcelona Process. Hence the expansion of communities of practices may also be understood as their centrifugal enlargement from the core outward.

Some communities of practice are tightly coupled; practitioners know one another personally and their practices are confined to a specific action. For example, UN weapons inspectors all know one other and their practices are well defined and localized. Other communities of practice—for example, cooperative security—are loosely coupled. Few practitioners know one another, they perform a plethora of distinct activities, and the boundaries of their community are likely to transcend organizational lines.

Agency

Although individuals' reasons, dispositions, and intentional acts are partly derived from the intersubjective understandings of communities of practice, they are not determined by them. More often than not, people act purposefully, with judgment and emotional drive on the basis of beliefs and interpretations of reality. This is why individuals' actions often surprise us. To put this another way, reasons are sensitive to interpretation and reflexivity. This means that reasons do not spring directly from the material world, but from the meaning, value, and function with which material objects are endowed. What agents think they are doing must be a cause of what they actually do.¹⁷⁹ But what they actually think they are doing and, thus, what they do is constituted or made possible by the episteme.

Power, governance, and authority

It is as members of communities of practice that people exercise one of the highest forms of power: determining the meanings and discourses that produce social practices. Because the meanings and discourses of communities of practice are negotiable, when practitioners negotiate meanings and discourse they also exercise power. For example, what does cooperative security mean? The answer is that it means different things to different people. Academics, members of regional security organizations, diplomats, and journalists who have been involved in an incipient cooperative security community of practice over the last fifteen years bargain about the meanings of cooperative security. This bargaining, however, has not been an academic exercise. Practitioners who were able to set the meanings of regional and global security for international organizations such as NATO, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe exercised one of the highest forms of power.

The exercise of power in communities of practice is mainly an issue of authority and, ultimately, of governance. Paul Miller has recently argued that governance within communities of practice can be traced to norms, the coupling

of impersonal and personal authority, and trust. As communities expand, norms and identities also expand, thus creating the cognitive alignment between the personal and community purposes of an increasing number of practitioners across space and time. More specifically, shared norms facilitate the cognitive alignment of practitioners during processes of norm selection and coordinate the evolution of norms.¹⁸⁰

Because norm-based governance has its limitations, however, personal agency and authority, which rely on trust, may influence social communication and affect the twin processes of norm selection and norm evolution.¹⁸¹ Personal authority enters through roles and positions in a bureaucratic and policy hierarchy. Thus the addition of key decision-makers to communities of practice can turn the knowledge, identity, and social learning of an otherwise small and localized community of practice into a national interest. As communities of practice expand and ‘induct’ policymakers into their ranks, the material and organizational resources and political power of policymakers become part of the repertoire of expanded communities of practice, which structure the practice of entire bureaucracies, governments, nationstates, and international coalitions. Personal authority also enters through agents’ ability to affect the environment in ways that makes it more conducive to the expansion and evolution of communities of practice. This ability can (but need not) be correlated with bureaucratic or political power. But it may also be related to intellectual innovation, the diffusion of ideas through the mass media, economic entrepreneurship, and the shaping of public opinion.

Interest

It would be wrong to think that the different types of communities of practice I have described above are functional and nonpolitical. On the contrary, behind every political or military practice, old or new, stands a community of practice that keeps changing with changes of knowledge, identity, and interests. It would be equally wrong, however, to think that policy-oriented communities of practice develop only around group interests. In fact, group interests and interest groups develop primarily because a community of practice has first attempted to influence the conceptual framework used to think about interests.¹⁸² As communities of practice expand, interests acquire a political and sometimes even a global dimension, and cognitively evolve into established practices. Thus, for example, what started in the mind of some academics and diplomats as the CSCE process and later crystallized into the 1975 Helsinki Final Act¹⁸³ has become a cooperative security practice that has been adopted, at least in part, in various regions and by diverse multilateral institutions—for example, Asia and ASEAN.¹⁸⁴

