

THE FORUM

Moving Beyond the Agent–Structure Debate

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Editor's Note: *Constructivists in international relations accept the basic premise that agents and structures are "mutually constituted." This perspective stresses that social context may constrain particular actions, but historical legacies do not determine behavior. People both perpetuate and alter their worlds. But this ontological agreement does not preclude vociferous disagreements beyond whether to label scholarship "positivist" or "post-positivist" (see, for example, Adler 1997; Campbell 1998; Hopf 1998; Price and Reus-Smit 1998; Ruggie 1998). Epistemological differences raise critical questions about the formulation of research designs and the selection of appropriate methodologies that can untangle the empirical manifestations of mutual constitution (Klotz and Lynch, forthcoming). If meanings are malleable, for instance, is it acceptable to assume that social structures are stable enough for us to identify norms or rules? If identities are fluid and overlapping, are we ever justified in using national interest as a category of analysis? Should we treat language as action or as evidence of individual beliefs?*

Valid criticisms have been raised about the agent–structure debate. One skeptic (Suganami 1999:367) has gone so far as to characterize it as "confused and unproductive," while another (Doty 1997:383) considers it a "significant barrier to more critical International Relations theory." Yet, constructivists cannot simply discard the agent–structure debate because the notion of mutual constitution remains a defining characteristic (Guzzini 2000; Adler 2002). We can, however, move beyond a stale debate that unnecessarily reinforces an epistemological divide. Refocusing on how we carry out empirical research leads to a reformulation of what is "at stake" in this debate. It begins an "imperative" discussion of methodology—the "major missing link" in constructivist International Relations (Adler 2002:104, 109; see also Dessler 1989).

This Forum contrasts two perspectives regarding methodology, written by researchers with avowedly opposing epistemologies. Jeffrey Checkel represents the positivist side, with Kevin Dunn advocating post-positivism. To clarify the assumptions underpinning this juxtaposition, Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch revisit the characterization of this epistemological divide and suggest that it unduly overshadows significant agreement. Scholars such as Checkel and Dunn, they claim, should be able to see common ground once they understand each others' terminology. To probe this potential, Checkel and Dunn elaborate on how and why they conduct research in particular ways. Their exchange highlights some commonalities but also suggests abiding limits to the reconciliation between analyses based on causal mechanisms and those based on discursive practices.

Translating Terminologies

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Recognizing that a shared ontology of mutual constitution points to common research questions is only possible if we move beyond the epistemological divide that riddles constructivist debates. Yet, we do need to understand alternative terminologies rather than simply privilege one set of assumptions over the other. Two key issues lead researchers to talk past each other: (1) the putative distinction between explanation and understanding and (2) inevitable differences that arise across levels of analysis. In an attempt to overcome these barriers, we offer a translation of key concepts. Then, we elaborate upon some of the methodological implications, concentrating on historical narrative at the macrolevel, process tracing at the mesolevel, and participant observation at the microlevel. Identifying complementarities and trade-offs between various tools of analysis will, we hope, provide a basis for building bridges across the prevailing epistemological divide.

From Ontology and Epistemology to Methodology

Constructivists define “structure” as institutionalized—but not immutable—patterns of social order that reflect historical context. In John Ruggie’s (1986:12) terms, institutions are “social facts” because actors agree that they exist. These understandings set up expectations about how the world works, such as what types of behavior are legitimate and which identities are possible. Individual or collective “agents” develop habits, procedures, vocabularies, and other types of practices that researchers can characterize and assess. Sociohistorical contexts evolve over time as people redefine who they are and what they want. Neither agents nor structures are preformed, predetermined, or “ontologically prior” (Wendt 1987). Many constructivists study particular norms and discourses as components of these broader social institutions; others focus on the possibilities for change.

Despite agreeing on this basic ontology of mutual constitution, not all constructivists give the same weight to the constraining effects of social and historical contexts. Nor do all the ideational concepts that abound in the social sciences—beliefs, norms, discourse—capture the *intersubjective* relationship between agents and structures that distinguishes constructivism (Hall 1993). Even so, we define these intersubjective understandings differently. For some, “norms” provide explicit standards of behavior, whereas others emphasize that “rules” take both linguistic and nonlinguistic forms. Still others prefer the term “discourse” to relate meanings to actions. Drawing upon the same evidence, such as public pronouncements, cabinet debates, and interviews, does not mean that we will reach the same conclusions about the nature of power or policymaking processes.

These alternative terminologies reflect disagreement over epistemology. Although constructivists agree on the need for interpretation to grasp the nature of social institutions, not everyone agrees on how far interpretation should go. Can we treat intersubjective understandings as social facts, as Ruggie argues, or do we also need to analyze the interpretations of the researchers? Answers to these

questions often become categorized as representing “modern” versus “postmodern” or as denoting “positivist” versus “post-positivist” positions.

Constructivists on the modernist or positivist side tend to see intersubjective understandings as *stable*, remaining unchanged by the perspective of the interpreter. They typically analyze the world in multicausal terms, treating components of structure and agency as variables to be tested. These researchers often frame questions in terms of policy and behavior, looking for patterns in the formation and operation of international regimes or foreign policymaking to demonstrate how norms matter. For example, contributors to *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (Katzenstein 1996) draw on sociological concepts associated with hypothesis testing and generalization. The title alone signals the epistemology: “culture” and “identity,” both in the singular, with “norms” implying that meanings can be stable and knowable, independent of the researcher. Culture and identity, therefore, can be isolated from other characteristics of social life and treated as variables. In a similar vein, Jeffrey Checkel, in his contribution to this Forum, advocates the use of causal process tracing to test hypotheses about norms and to delineate “scope” conditions for processes of socialization.

Post modernists or post-positivists, in contrast, favor terminology that captures the *instability* of meanings. They insist that we work in a hermeneutical circle without any objective standpoint for analysis. Less concerned with generalization, they typically eschew the goal of causal explanation—thus rejecting the vocabulary of “variables”—in favor of tracing “historical conjunctures.” For example, contributors to *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Weldes et al. 1999) draw explicitly on anthropological insights. Cultures provide all-encompassing contexts within which we can appreciate nuances in meaning. Again, the choice of title signals an epistemological perspective: the “production” of multiple “cultures” suggests fluidity and malleability in social understandings, including the researchers’ own biases. Rather than being an outcome to be explained, policies signal notions of security. In his contribution to this Forum, Kevin Dunn characterizes this anthropological approach as asking “how possible” rather than “why” questions because cultures—comprised of dominant but evolving discourses—set the parameters for action rather than determine particular choices.

Yet, these two edited volumes and this Forum also illustrate how alternative theoretical vocabularies can hide common research concerns. For instance, some talk about the “production of representations,” whereas others explore the “functions of norms.” But both groups see “security” and “identities,” among other core concepts, as conditioned by cultural context rather than determined by any objective characteristics. As Colin Wight (1999:122, emphasis in the original) points out, “we can expect *both* determinacy and indeterminacy” in meanings and practices. By looking at “representations,” “norms,” “discourses,” “rules,” and other types of intersubjective understandings, constructivists demonstrate that certain ideas get taken for granted or dominate while others remain unspoken or marginalized. Positivists and post-positivists agree, in other words, that agents or subjects create meanings within structures and discourses through processes and practices.

Because our common research agenda focuses on how and why meanings become institutionalized or change, we should reject any stark distinction between “explanation” through causal analysis versus “understanding” through interpretation (see, for example, Hollis and Smith 1990). In practice, there is considerable overlap. Although researchers concentrate more on one or the other, “how” and “why” questions are not easily separated. Those who say they explain behavior also interpret meaning, and those who focus on understanding language also explain action to some degree. As Hidemi Suganami (1999:371–372) points out,

“we explain something to someone [to make it understandable] ... the act of ‘explaining’ assumes a common set of prior ‘understandings.’”

In the next three sections, we will map out some methodological tools available to constructivists falling anywhere along this epistemological spectrum. We start by comparing historiographic techniques used to characterize changes in the international system. But these studies tend to privilege structure over agency, so we turn to works on international regimes to examine how actors frame and reframe ideas. Disagreement between constructivists over whether to incorporate the role of the researcher leads us, finally, to query the place of individuals in processes of socialization.

