Dear colleagues,

Fair warning: I am not a social scientist, but a humanist from so liminal a field that it is less interdisciplinary than undisciplined. So this will be a magpie’s response, picking out some of the bits that attracted me from these enormously rich pieces, and arranging them in dubious collage with a few of the things in my existing collection, all pasted together with reckless generalization—more fun for me than useful for you, I fear. However--

STALKING THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLE.

Vulgar culturalists (and clearly no one here remotely approaches that category) on both right and left have lately been exalting the Margaret Mead-era culture concept: culture as worldview inside people’s heads, assimilating all inputs into the system or rejecting them outright. Culture—in such discourses equated with identity—is all-determining and invulnerable to dialogue; it endureth forever; it is the archetypal independent variable.

Abdelal, Herrera et al. recognize this sort of essentializing as a problem, and they propose that different methods can provide different kinds of “snapshots” of identity at a given moment, allowing it to be stabilized as an independent variable. Klotz also wants to argue that norms have autonomy, equated with causality.

I’m not well-positioned to make sense of this, for when you have folklore as your field and Catalonia as your area there comes a moment when you just have to give up on independence. (Would it be too much to suggest that only a hegemonic discipline can afford to indulge this sort of fantasy, about variables or anything else?) So I am more at ease with Fierke’s approach, such as her observation that norms and socialization have reciprocal effects over time. There are no independent variables in such a reading; everything is contextual, interacting, and interdependent. That includes, we should add, society itself, which Fierke’s account I think tends to ontologize—Klotz’s emphasis on multiple communities and their fluidity is a useful corrective here. Abdelal et al. too, along with much of the constructivist literature I’ve seen, tend to naturalize the group that debates its identity, but it’s those very processes of self-definition (or definition imposed from outside, of course) that erect boundaries around a particular network cluster and reify it into a group (cf. Noyes 1995).

To be sure, we have to reduce social reality in order to talk about it at all, and some variables are no doubt less dependent than others. So how do we reduce identity? Abdelal et al. take a very intelligent, pragmatic approach, calling for the methods best suited to the task at hand. They acknowledge both the variety of content that can be declared as identity, and the often high degrees of contestation over such content. Their solution is to seek “snapshots” of identity in particular moments or situations; following Robert Cox, they look for the moment of fixity that lend themselves to social scientific
analysis. I’d like to hear more about the results of such analyses: would they too be snapshots, limited in their validity or generalizability? There is hard work to save a paradigm here—but are not our authors at war with the nature of the phenomenon?

I don’t have a solution, but two suggestions for exploration. One: to see what would happen if we defined identity not as a cohesive focus, but—putting content and contest together—as a field of tensions. (Members often do this themselves: a famous Catalan self-definition is seny i rauxa, measured social prudence and ferocious surrender to individual impulse.) There are a few promising models out there, most often seeking to find a higher logic in the cultural divisions of a class society: Labovian sociolinguistics, Bourdieu’s sociology of fields. More relevant to IR, in many societies there’s a reciprocal projection of domestic and international fields onto each other, as in 18th century Spain, 19th c Germany and Russia, and as Ted and Klotz have respectively shown so well, Russia and South Africa today.

Even the notion of a field has certain inflexibilities—it’s reification at a higher level and not always appropriate, especially in a highly plural society—or a multipolar global order. So the other thing to do is to recognize that group members themselves are deeply into the reification business, and to treat their discourses, etc., not as snapshots revealing something that is there beforehand but as representations constructed to win adherents, intimidate rivals, etc. That is, manifestations of identity are not expressive but rhetorical (more below). Would-be group leaders—national, ethnic, religious, whatever—work very hard to create the kinds of fixity and objectivity that are amenable to social-scientific analysis, using whatever media lie conveniently to hand and provide the legitimation of the moment: epic poems, dictionaries and grammars, monuments, history textbooks, value surveys, archaeological remains, genomes, etc. They are drooling to have their identity accorded the status of an independent variable—but, as Bourdieu explains, codification is not the same as the practice upon which it draws (1990). And as we all know, when we scratch culturalist assertions of untranslatability, primordiality, etc., we find enormous insecurity: the erection of walls against foreign influences, the establishment of canons and rules to fight entropy, etc. We represent identity as impenetrable out of the fear that it is anything but. Social science methods need to work with these in-group representations instead of trying to work around them.