The authority to determine what the interest of a community means and is depends not only on material and organizational resources but also on the ability to attach one’s meanings to material objects in ways that permit them to survive

processes of diffusion, selection, and institutionalization. But people learn about their ‘real’ interests only as they are revealed in the ‘heat of the battle’—in political campaigns, negotiations, and collective action. In other words, interests emerge when people have to bargain about meanings, justify their aptness to particular situations, and create narratives through which they can control their social environment. The negotiations about meaning that occur within and between communities of practice eventually define the communities’ boundaries. Once the cognitive-evolution process is under way, communities of practice diffuse the political innovations that have been selectively retained to state and non-state actors.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that constructivism has not merely enlivened IR theoretical debates. It has also introduced a new communitarian approach for which the social construction of knowledge and the construction of social reality take place within communities of the like-minded—most of which can be characterized as communities of practice. On one level, this communitarian approach can contribute to an understanding of social change and of international and transnational reality. Taking real and practical communities as the ontological ground and level of analysis that mediates between individuals and social structures helps overcome the epistemological and methodological problems associated with using ideas to explain social phenomena as well as the agent-structure dilemma. As I have tried to show in this chapter, however, it also helps to explain the relevance of both collective learning for IR theory and the communitarian sources of social change. On another level, the communitarian approach advanced in this chapter provides us with a better understanding of the mechanisms and processes involved in normative change and of the notion that some of the tough questions currently being debated in analytical IR theory may be intrinsically related to normative issues about liberal order, its variants, and its alternatives.

So this chapter points toward the development of a double synthesis. The first blends normative IR theory with constructivist—analytic IR theory, both of which have been debating the role of communities in international life and their value as a key concept in IR theory. The English school has tried, with some success, to achieve such a synthesis.¹⁸⁵ Although not all IR theorists adopt this school’s main theories, discourse, and findings, they can profit greatly from its example.

Once we realize that the ontological and epistemological terms of the debates in normative IR theory and in analytic IR theory are similar, we can move along to a second and more ambitious synthesis. This blends the liberal—rationalist argument—which emphasizes the individual, the micro foundations of change, methodological individualism, and a cosmopolitan society as a normative goal—with the normative and analytic communitarian argument—which locates social

change in communities, emphasizes the macro foundations of change, and holds that moral life is possible only within communities. If the discipline moves in the direction of the latter synthesis, normative IR theorists will be able to ground their work on the evolving common ground between constructivism and rationalism. For example, learning the conditions and circumstances in which instrumental action and practical or communicative rationality complement each other in the construction of social reality¹⁸⁶ may enlighten normative IR theorists about how communitarian and cosmopolitan notions of normative change can be combined to explain normative evolution toward larger, procedurally better, and more just communities.

At the same time, constructivists and rationalists, who have been concerned mainly with ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions, will be able to ground their understanding of social and international reality on normative foundations of the nature of knowledge, social association, rationality, social change, and human progress. Then we will be able to start speaking the same ‘language’ and tackle the task of imagining together how to transcend our present situation and move in the direction of a global security community in which, peaceful change having been guaranteed, issues of fairness, transparency, responsibility, and mutual dignity can become the new terms of political discourse and practice.

One question that most theorists can debate, regardless of their persuasion, is whether a more just society and a more efficient system of global governance can evolve from existing social structures and practices, or whether the cause of peace and justice will have to wait for a larger transformation of social epistemology, practice, and organization. In the former case, one way of evolving in that direction would be the enlargement of the emerging European liberal order. It is hard to imagine, however, that this will happen in the short term. Another way of evolving toward a normatively and procedurally better, albeit ‘thinner,’ system of governance would be via partnerships of different normative orders—for example, Western liberal and Islamic—and of their related communities of practice. Although these partnerships would not prod political, cultural, and religious communities to abandon their separate understandings of the social world, they could nevertheless advance a moral cause by establishing the conditions of peaceful change (e.g., the rule of law, sustainable development, institutionalized dialogue, international cooperation) in which fairness and mutual respect can more readily develop.