System Change

Constructivists analyze how institutions, comprised of rules and norms, establish habitual practices and procedures. The resulting social structures vary across historical periods, leading scholars to distinguish between systems, such as between the ancient, the medieval, and the modern. When feudalism gave way to absolutist monarchy, for example, sovereignty legitimized territorial political units while it undermined the authority of the Catholic Church (Hall 1999). In ancient Greece, city-states abided by diplomatic rules of arbitration (Reus-Smit 1999). Through these studies, constructivists challenge the common assumption that states have always been the primary actors in an anarchical international system, opening up the possibility for both agency and change.

Variations in the components of social structure, such as the norm of sovereignty and the practice of arbitration, offer one way to delineate systems and what drives macrohistorical change. One reason why constructivists disagree over the details of periodization is that they do not necessarily apply the same concepts in organizing source materials. Christian Reus-Smit (1999), for example, uses the notion of moral purpose to question Ruggie’s (1986) emphasis on the seventeenth century as the transition to the modern era. By probing in detail the differences between Italian city-states, absolutist monarchies, and nation-states, he asserts that the multilateral practices of the nineteenth century are sufficiently distinct from those of the seventeenth to merit labeling it a new era. Rodney Hall (1999), in contrast, emphasizes moral authority in the decline of the Catholic Church, paying less heed to variations in how states interacted among themselves. Looking at the mythology of ancient civilizations through the Christian era and up to contemporary times, James Der Derian (1987), in turn, builds on the concept of alienation as a basis for tracing cultures of diplomacy.

Despite their differences, all these studies use historical evidence to tell a more coherent and complete (“better”) narrative. These researchers use some combination of secondary sources and archival materials to draw out new insights or to argue for the broader significance of particular events. They insist, for example, that classic texts, including legal documents such as the Treaty of Westphalia, need to be read within their historical context. Otherwise, we may superimpose contemporary concepts and concerns back in time, distorting the meaning of these documents. Thus, Reus-Smit (1999) insists that realists have misinterpreted *The Peloponnesian War* and *The Prince* because they take snippets out of context, leading to inaccurate inferences about Thucydides and Machiavelli’s original arguments. Placing these texts in historical context, including contemporaneous primary and secondary sources, enables us to assess just how much the Treaty of Westphalia (or other manifestations of social structure) reflect new practices. Only then can we delineate historical junctures and characterize eras—based on what we consider to be significant shifts.

Because conceptual choices lead to alternative demarcations of temporal (or geographical) boundaries, how should we determine which of these approaches is

better? Those leaning toward positivism value the coherence or completeness of a narrative based on an objective search for new facts. But post-positivists stress that narratives create truth claims not objective knowledge. Consciously or not, these histories reflect the scholar's own interpretive framework because we derive fundamental assumptions—including concepts like moral authority or alienation—from underlying ideologies or “meta-narratives” (Lynch 1999). These assumptions, in turn, guide the formulation of research questions. The predominance of realist thinking, in this view, reflects US power, both in world politics and in the academy, whereas Marxism tends to be marginalized as an analytical framework because it challenges capitalism, a fundamental component of US hegemony (Agathangelou and Ling 2004).

Consequently, we need to be conscious of how our key concepts (such as social purpose, moral authority, and alienation) reflect underlying ideologies and shape the formulation of our research questions—and answers—because we look for new evidence when our theoretical assumptions change or are challenged. For example, regardless of whether they seek to promote US power, realists are unlikely to explore shifts in the fundamental nature of the international system because they assume the persistence of anarchy. Constructivists, in contrast, show that states emerged as key actors during a particular period in European history. At issue is whether to accept states and anarchy as core theoretical assumptions and not as historical claims. Given a set of core assumptions, we can evaluate the accuracy and completeness of historical narratives, but history will not provide the basis for assessing whether realism is “right.”

Because constructivists demonstrate that system transformation is possible, they are often portrayed (especially by critics) as championing agency. This charge shifts the terrain from the past to the future, turning theory into a prescriptive—ideological—guide to action. Even though we accept that theories can have prescriptive value, we reject the position that theories only reflect political agendas. Even when they serve as guides for action, theories still need to be evaluated on the basis of empirical analysis. Regardless of whether one champions or resists change, some analytical lessons prove more useful than others. For example, are we now experiencing the transition to a new era of globalization? Answers to this question can aid those who seek to prevent change as much as those who foster it.

The challenge, then, is to figure out why international systems sometimes change. The macrohistorical works surveyed above offer only a starting point because their primary goal is to identify differences between the contemporary and previous systems. Understanding—and perhaps shaping—the processes of system change require more than static comparisons. As the following section on regime evolution demonstrates, methodologies that highlight interactions between structures and agents offer us complementary insights into mechanisms of change.

Regime Evolution

Constructivists agree that no institutions, interests, or identities are immutable. Prevailing ideas change over time because some people modify them. For instance, the influence of the Catholic Church diminished relative to the secular state, wage labor prevailed over slavery, imperialism gave way to decolonization, and the Bretton Woods economic system is under challenge. Protestant princes, abolitionists, and liberation movements (among others) transformed their worlds; today, anti-globalization activists seek to do the same. But if actors are conditioned (“constituted”) by the prevailing sociohistorical contexts of their times, why do some adopt new ways of thinking and behaving rather than follow habitual practices?

One set of debates about these questions centers on hegemony and the mechanisms that maintain it. For example, we might characterize contemporary

capitalism as a cluster of social understandings based on a concept of money valued through exchange rates rather than gold and the legitimacy of wage labor rather than indentured servitude. Within this context, Ruggie (1992) argues, the postwar economic order, manifest in a particular multilateral form of formal organizations, reflected and reinforced US predominance. Robert Latham (1997) goes further to critique the role of liberal values and practices in the construction of that particular global order. He links capitalist ideology, liberal economics, and militarism as inseparable components of US power. Feminists, such as Ann Tickner (2001), make similar claims, highlighting how gendered assumptions explain this mutual constitution of liberalism, capitalism, and militarism.

People act within this capitalist framework of meaning (what some call “regimes of truth”), but we cannot *assume* that its norms and practices always “naturalize” to create “collective recognition of them as structural properties” (Doty 1997:371). Hegemony, after all, does not eliminate ideological tensions or preclude challenges to the policies of multilateral organizations as is evident in debates over globalization. If ideologies do not automatically produce social facts, how do individual beliefs become collective understandings about the world? Why do some norms and practices attain sufficient autonomy—epistemic power—to constrain actions? When should we treat them as social structures?

To answer these questions, constructivists explore the degree to which actors reinforce or transcend institutionalized practices, suggesting processes such as legitimation, learning, reasoning, and other forms of communication. By demanding or apologizing, for instance, people reinforce or recreate the meanings institutionalized in social structures. Research examining these issues uses a range of methodological techniques to capture various aspects of the language people use, how they use it, with what effects, and why. Often, these tools complement each other, but there can also be trade-offs between them. These methodological choices are rooted in the language that researchers use in their core concepts. A comparison of causal and conjunctural process tracing illustrates this point.

Positivist-leaning scholars often look for patterns in the language of international agreements, such as treaties, to observe norms. They then analyze structural constraints, collective action, or shifting interests as variables leading to testable hypotheses. By examining the diffusion of norms through European integration, for example, Checkel (2001) seeks to explain why some countries adopt pan-European conceptions of citizenship for minorities by contrasting coercion and social learning. Because he sees norms as stable intersubjective understandings that remain unchanged by the perspective of the interpreter, he treats discourse as objective knowledge to be discerned through interviews with participants and in meeting memoranda (for example, in the Council of Europe). Researchers’ interpretations of policymakers’ preferences and motives can also be verified with media reports and other observers’ assessments. Tracing a chain of decisions about policy outcomes produces a causal claim that can, in turn, be the basis for generalization.