Linguistic anthropologists have been doing especially interesting work in coming to terms with all this lately. There has been a shift of figure and ground such that flux is now assumed to be the norm, and fixity the special case that must be interrogated. The prototype for a “normal” linguistic situation is today not the homogeneous national language, but the creole community. One study of the Caribbean gives up on the notion of languages altogether, saying there are only “acts of identity” drawing selected dimensions of the local linguistic resources into a temporarily crystallized coherence (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). (Compare Foucault on ancient sexualities: there are no homosexual identities, only homosexual acts—but they are trying to get at the transition from one to the other.) A slightly less radical historical approach looks at how discourse—and the identities it constructs—moves in and out of phases of fixity, and the strategies by which it can be stabilized and made authoritative (Silverstein and Urban eds. 1996).

NORMS, FORMS, AND BODIES
In urging attention to in-group reifications/codifications etc., I’m following the current humanist agnosticism towards the culture concept: we are more comfortable talking about forms in the world than norms in the head. It’s surprising to me, actually, that a certain kind of positivism is so wedded to a notion of culture as worldview, inherently not amenable to observation and thus necessitating an extraordinary machinery of questionnaire design and regression equations and—well, all the parts of the presentations at Mershon during which the humanists’ minds begin to wander—to bring it into visible being.

Amid present company, I hasten to add, there has been no such wandering, and I see that I am going to have to start taking norms and rules much more seriously. I do wonder, however, whether older disciplinary habits of mind have not had an influence on a certain libidinal deficit in the treatments of identity here. I work in mostly face-to-face communities and of course the dynamic is different, but there identity is all about how things smell and tunes you can’t get out of your head and the particular configuration of your objects of desire. Larger-scale identities, when they work, feed off of these local experiences, and this isn’t just the age-old use of folklore in the service of nationalism: surely the norm of racial equality in Africa, among whites or blacks, is intimately energized by memories of face-to-face encounters.

Abdelal et al. enumerate possible identity contents as norms, comparisons, models, and purposes. None of these categories necessarily omits the outward and visible forms of culture or the inner habits and passions of the lower body, but they are nonetheless what anthropologists would call a bit—mental. By the same token, there is a method the authors do not take into account: participant observation, or ethnography. As many of us practice it, it’s not easy to talk of ethnography as a method, in the sense of a design imposed upon the knowledge process: ethnography is surrender to the norms, forms, and bodies of others and that is the source of the unpredictable knowledge it produces. (This is not to say that ethnography is pure irrationality—for a useful discussion see Fabian 1994.) So it fits less neatly into their conspectus, but there are aspects of identity one just doesn’t come to any other way—see for example Joseba Zulaika’s work on Basque violence (ca. 1989). (I am waiting, by the way, for Ted to come out of the closet as an ethnographer—it seems to me his interest in habit, for example, doesn’t come from discourse analysis alone).

RECOGNITION, THE AS-IF, AND THE VIRTUES OF HYPOCRISY

Now let me try to come to terms with Klotz on norms. I want to emphasize her very important discussion of reputation within community, and take it further. The dynamic she describes around international sanctions for apartheid sounds very much like the court of Louis XIV as described by La Rochefoucauld. Virtue is the currency of social recognition, and may or may not exist beneath the displays thereof. “What we take for virtues are often only a collection of diverse actions and interests arranged by our luck or our industry, and it is not always through valor or chastity that men are valiant and that women are chaste.” “Good advice is something a man gives when he is too old to set a bad example.” “It is truly to be an honnête homme to wish to live always under the gaze of honest people.” “We confess our little faults to persuade people that we have no large
ones.” “To establish oneself in the world, one has to do all one can to appear established.” “If we had no faults of our own, we would not take so much pleasure in noticing those of others.” “Few are agreeable in conversation, because each thinks more of what he intends to say than of what others are saying, and listens no more when he himself has a chance to speak.” “Hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue.”

