Constructivism

• Key points:
  – Questions the rationality assumption of liberals and realists.
  – ‘Rationality’ is limited by norms of appropriate action.
  – Interests (e.g. power, wealth, etc) cannot be assumed, but are a social construct.
Rational-choice vs. Norms

• **Rational-choice theories**: actions are motivated by their consequences.
  – e.g. Bargaining to buy a car.

• **Social Constructivism**: actions are determined by what is appropriate in a given context.
  – e.g. Why don’t we buy and sell kidneys?
What is Rationality?

• Not the same as ‘common sense.’
• Goals and strategies: Actors value some outcome (goal) and take steps to achieve it (strategy).
  – (e.g. maximize power; maximize profits.)
• International politics is like a chess game.
Norms and International Politics

• Constructivists argue that goals and strategies are conditioned by social norms.
• States have subjective beliefs about what is ‘valuable.’
  – Goals are not fixed, but determined by social acceptability.
  – Cannot assume that states are motivated only by power or wealth. May also promote human rights, equity, cultural values.
• Some strategies are socially unavailable.
• Countries form a ‘community’ of nations.
Example: Democracy promotion.

Source: Susan D. Hyde
Jack Straw, British Foreign Secretary

- “The spread of democracy and freedom across our continent, a process continuing today in the Turkey, Ukraine and the Balkans, has come about not least through the magnetic power of Europe's values and achievement. We need to... support a commitment to democracy, good governance and human rights.”
Example: Nuclear ‘Taboo.’

• Is the use of nuclear weapons ‘unthinkable’?

• “There has never been any doubt about the military effectiveness of nuclear weapons or their potential for terror. A large part of the credit for their not having been used must be due to the ‘taboo’… that attached itself to these weapons.”

Thomas Schelling. Nobel prize winner in economics.
Example: The International Slave Trade

- Slavery existed for thousands of years.
- Fundamental to economy of the Americas.
- England first to ban the slave trade, pressured others to do the same.
- Although forms of slavery still exist (e.g. sex industry workers), thought of as morally abhorrent.
Where do norms come from?

• Norm life cycle (Finnemore & Sikkink):
  1) **Emergence**: Norm entrepreneurs (social activists) attempt to persuade others.
  2) **Norm cascade**: Conformity pressures lead others to follow.
  3) **Internalization**: The norm become ‘taken for granted’.

• Example: Women’s suffrage.
The Democratic Community

• Liberal democracies share common values.
  – Popular sovereignty: rule by the people.
  – Secularism: separation of church and state.
  – Human rights: protection of individuals from abuse.
  – Capitalism: free markets (more or less).

• Institutions such as NATO, the EU, the World Bank reflect common identity.
The Influence of Norms: The EU and the Death Penalty

- All Western democracies (except for the US) have abolished the death penalty.
- The EU makes abolition a pre-requisite for membership.
- Applicants for membership have revised penal codes.
- Turkey abolished the DP in 2002.
Clash of Civilizations

• “The fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural... The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.”
  – Samuel P. Huntington
Clash of Civilizations

- ‘Civilizations’ are broadest possible grouping of human cultures (Western, Hindu, Asian, and Islamic.).
- Fundamental differences in values as a source of conflict.
- Each civilization wants to preserve its way of life at minimum. Global penetration of ‘Western’ life styles.
- Islam-West division seen as particularly deep.
  - Should countries in the Middle East adopt secular democracy, or Islamic law?
- Yet, may mask important divisions within civilizations & common values across them.