Eschewing causal claims in favor of historical contingency as noted above, post-positivists see language as more fluid, insisting that we work in a hermeneutical circle, which precludes any objective stand point. Mapping discursive conjunctures and disjunctures over time, with what is frequently called a genealogical approach, the researcher identifies “chance occurrences, fortuitous connections, and reinterpretations,” underscoring that structures or practices “often change in such a way that they come to embody values different from those that animated their origins” (Price 1995:86). For example, Dunn (2003) traces images of the Congo in Western public discourse from colonization through contemporary civil war. Recurring tropes, notably “the heart of darkness,” portray the Congolese as irrational savages. Such dehumanization legitimates foreign intervention by making

it conceivable as a policy option. Rather than seeking to explain when or why intervention then occurs, Dunn concentrates on the effects of such policies on subsequent images of the Congo, noting the ebb and flow of particular representations that comprise Western and Congolese identities.

Both causal and conjunctural forms of process tracing enable us to grasp specific components of structural change. Indeed, they complement each other, with genealogy providing an explanation for the range of possible policies and causal process tracing focusing on the particular selection that occurs among these possibilities. Yet, both still leave unanswered many questions about when and why some people challenge prevailing norms and practices. Why do only some rules become internalized? Why do some people rebel? How do decision makers resolve conflicting social and self-interested expectations? Do we need to understand actor motivations? If so, can constructivists fit individuals into their analyses without “negating the indissoluble unity” that Roxanne Doty (1997:373) suggests is fundamental to the notion of mutual constitution?

Cognitive Transformation

Neither causal nor conjunctural process tracing sufficiently captures human cognition. The traditional array of interviews, news reports, memoirs, biographies, and archival records of meetings that delve into the elusive thinking of key decision makers can never reveal the “real” reasons for their choices. Despite the insights that can be gained from these sources, their limitations are also well known. People rewrite their views with their legacies in mind; records can be incomplete or inaccessible; and interviewees may not be forthcoming. Alternatively, public discourse captures how socially constructed subjects act within the confines of shared language. Yet, as Wight (1999:137, n. 4) points out, privileging these observable linguistic practices downplays “the inner life” of actors.

Participant observation offers an underutilized complement to these private and public sources of evidence, because it offers exceptional insights into the transformative potential of language at the social–psychological level. In particular, Carol Cohn’s (1987) path-breaking assessment of her experiences in a nuclear weapons bureaucracy during the Cold War demonstrates how language constructs and reconstructs agents. She suggests four stages in this socialization process: listening, speaking, dialogue, and “terror,” a term she uses to indicate alienation from her former beliefs. Michael Barnett’s (1999) more recent experiences as a political officer for the US mission to the United Nations confirm this trajectory.

When Cohn and Barnett arrived at their respective workplaces, they realized that their academic training and research experience did not prepare them for their new roles. The sexual imagery of the techno-strategic language of the weapons scientists, for example, starkly showed Cohn that she was an outsider. And the scientists ignored even sophisticated questions when she spoke in ordinary English. Colleagues, furthermore, teased and cajoled both Cohn and Barnett; personal acceptance required an ability to fit into the local culture. Both learned to speak these new languages and abide by the rules of the game. They describe, furthermore, how the use of these specialized languages—engaging in dialogue—transformed their thinking. Previously sympathetic to disarmament activists, for example, Cohn almost forgot how to articulate her long-standing critiques of strategic thinking. Barnett, in turn, found himself expressing a version of US interests that best meshed with the values voiced in the UN. In less than a year, both participant–observers had been socialized into their respective languages and bureaucracies.

Despite what appears to be these overarching similarities, we can also see differences in their analyses. Cohn shows us a world populated by imagery that distances the user from any impact that nuclear weapons might have on human

lives. Nuclear strategists happily discuss war-fighting strategies and weapon survivability without any attention to the potential for nuclear holocaust. We cannot dismiss this language, because it affects resource allocation and the manufacture of actual bombs. Cohn's work thus highlights post-positivist claims that discourse creates new realities. Reflecting a positivist's inclination to explain policy outcomes, in contrast, Barnett concentrates on the discursive framing of "interests" that are produced and reproduced through institutionalized decision making. A few particular words, notably "genocide," hold the power to define situations and demand policy responses. Hence, policymakers refused at the time to characterize the killings in Rwanda as genocide and are reacting similarly to the mass killings in Sudan.

Both writers also draw out the moral implications of discourse. For instance, Barnett, having participated in the UN decision not to send peacekeepers to Rwanda at the height of the genocide in 1994, now decries the sense of indifference that his role taught him; the reputation of the UN proved more important than saving Rwandan lives. As a result, these studies call on us to reject the tendency to see only those people capable of changing structures (that is, exhibiting epistemic power) as having agency. Constructivism can, therefore, lead to a broader basis for ethics if all individuals are held accountable for replicating or challenging the rules of the game.

Conclusion

Our purpose here has been to move beyond an abstract formulation of the agent-structure debate by drawing attention to the processes of mutual constitution and some techniques for researching them. We urge constructivists of all persuasions to recognize our shared aim to produce scholarship that carefully uses and evaluates evidence. If we lose sight of our commonalities, we miss an opportunity to learn from each other about how to understand *and* explain international relations. Choices among these (and other) methodologies certainly deserve greater attention because no single set of "best" tools could possibly apply to the diverse questions that arise in the societies in which we live, write, and teach. We welcome Jeffrey Checkel's and Kevin Dunn's contributions to this Forum as a step in this direction.

Tracing Causal Mechanisms

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"This argument is too structural. It's under-determined and based on unrealistic assumptions. Moreover, it tells us little about how the world really works." Among many scholars (the present author included), these are an oft-heard set of complaints. Consider two examples. The central thesis of the democratic peace literature—that democracies do not fight other democracies—is hailed as one of the few law-like propositions in international relations. Yet, as critics rightly stress, we know amazingly little about the mechanisms generating such peaceful relations (Rosato 2003:585–586, *passim*; Forum 2005; Hamberg 2005). And in Europe, scholars have for years debated the identity-shaping effects of European institutions. One claim is that bureaucrats "go native" in Brussels, adopting European values at the expense of national ones. But here, too, critics correctly

note that we know virtually nothing about the processes and mechanisms underlying these potentially transformative dynamics (Checkel 2005a, 2005b).

So, to paraphrase a former US president, “it’s the process stupid.” To invoke process is synonymous, I argue, with an understanding of theories based on causal mechanisms. To study such mechanisms, we must use a method of process tracing. But this is not easy. Proponents of process tracing should be wary of losing sight of the big picture, be aware of the method’s significant data requirements, and recognize epistemological assumptions inherent in its application. Consistent with a central theme of the present Forum, I argue that process tracers are well placed to move us beyond unproductive “either/or” meta-theoretical debates to empirical applications in which *both* agents and structures matter as well as are explained and understood through *both* positivist and post-positivist epistemological–methodological lenses.

Causal Mechanisms and Process Tracing

Mechanisms operate at an analytic level below that of a more encompassing theory; they increase the theory’s credibility by rendering more fine-grained explanations (Johnson 2002:230–231). According to one widely cited definition, a mechanism is “a set of hypotheses that could be the explanation for some social phenomenon, the explanation being in terms of interactions between individuals and other individuals, or between individuals and some social aggregate” (Hedstroem and Swedberg 1998:25, 32–33; Hovi 2004). As “recurrent processes linking specified initial conditions and a specific outcome” (Mayntz 2003:4–5), mechanisms connect things. For example, in a recent project on international socialization (Checkel 2005a, 2005b), the objective was to minimize the lag between international institutions (cause) and socializing outcomes (effect) at the state or unit level. To this end, I theorized three generic social mechanisms (strategic calculation, role playing, and normative suasion), which allowed me to posit fine-grained connections between institutions and changes in state interests and identities.

How does one study these causal mechanisms in action? Process tracing would seem to be the answer, given that it identifies a causal chain that links independent and dependent variables (Bennett and George 2005:206–207). Methodologically, process tracing provides the how-we-come-to-know nuts and bolts for mechanism-based accounts of social change. But it also directs one to trace the process in a very specific, theoretically informed way. The researcher looks for a series of theoretically predicted intermediate steps.

When talking of mechanisms and process tracing, I adopt a microperspective—what are sometimes called agent-to-agent mechanisms (Bennett and George 2005:145). However, this is merely a pragmatic choice, not an ontological claim. I know the microlevel best, theoretically and empirically. Not all mechanisms need to be linked to individual decisions. Others have argued for a macro focus in the study of causal mechanisms (Tilly 2001; Katzenstein and Sil 2005). Whether the specific lessons I offer below can be “scaled up” to a more macro level is a question for future research.

Epistemologically, process tracing appears to be at odds with interpretive approaches even though it relies on similar types of qualitative data, such as historical memoirs, expert surveys, interviews, press accounts, and documents. Process tracing only works if you hold things constant in a series of steps: A causes B, B then causes C, C then causes D, and so on. Such a strategy cannot capture the fluidity of post-positivist epistemologies because linearity is captured at the expense of recursivity. Many constructivists would thus be rightly surprised to learn that this method is part and parcel of their tool kit (Bennett and George 2005:206). Indeed, those interpretive constructivists who do use process tracing are very careful to

separate it from the discursive and narrative techniques at the heart of their approach (Hopf 2002; see also Dunn in this Forum).

The Socializing Power of European Institutions

To illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of this positivist, microlevel, process-tracing tool kit, I assess the causal impact of one mechanism of socialization: persuasion. In Europe, there are numerous tantalizing hints of such socialization dynamics; for example, consider the European Union's (EU) Convention on the Future of Europe (Magnette 2004). There are also ongoing, contentious, and unresolved policy (*Economist* 2002, 2003) and academic debates (Laffan 1998; Wessels 1998) over the extent to which European institutions promote shifts in preferences and identities. Moreover, with its thickly institutionalized regional environment and, some argue, a supranational polity-in-the-making like the EU, Europe seems a highly likely place for socialization to occur (Weber 1994; Zürn and Checkel 2005).

Socialization refers to the process of inducting new actors into the norms, rules, and ways of behavior of a given community. Its end point is internalization, when the community norms and rules become taken for granted (Checkel 2005a). I define persuasion as a social process of communication that involves changing beliefs, attitudes, or behavior in the absence of overt coercion. It entails convincing someone through argument and principled debate (Zimbardo and Leippe 1991; Perloff 1993:14; Brody, Mutz, and Sniderman 1996; Keohane 2001:2, 10). To use my earlier language, it is a social mechanism through which the interactions between individuals may lead to changes in interests or even identities.

Persuasion may, thus, sometimes change people's minds, acting as a motor and a mechanism of socialization. However, the key word here is "sometimes." The challenge has been to articulate the scope conditions under which such change is likely to happen. Deductively drawing upon insights from social psychology (Orbell, Dawes, and Van de Kragt 1988) as well as Habermasian social theory, recent work suggests that persuasion—and its close conceptual relative, arguing—are more likely to change the interests of social agents and lead to internalization when the following conditions hold (see Checkel 2005a for details):

- (1) The target of the socialization attempt is in a novel and uncertain environment and, thus, cognitively motivated to analyze new information.
- (2) The target has few prior, ingrained beliefs that are inconsistent with the socializing agency's or individual's message.
- (3) The socializing agency or individual is an authoritative member of the in-group to which the target belongs or wants to belong.
- (4) The socializing agency or individual does not lecture or demand, but, instead, acts out principles of serious deliberative argument.
- (5) The agency target interaction occurs in less politicized and more insulated, in-camera settings.

These scope conditions indicate, for example, that persuasion is more likely in brainstorming and depoliticized institutional settings. This is one of the hypotheses that I have explored in my work on citizenship policy in the Council of Europe.

When the Council confronts a new issue, it sets up committees of experts, composed of representatives from Council member states as well as academic and policy specialists. Their mandate is to think big in an open way. In the early 1990s, two such committees were established: a Committee of Experts on National Minorities and a Committee of Experts on Nationality. If new norms were these committees' outputs, then the issue for me was the process leading to such outcomes. In particular, what role was played by persuasion?

For the committee on national minorities, there were few attempts at persuasion throughout its five-year life. Rather, committee members were content to horse-trade on the basis of fixed positions and preferences. Key to explaining this outcome was the politicization of its work at a very early stage. Events in the broader public arena (the Bosnian tragedy) and within the committee led to a quick hardening of positions. These political facts greatly diminished the likelihood that the committee's formal brainstorming mandate might lead to successful acts of persuasion through which Council member states might rethink basic preferences on minority policies.

The story was quite different in the committee on nationality. Through the mid-1990s, nationality was a rather hum-drum, boring issue, especially compared with the highly emotive one of minorities. Initially, much of the committee's proceedings were taken up with mundane discussions of how and whether to streamline immigration procedures and regulations. In this technical and largely depoliticized atmosphere, brainstorming and attempts at persuasion were evident, especially in a working group of the committee. In this smaller setting, individuals freely exchanged views on the meaning of nationality in a post-national Europe. They sought to persuade and change attitudes, using the force of example, logical argumentation, and the personal self-esteem in which one persuader was held. In at least two cases, individuals clearly did rethink their views on nationality in a fundamental way; that is, they were convinced to view the issue in a new light (Checkel 2003).

This last sentence that you have just read, however, raises an important methodological issue. How does the tracing of this process allow me to assert plausibly a causal role for persuasion as a mechanism of socialization? Put more prosaically, how would I recognize persuasion if it were to walk through the door? The following can be said. I used multiple data streams, consisting of interviews with committee members (five rounds spread over five years), confidential meeting summaries of nearly all the committee's meetings, and various secondary sources, and I triangulated across them. (Note that Dunn, in this Forum, advocates essentially the same sort of triangulation procedures.)

In the interviews, I asked two types of questions. A first touched upon an individual's own thought processes and possibly changing preferences. A second was more intersubjective, asking the interviewee to classify his or her interaction context. I gave them four possibilities for characterizing the context—coercion, bargaining, persuasion/arguing, and imitation—and asked for a rank ordering. Interviewees were also asked whether their rankings changed over time and, if so, why (Checkel 2003).

In sum, nondistributive mandates and actor independence promoted an institutional context in which persuasion was able to play a role influencing preferences on nationality. This conclusion is strengthened by asking the counterfactual. Absent these persuasive dynamics, would the outcome have been any different? In fact, the regional norms that emerged from the committee's deliberations were different from what otherwise would have been the case. For example, on the question of dual nationality, a long-standing prohibitory norm was relaxed, thus making European policies more open to the possibility of individuals holding two citizenships (Council of Europe 1997, 2000).

Put differently, persuasion's causal role was facilitated as one moved from institutions as bargaining arenas to institutions as transformative settings marked by a thicker institutional context (Gourevitch, Katzenstein, and Keohane 2002; March and Olsen 2005:6–7). These findings are consistent with insights drawn from laboratory experimental work in social psychology on the so-called contact hypothesis (Beyers 2005). In addition, they are corroborated by results from work on epistemic communities in international relation theory (Haas 1992) that also emphasizes nonbargaining dynamics in apolitical, technical settings.

Assessing Process Tracing: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

What have I learned from more than a decade of using process tracing as my method of choice? I offer 11 lessons—four good, five bad, and two ugly. The good is the value added that comes from applying the method—how it advances the state of the art metatheoretically, methodologically, and theoretically. The bad are issues and failings that one needs to be aware of before starting a research project with this method. The ugly stand out as “red flags”—questions in urgent need of attention. Addressing the latter will require process tracers to transgress both metatheoretical (agents *and* structures) and epistemological (positivism *and* interpretivism) boundaries.

Lesson #1 (The Good): Helping to Bring Mechanisms Back In

A very diverse set of social theorists now call for more attention to mechanisms (compare Elster 1998; Wendt 1999: Chapter 2; Johnson 2006). There are good and sensible reasons for this trend. Most important, it moves us away from correlational arguments and “as-if” styles of reasoning toward theories that capture and explain the world as it really works. Less appreciated are the methodological implications. Simply put, if one is going to invoke the philosophy-of-science language of mechanisms, then process tracing is the logically necessary method for exploring them.

Lesson #2 (More Good): Coming to Grips with First-Mover Advantages

Process tracing can minimize the problems of the so-called first-mover advantage (Caporaso, Checkel, and Jupille 2003b:27–28). If they are honest, most scholars will admit to having favorite theories. In empirical research, the tendency is first to interpret and to explain the data through the lens of this favored argument. By encouraging researchers to consider alternative explanations, the positivist-empiricist tool kit has built-in checks against this first-mover advantage. And process tracing can make such checks stronger. Predicting intermediate steps between independent and dependent variables essentially produces a series of mini-checks, constantly pushing the researcher to think hard about the connection (or lack there of) between expected patterns and what the data say.

Lesson #3 (Yet More Good): Promoting Bridge Building

It has become increasingly evident that process tracing has a central—and necessary—role to play in contemporary debates over theoretical bridge building (for example, Adler 1997). To make connections between different theoretical tool kits (rational choice and social constructivism, most prominently), scholars have advanced arguments on temporal sequencing and domains of application. Implicitly or explicitly, the method on offer is typically process tracing as it is extremely useful for teasing out the more fine-grained distinctions and connections between alternative theoretical schools (Fearon and Wendt 2002; Caporaso, Checkel, and Jupille 2003a; Kelley 2004; Checkel 2005b).

Lesson #4 (More Good): Helping Answer “How Much Data Is Enough?”

Process tracing makes it easier to answer a question that often plagues qualitative researchers: “When is there enough data?” My work on socialization in European institutions provides a case in point (Checkel 2003). After two rounds of interviewing, I took a break from data collection. Writing up the results—connecting the data to the causal story I was attempting to tell—allowed me to see the ways in which my data coverage was still weak. This discovery suggested the kinds of data

I would need to collect during future field work. Especially with interviews, I used what is sometimes called a branching and building strategy, through which the results of early interviews are used to restructure and refocus the types of questions asked at later points.

After two more rounds of field work, I again wrote up the results. This time, I also circulated the draft to several colleagues. Based on their input and my own, I came to a determination that I had, indeed, collected enough data. More specifically, I felt that my story was now plausible in that a rigorous but fair-minded reviewer would read the analysis and say “yeah, I see the argument; Checkel has made a case for it.” (Again, note that Dunn’s excellent discussion on establishing the validity of interpretations, in this Forum, uses largely the same language, suggesting that our meta-theoretical and epistemological divisions may be more apparent than real.)

Lesson #5 (The Bad): Nonparsimonious Theories

Process tracing is not conducive to the development of parsimonious or generalizable theories. In part, the reasons for this are social theoretic. As I argued earlier, process tracing is synonymous with a mechanism-based approach to theory development, which, as Jon Elster (1998:45) correctly argues, is “intermediate between laws and descriptions.” However, in equal part, the reasons are human and idiosyncratic. The typical process tracer is a scholar driven by empirical puzzles. He or she is happy to combine a bit of this and a bit of that, the goal being to explain more completely the outcome at hand. The end result is partial, middle-range theory (Bennett and George 2005:7–8, 216). If one is not careful, however, middle-range theory can lead to overdetermined and, in the worse case, kitchen sink arguments in which everything matters. More careful attention to research design can minimize such problems (Johnston 2005).

Lesson #6 (More Bad): Proxies Are a Pain

Process tracers often decry the unrealistic proxies that quantitative researchers use in the construction of data sets (for example, Hug and Koenig 2000, 2002). But qualitative researchers, including process tracers, face similar problems albeit at a different level. A central concern in my own work has been to theorize and document the causal mechanisms of socialization, such as persuasion. Did I ever actually see somebody persuaded, see a decision maker change his or her mind? No, I did not. I was not a fly on the wall, secretly observing these sessions. Participant observation was not an option. I, too, was therefore forced to rely on proxies: before and after interviews, documentary records of the meetings, and the like. The lesson here is similar to that given in #5 above. At an early point, the process-tracing, qualitative scholar needs to think hard about the conceptual variables at play in his or her project and ask what the feasible and justifiable proxies for measuring them are.

Lesson #7 (Still More Bad): It Takes Lots of Time

Process tracing is time intensive and, to put it ever so delicately, “can require enormous amounts of information” (Bennett and George 2005:223). Researchers need to think carefully about their own financial limits and temporal constraints. My studies of socialization included five rounds of interviews spread over 5 years and a close reading of numerous documents (both public and confidential). The project, in large part because of its methodology, has taken a long time to bring to fruition. Although all scholars face trade-offs when thinking about productivity,

research endeavors, and methods, these dilemmas may be particularly acute for process tracers.

Lesson #8 (Yet More Bad): Missing Causal Complexity

Like any method, process tracing abstracts from and simplifies the real world—probably less than many others, but abstract it still does. By tracing a number of intermediate steps, the method pushes a researcher to think hard about the role played or not played by a particular mechanism. Yet in many cases, the outcome observed is the result of multiple mechanisms interacting over time. Process tracing can help deal with this challenge of causal complexity, but only in an indirect way. For instance, process tracing helped me establish when persuasion was present and when it was absent. The latter “non-finding,” then, suggested a role for additional causal mechanisms such as bargaining (see also Zürn and Checkel 2005:1052–1054 on primary and secondary mechanisms).

Lesson #9 (More Bad): Just How Micro To Go?

Process tracing and the study of causal mechanisms raise a difficult “stopping point” issue. When does inquiry into such mechanisms stop? How micro should we go? Consider my project on socialization. As noted above, I took one mechanism—socialization—and broke it into three submechanisms: strategic calculation, role playing, and persuasion (Checkel 2005a). Why stop at this point? Persuasion, for example, could be further broken down into its own submechanisms, most likely various types of cognitive processes. My justification has two parts, neither of which has anything to do with process tracing. First, the state of disciplinary knowledge told me it was a concept like socialization—and not persuasion—that was ripe for disaggregation into smaller component mechanisms (see also Alderson 2001). Second, a growing and increasingly sophisticated array of qualitative techniques (interview protocols, surveys) made it possible for me to craft reliable proxies to measure persuasion’s causal effect.

Lesson #10 (The Ugly): Losing the Big Picture

In making a methodological choice to examine questions of process, it is all too easy to lose sight of broader structural context and the normative-ethical implications of one’s work. For example, when I presented my findings on individual decision makers and the social-psychological and institutional factors that might lead them to change their minds in light of persuasive appeals, interpretive scholars noted that I had no way—theoretically or methodologically—to figure out what counted as a serious deliberative argument. I had just assumed it adhered to the individual. But equally plausible was the consideration that my persuader’s arguments were legitimated by the broader social discourse in which he or she was embedded. In positivist-empiricist terms, I had a potential problem of omitted variable bias, whereas, for interpretivists, the issue was one of missing the broader forces that enable and make possible human agency (see Dunn in this Forum).

The normative-ethical context is a second area in which process tracers may be prone to overlook important dynamics. In my collaborative project on socialization and European regional institutions, all participants adopted a mechanism-based approach and many combined this with a process-tracing method (Gheciu 2005; Lewis 2005; Schimmelfennig 2005). Yet, even though we were tracing such dynamics, we forgot to ask important normative-ethical questions. Is it legitimate and just that Western Europe—through the EU, NATO, and the Council of Europe—imposes norms and rules on applicant countries from Eastern Europe that, in some cases (minority rights), are flagrantly violated by those very same

Western European states? What are the implications for democratic and legitimate governance if state agents acquire supranational allegiances and loyalties?

Lesson #11 (The Really Ugly): The Dreaded “E” Word

Most process tracers are empirically oriented scholars who just want to conduct research on the fascinating world around us. On the whole, this is a healthy attitude. Especially for rational-choice scholars who adopt process tracing (Schimmelfennig 2003; Kelley 2004), variable-oriented language fits well with their positivist-empiricist epistemological orientation. But constructivist theorists are split, with some explicitly (Wendt 1999:82) or implicitly (Ruggie 1998:94) endorsing the method, although others appear much more skeptical (Adler 2002:109). Still others advocate a so-called bracketing strategy (Finnemore 1996) in which one first holds structure constant and explores agency’s causal role, and then reverses the order. Yet, as a result, the recursivity at the heart of constructivist social theory is lost.

To begin to address this state of affairs, the dreaded “E” word must be revisited. As some have noted (Guzzini 2000; Zehfuss 2002: Chapters 1, 6), constructivists—especially those who endorse methods like process tracing—do need to explicate more carefully their epistemological assumptions. And such a rethink will likely require a turn to post-positivist philosophies of science.

Conclusions and Implications

After the numerous criticisms in the preceding section, readers may be surprised by my bottom line: process tracing is a fundamentally important method. Although current applications leave much to be desired, the problems are all fixable. The signal benefit of process tracing is that it places theory and data in close proximity. One quickly comes to see what works and—equally important—what does not. This said, process tracers need to think harder about the logical and philosophical bases of this mechanism-based approach. Positivism as a philosophy of science will not do the trick, given its correlational view of causation and instrumental use of theoretical concepts (Wight 2002).

One possible post-positivist starting point would be scientific realism, which is the “view that the objects of scientific theories are objects that exist independently of investigators’ minds and that the theoretical terms of their theories indeed refer to real objects in the world” (Chernoff 2005:41; see also Wendt 1999: Chapter 2; Bennett and George 2005:147–148, 214). For many scientific realists, these “real objects” are precisely the causal mechanisms of the process-tracing studies highlighted in this essay. Scientific realism is also epistemologically opportunist in that “no one method, or epistemology, could be expected to fit all cases” (Wight 2002:36; more generally, see Lane 1996). With such qualities, it would seem ideally placed to give process-tracing conceptual grounding.

Given such foundations, process tracers could then begin to ask hard questions about their community standards—standards anchored in a philosophically coherent base. What counts as good process tracing? How do we know process tracing when we see it? How can discourse/textual and process-tracing approaches be combined (see also Hopf 2002)? Although my answers to such questions are implicit throughout this essay, let me now be explicit by suggesting that good process-tracing adhere to the four following core maxims:

- *Philosophy*: It should be grounded, explicitly and self-consciously, in a philosophical base that is methodologically plural, such as that provided by scientific realism or other post-positivist philosophies of science.

- *Context*: It will utilize this pluralism both to reconstruct carefully causal processes and to not lose sight of the broader structural–discursive–ethical context.
- *Methodology I*: It will develop and carefully justify a set of proxies that will be used to infer the presence of one or more causal mechanisms.
- *Methodology II*: It will take equifinality seriously, which means to consider the alternative paths through which the outcome of interest might have occurred.

Although positivists have avoided such issues by focusing excessively on correlation and design at the expense of causation and method (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; see also Johnson 2006), too many interpretivists for too long have simply sidestepped methodological questions altogether (Checkel 2006; Hopf 2006). This Forum and other endeavors currently under way (see especially Lebow and Lichbach 2006) hold out the promise of correcting this truly odd state of affairs.

Examining Historical Representations

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I am most interested in how particular social identities are constructed and how they make certain practices possible but others unthinkable. These “how” questions lead to investigation of structures of knowledge, such as historical representations, that produce meanings. Like Roxanne Doty (1996:4), I examine “how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects and objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions that create certain possibilities and preclude others.” I am less interested in the “what” questions because these often prompt historical narratives that mistakenly assume a simple linearity of events. In addition, I am less interested in “why” questions that tend to assume a certain set of choices exist. Rather, we should investigate how these options and the larger parameters of action become established.

Because humans make sense of the world by navigating the social understandings that make reality knowable, researchers must use interpretive methods to answer these “how” questions. In carrying out my research, I focus in various ways on language, ideas, and culture, particularly as they contribute to the creation of structures of knowledge during specific historical moments. Thus, I work at a fairly macrolevel, which, admittedly, limits my ability to understand and investigate issues of agency. But because microlevel analyses usually ignore the effects of discourses as structures of meaning, I am skeptical that such attempts at causal explanation offer better analyses (see, for example, Checkel in this Forum).

In this essay, I discuss the various theoretical and methodological issues I encountered while researching my dissertation on Congolese identity, which was later published as *Imagining the Congo* (Dunn 2003). First, I deal with two basic questions: (1) what do I mean by historical representations and (2) why is it important to study representation? The rest of the essay is dedicated to a frank discussion of how one carries out this type of research while avoiding possible pitfalls. Using a historical “thick” description is useful for gathering and analyzing data, I argue, but it is not without limitations. In this discussion, I focus on four issues: parameters, sources, data collection, and analysis.

Representation and Interpretation

My interest in historical representations flows from my epistemological assumptions, which are grounded in post-modernist/post-structuralist thought. In effect, “reality” is unknowable outside human perception, and there is never only one authority on a given subject. As Friedrich Nietzsche noted, “there are no facts in themselves. It is always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be a fact” (quoted in Barthes 1981:15). This position does not deny the existence of reality, but the “true” essence of the object is always unknowable to us. Therefore, we must interpret representations of it.

The object of our inquiry, representation X, can be anything at all: a country (the Congo), a nation or community (the Kurds), a person (Saddam Hussein), or a concept (sovereignty). Societies discursively produce, circulate, and consume representations of X, constructing what are often called “regimes of truth” or “knowledge.” Perhaps the best-known example of this approach is Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* in which he exposed how British and French societies constructed “truth claims” about the supposed innate and inferior qualities of non-white, non-Christian, “Oriental” people.

Given that all we have to work with are discourses that represent reality, I am primarily concerned with how names, meanings, and characteristics are attached to the world around us. I focus on the “mechanics” of knowledge and identity and how they differ across time and space. For instance, understanding that this is a “tree,” that is a “book,” and that I am a “man” presumes access to a structure of knowledge about objects such as trees, books, and men. But these naming practices might mean something different (or perhaps nothing at all) to people living in different cultures or historical eras. A tree might be a natural resource to be preserved, a commodity to be harvested, a living soul force to be honored, or an embodiment of the spirits of the dead to be worshiped.

Representations are inventions based on language, but they are not neutral or innocuous signifiers. Because they enable actors to “know” the object and to act upon what they “know,” representations have very real political implications. Certain paths of action become possible within distinct discourses, while other paths become unthinkable. For example, consider two photos that circulated in the media in the aftermath of the flooding in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The first showed a couple chest-high in water with bags full of groceries. The caption stated that this couple had “found” food. The second photo was of a similar scene, a woman chest-high in water with a bag full of groceries, but she was identified as a “looter.” This disparity generated much attention because the “finders” were Caucasian, while the “looter” was African American. But beyond the racial elements at work here, these representations enabled and justified certain actions. Police, for instance, would be expected to assist the couple and to arrest or even shoot the single woman. Thus, discursive practices created a truth-effect—“a doing, an activity and a normalized thing in society, one enjoining activity and conformity” (Brown 2005:63)—that shaped the possibilities for action.

Because some representations become accepted as “true” and others do not, it is important to ask how certain structures of knowledge become dominant. Particular meanings and identities are widely accepted, or “fixed,” not because of any inherent “truth” but because of the strength of that specific representation. Who constructs knowledge and truth claims, for what purposes, and against what resistance? Representations are rarely the exclusive product of the object itself, even if it has agency, such as a state (Congo) or an individual (Saddam Hussein). External forces are constantly at play, seeking to select, plot, and interpret the events and meanings by which identities are represented. As Said (1978) noted, the dominant knowledge of “the Orient” was a creation of the European imperial imagination. With its representations repeated over and over again in Western

literature, government publications, and advertisements, Orientalism became authoritative knowledge.

With regard to agency, this approach assumes that people are guided to act in certain ways and not others by their discursively produced understanding of the world and their place in it. It rejects arguments that actors are motivated by inherent (universal) interests, rational means-ends preferences, or even internalized norms and values. That is, historical representations establish preconditions and parameters for the possibility of action rather than explaining why certain choices are made. For example, it helps a researcher understand the range of options imaginable to President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but it does not explain why he made specific decisions (Weldes 1999). To examine individual decision making, one would need to use other methods.

Yet, even though there may be methodological compatibility among those of us writing in this Forum, as suggested by Klotz and Lynch in their piece, there is a clear epistemological divide on the issue of causality. As Checkel notes in his discussion, the process-tracing approach relies on an epistemological disposition that “only works if you hold things constant in a series of steps: A causes B; B then causes C; C then causes D; and so on.” Although I believe that microlevel analyses like Checkel’s are useful in understanding agency in ways that my own macrolevel approach is unable to do, I remain unconvinced that we can offer causal explanations. The world is far too complex, complicated, and contingent to be studied with any degree of certainty. My post-positivist approach is based on “a logic of interpretation that acknowledges the improbability of cataloguing, calculating, and specifying ‘real causes’” (Campbell 1993:7–8).

So how does one make this sort of contingent interpretation? My own work on the Congo assumed that representational practices are embedded in historical social narratives. Therefore, I combined discourse analysis and historical research to examine struggles over the articulation and circulation of competing narratives. Each of the actors claimed dominant authorship but, obviously, some of the voices were reproduced more than others, giving them greater “weight.”

To explore the complexities of the discursive production required me to engage with a wide and diverse spectrum of sources and authors. During the 1960s, for instance, the Congo was rewritten on the floor of the UN General Assembly by representatives from the Soviet Union, newly independent African states (most notably Ghana and Guinea), Belgium, and the United States, all competing to present their narrative of events. Within the Congo, multiple voices—president, prime minister, future coup leader, secessionist leader, local media, citizenry groups, members of the army—articulated either a Congolese national identity or a regional, substate identity. Competing narratives also circulated in international and regional media, pamphlets and fliers passed around at political meetings across the globe, government pronouncements from Western and African capitals, best-selling novels, fictional and documentary films, and the “bush” of the Congolese jungle.

Interpretation requires not just a description of these particular representations and representational practices, but a deeper contextualization within the larger structures of meaning of which they are a part. Without going into the theoretical and philosophical debates within the discipline of history (for example, White 1978; Barthes 1981), let me merely point out that I believe historians produce their own “regimes of truth,” not objective “truth,” which means that both primary and secondary sources should be treated as texts to be decoded and deconstructed. Moreover, it means a distinction is required between empiricism as a *method* (skills of verification, close textual attention, proper sourcing, referencing, and so on) and as a *philosophy of knowledge* (the illusion of delivering fact, truth, and a knowable reality). Although I (and other “post-modern historians”) value the former, we reject the latter.

I find Clifford Geertz's (1973) "thick description" a useful label for this type of deeply contextualized historical analysis. In particular, I have found the "long conversation" concept of historical anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (1991) to be a useful way of understanding the historic contestation over representations. In their work on the colonial contact between the Tswana peoples of South Africa and British Christian missionaries, the Comaroffs (1991:198–199) define the "long conversation" as "the actions and interactions that laid the bases of an intelligible colonial discourse." They argue that there were two faces to this conversation between the colonizer and the colonized: what was talked *about* and the struggle to gain mastery over the *terms* of the encounter. I believe that representations are historically produced within similar "long conversations" in which multiple actors have come together to contest the meanings of those identities and the terms through which they are expressed.

I believe, however, that there is a third dimension to the "long conversation," overlooked by the Comaroffs: the struggle over finding and creating an acceptable position or space within the conversation. Specifically, this refers to the ability to access "discursive space" within which to engage in the conversation. As Michel Foucault (1984) has noted, discourses empower certain people to speak and act. Delineating and policing discursive space has been an important element in international relations, especially for disadvantaged Third-World states like the Congo. At times, international discursive space has been actively closed off to competing and counter-hegemonic discourses. For example, Western governments not only intervened directly to deny the seating of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba's United Nations delegation but also his access to the radio station in his country's capital. Both of these actions effectively limited his ability to articulate and circulate his narratives of Congolese identity.

Let me reiterate that I am not arguing that the existence or absence of a specific historical representation offers a causal explanation, largely because these representations are historically contingent. For example, the image of Congolese "inherent savagery" (a familiar Western trope) engendered intervention and colonial conquest in the late nineteenth century: "bringing civilization to the savages." But this same representation enabled Western policies of inaction and indifference regarding the Congo a century later: "violence is due to their innate barbarism and tribalism, so there is nothing we can do about it." This example illustrates the need for sensitivity to historical context, while also underscoring the point that the way certain structures of knowledge are constructed engenders what policies are possible. Representations do not cause policies such as intervention or explain choices to intervene at one time rather than another.

Practical Advice for Dealing with Data and Avoiding Potential Pitfalls

There are several steps to this method, each with its logistical challenges. I will discuss some of these along four general lines: establishing the parameters of a doable project, selecting appropriate sources of data, collecting those data, and analyzing them. But let me preface my comments by pointing out that there is almost always an arbitrary element in case selection. Many cases may actually work just as well. Basic language limitations also matter: if you do not speak or read the language that most of the data are in, you should probably find another case. Or there simply might not be enough information out there to find. So, some of the choices are made for you. But others you do make for yourself, and you should be honest about why you make these decisions. My comments here aim to help researchers understand the intellectual justifications that underpin the choices involved in historical analysis of representations.

Establishing Parameters

It is easy to get overwhelmed by a topic that is just too unwieldy. I find it useful to pick a very narrow, specific topic that allows me to explore much larger issues. For my dissertation, for example, I chose to examine how the Congo had been represented within the international community, beginning with its colonial conquest up to the current civil war. This case study let me explore not only issues of colonialism and neocolonialism but also the social construction of sovereignty, the performativity of stateness, repression and resistance, and the decline of the Westphalian state system.

However, telling the definitive story of how the Congo has been imagined over the past century would be an overwhelming task, filling numerous volumes. To make my project doable, I focused on four historical moments: (1) the colonial “invention” of the Congo at the end of the nineteenth century, (2) its decolonization in 1960, (3) its reinvention as “Zaire” during the 1970s, and (4) the “return” of the Congo at the end of the twentieth century. During each of these four periods, the identity of the Congo was being contested with numerous forces attempting to produce and attach meanings to its territory and people. These forces sought to create “regimes of truth” about the Congo by defining and inscribing its identity. As Klotz and Lynch note in their contribution to this Forum, this type of approach stresses historical contingency with a focus on ruptures and disjunctures.

I originally wanted to have six historical moments but found that would have required more time and effort than was reasonable. Likewise, I wanted to have one of my historical moments focus on the Ali-Foreman “Rumble in the Jungle,” but I soon realized that there were strong intellectual reasons to include that case beyond it simply being cool—let me stress that, if there had not been a larger justification, being “cool” would not have cut it. When examining historical representations, what matters most is selecting points at which forces are seeking to create regimes of truth about the object of inquiry, representation X, by defining and inscribing its meaning.

Sources of Data

When I talk about “data,” I am first and foremost referring to textual representations: attempts to fix the meanings of my object of inquiry, representation X. This tends to be done by numerous actors. When researching the construction of Congolese identity, I engaged empirical data from a broad array of sources. Discourse analysis requires using multiple texts given that “a single source cannot be claimed to support empirically arguments about discourse as a social background” (Milliken 1999:233). Although the majority came from the “official” realm of government reports, speeches, and documents, I also drew from journalists, travel literature, academic treatises, fiction, film, museum displays, art, images, maps, and other “popular” texts. These latter texts often provide the most vivid and potent examples of the techniques through which Third-World subjects have been narrated by Western hegemonic powers. For many outside observers, including politicians, these are the sources that have provided the primary framework within which the Congo has been made “knowable.” As David Newbury (1998) pointed out, many Westerners are intellectually uninformed about the Congo but are so inundated by stereotypical images that they feel they have a well-defined cognitive framework. Novels such as *Heart of Darkness*, films such as *Congo*, and cartoons such as *Tintin in the Congo* constitute the basic discursive structure through which many Westerners view the Congo even today.

Different topics will, of course, mean engaging in different sources of data. But I firmly believe in casting the net wide, mainly because our structures of knowledge derive from a variety of sources. Therefore, sources to consider include (but are by

no means limited to) speeches by political leaders and elites, government records and public announcements, private writings of political elites, popular fiction, nonfiction, newspapers, magazines, music, cartoons, music, television, and the Internet. I will discuss the “weighting” of various data below, but for now I think it is important to begin with an open mind. A popular text (that is, a text with wide circulation such as a presidential speech, popular movie, or well-known photograph) will clearly be important in the process of structuring meaning. But more obscure texts (those that have a much more limited circulation, like an academic article or poem by an unknown writer) are often still important, if for no other reason than they represent an alternative to the dominant discourse.

In many cases, the researcher may be faced with data overload, a problem I frequently encountered when carrying out my Congo research. For example, when investigating historical representations of the Congo at the time of independence, I was simply swamped with what often seemed to be relevant data—from *National Geographic* articles to innumerable political cartoons from the European press to an endless slew of official pronouncements from various governments. If I did not make hard decisions about what would count and what would not (such as limiting my review of newspapers and news magazines to a handful), there is no doubt that I would still be researching today (and in some ways I still am!). This gets back to my earlier point about setting parameters: I had to make tough decisions in order to make my project doable, and I had to have solid intellectual reasons for making those decisions. (I tried to be as honest and transparent about such decisions as I could.) Therefore, all of my conclusions are tentative and tenuous at best. But I believe that is the nature of carrying out qualitative research.

Collecting Data

I often combine archival work in historical records with interviews and investigations of popular culture texts. These three sources can each provide their own unique problems. Despite my emphasis on narrowing down potential sources, scarcity of data can also be an issue, given that gaining access to data can be challenging.

The “official” data relevant for an examination of historical representations are found in a number of places from libraries to the Internet, but most often in government archives. Without meaning to state the obvious, not all archives are the same. The British National Archive is extremely well organized, with the entire catalogue accessible from the web. But some countries have, shall we say, a different culture about sharing state records. The Belgian archive was very difficult for me to access; indeed, I was denied entry on several occasions. Or, maybe no organized archives exist to house the historical material you are interested in investigating. For example, King Leopold II burned almost all the documents associated with his rule in the Congo immediately before handing control over to the Belgian government. (Fortunately, the Belgian foreign ministry had their own copies of many of the torched documents.) Archives in the developing world often are not as organized, accessible, and user friendly as those in the developed world, often for good reasons—ranging from a healthy (and sometimes well founded) suspicion of Western researchers to the impoverishment of state infrastructures due to global inequalities. Sometimes, state officials are not even aware of the existence of archives even though they may be in the same building—an experience that I have encountered on more than one occasion. And it is usually safe to assume that your time in the archive will take longer than you expect.

Access to popular culture can also be difficult or simply impossible. For example, I had no idea how to go about accessing texts from Congolese society in the late-eighteenth century. Therefore, I only examined examples of Western fiction and nonfiction writing, from travelogues by colonial explorers and tourists to popular

novels by Conrad and Graham Greene. Again, I examined the ways the Congo was discursively represented: as an empty landscape waiting for Western conquest (Stanley)? As a primordial *Heart of Darkness* that corrupted civilized Europeans (Conrad)? These were powerful and evocative images that have been reused and circulated frequently over time. I also looked at the representations of the Congo in the popular press, focusing on the major newspapers in Belgium, the United States, and France, including major magazines of the day, such as *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*. I also found it useful to examine how the Congo was portrayed in music, movies, television, and cartoons (a highly fruitful source of data for multiple reasons). Museums, world exhibitions, and public spaces (such as public statues and commemorative arches in Brussels) provided additional rich source material. Although by no means a comprehensive sample of how the Congo was portrayed in the Western popular imagination, drawing on the myriad of textual and visual forms by which actors attempt to articulate, circulate, and fix meanings compensates for inevitable limitations in any particular source of data.

Another potential limitation is language proficiency. The representations of the Congo exist in numerous languages. For example, there are several major languages in the Congo itself (for example, French, Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo, Tshiluba), while its colonial ruler, Belgium, has three official languages—none of which are my native tongue. This has meant that countless relevant texts went unstudied by me simply because I could not understand them. And even when I could, I suspect my language skills were not proficient enough to capture subtle meanings, allusions, and jokes, which is a serious problem. Focusing on material only available in your native tongue greatly limits your observations. In the end, I tried to acknowledge these limitations, avoid any overly grand claims, and recognize the narrow focus of my work.

Interviews provide more challenges than I have room here to discuss fully. Gaining access to subjects can often be difficult. Again, language limitations can also be problematic. For instance, I often used an interpreter and relied on him to translate accurately the words and meanings of the speaker, which is often extremely hard to do. My being a white male also raises gender and racial problems that can often color the exchange. And, of course, interview subjects may simply be untruthful for numerous reasons.

Analyzing Data

So what do you look for in the data? First, I try to identify the different discourses engaged in representing X at that given moment. Specifically, I am looking for the ways these actors represent the object of inquiry. What type of language do they use when referring to it? What adjectives, illustrations, metaphors, and comparisons do they make? For example, at the time of Congolese independence, how did Western leaders in Belgium and the United States portray the country, its inhabitants, and its leaders?

Second, I chart the contestation of these discourses. For instance, why did the Belgian and US presses portray the Congo in different—although equally negative—ways at independence? Who is engaged in the articulation and circulation of these alternative discourses? What is potentially at stake for these actors? Why do certain discourses emerge as socially dominant but others do not? What are the social and political strategies involved in that contestation? How are these discourses being consumed and by whom?

Third, I historicize and contextualize these representations and discourses within the larger structures of meaning of which they are a part. For example, US representations of the Congo during its independence were situated within a larger Cold War discursive framework, whereas Belgian representations were part of a longer colonially inspired framework. Sensitivity to history and context allowed me

to observe how portrayals of the Congo changed over time. Here is where I also realized how much the “official” sources were informed by “popular” structures of knowledge. During the 1960 crisis surrounding Congolese independence, Western political elites frequently used texts, metaphors, and images from popular culture, ranging from *Tarzan* movies to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* to contemporary magazines and cartoons. The reason for this, of course, is simple. The structures of knowledge in a society are as much a product of “popular” culture as they are of “political” culture. The dichotomy between the two is an illusion that obscures more than it reveals.

Finally, I explore how the dominant discourses enable certain policies and practices to become possible. That is, what becomes thinkable, and what does not? For example, the Eisenhower administration’s eventual declaration that there was a Congolese problem and that Lumumba was the source of that problem had clear political implications, namely, the authorization of his assassination by the US Central Intelligence Agency. This action was only thinkable because of the representations generated during this time (with their strong historical roots).

Conclusions and Implications

I believe our engagement with the world is based on interpretation. As I noted at the outset, I do not believe the world presents itself to us as self-evident. As human beings, we make sense of the world around us through the social construction of the meanings, characteristics, and “truth” that make reality “knowable.” There is no way to step outside interpretation. There is no objective Truth to discover; only competing interpretations to navigate.

Given that my epistemological position is open to the criticism that it leads to relativism and raises questions about the role of the researcher in the interpretive process, let me respond. I do not believe it is possible to strive for some mythical goal of objectivity because no such *terra firma* exists. Therefore, I recognize that I am not neutral and am not too concerned with charges of interpretive bias. But are there ways to decide what counts as “good” analysis? I believe there are. For me, there are two important issues to consider when judging the validity of one’s interpretation.

First, is there supporting evidence to back up my claims? As researchers, it often seems obvious to us that the bulk of our data is pointing to a certain set of interpretations. Of course, our interpretation of those data is what is leading us to our concluding interpretation. But I believe it is important to have supporting evidence. If I claim that the United States government portrayed the Congo as Y, which thus enabled it to act in Z manner, I need to provide evidence of both Y and Z. If that is not possible, then my claims should be taken as highly speculative. I would argue that this is the reason one needs to carry out as much historical research as possible. But am I slipping rationality and empiricism back in? I reiterate my distinction between empiricism as *method* versus *philosophy of knowledge*. The value that I place on the former does not make my claims “true,” but it does strengthen my ability to argue for their validity.

This leads to my second point: that the validity of one’s interpretation can be measured by its logical coherence does not imply that there is an objective measure of logical coherence (in contrast to a rational choice approach, for instance). Put simply, I am interested in whether or not my conclusions make sense to me. Do they provide a reasonable answer for the questions I was trying to answer? If not, then I try again. Does such a position lead to relativism? Absolutely. My goal as a researcher is to provide an argument about why my interpretation is valid, so that I can convince others that mine is one of the best interpretations out there. In a very real sense, I am constructing my own representation of the representations I am studying. I am very much part of the process of knowledge construction that

I am investigating. With my work, I am constructing my own discourses. And because I want them to gain social dominance, I am concerned that my conclusions convince other people.

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