None of this is as cynical as it sounds on first hearing: the French moralists arguably show that it takes a world of appearances to foster the realities—and Fierke’s discussion of the power of behavior “as if” is crucial here. Hypocrisy is socially useful—it is the general observance that sustains a norm and gives it an opportunity to become authentic. In fact, we need to avoid not just the realist approach seeing norms as pure camouflage but the vulgar culturalist approach seeing them as rules in the head. The institutionalists seem to have it right here, as Klotz says. Norms are consequential when they are externalized and reified in institutions. Then they can be used to call actors to account, and then they undergo the constant reiteration that allows them to become generalized habits in the head as well.

In fact, even prior to institutionalization, norms are forms—and here the realist insistence on behavior over discourse isn’t so far wrong, if we’re not careful about what we mean by discourse. Communication is behavior too, not unmediated expression of what is within. Norms exist in their observance, not only in action but in discourse. Cf. Judith Butler on gender as performance—what maintains gender as a system is less that I believe myself to possess genuinely feminine qualities than that I do not attempt to grow a beard. In the present tense, there is certainly a qualitative difference for all concerned between sincerely believing in racial equality and sincerely wanting sanctions to be lifted and behaving as if one believed in racial equality. But might not the long term result come to pretty much the same thing either way? (Yes, it’s an empirical question.)

Moreover, while black Zimbabweans, let’s say, were undoubtedly genuinely outraged by apartheid, that doesn’t prevent it from also being true that an international norm of equality will conduce over time to greater consideration and clout for themselves. We need not reduce all norms to disguised interest to recognize that norms and material interest are likely to develop in close mutual relationship. As Bernard Shaw said, “There is no love sincerer than the love of food”; and Abdelal et al. are right, I think, in pointing to a feedback loop between instrumentality and authenticity.

Klotz is subtle in her dissociation of norms from material interest, and she does not limit norms to ethical positions. But she picks an exceptional case rather than a typical one, one in which norms are unusually visible, autonomous, and, if you will, pure—dictating behavior in clear opposition to short-term (but arguably not to long-term) material interest. I’d like to see her attack a more “normal” situation next—say the recent Eastern European responses to the US/”Old Europe” split—in which norms and interests are so thoroughly entangled that all of us should question our own motivations as much as we attack those of others.

To motivations, then, and here is one place for Don’s psychological concerns to come in. Reputation, which Klotz argues is key to a regime of norms, is about existing to others. While norms have constraining power, they are arguably not the primary motivating force for most actors, as La Rocheffoucauld reminds us: a key motivating force is the desire for social belonging and recognition.
Coercion carries very high costs; coercion is also stressful for the coercer as well as the coerced. The powerful would usually like to be loved as well as feared (why do they hate us? we wail); the disempowered would usually like to be respected and welcomed, not just tolerated. Accommodation to a group norm can result from both positions (and of course there’s often deception and self-deception involved in its practice). Elites claim to be acting for the general good and must make a reasonably convincing demonstration of doing so; marginal actors make concessions to show themselves responsible community members (Italian communists, Catalan nationalists, etc.). Each side, however ambiguous their actions, reproduces and further entrenches the norm.

Recognition is both a psychological need of individual actors and a material need—an interest-based need in the usual sense—of state actors. The intertwining of these two kinds of recognition-seeking in the behavior of leaders seems like a rich area for study—I think of Lebow and Stein on the interplay of personal and national insecurities in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Again, we can look at the Eastern Europeans over the last few months: their desire to become players in both NATO and Europe, their embrace of democratic liberation as a norm, their hope of postwar contracts, their conspicuous performances of political maturity in the face of Chirac’s petulance—or, by contrast, the posture of Fox and the Mexicans towards the Iraq war in relation to their resentment at having been seduced and abandoned by the Bush administration.

A methodological suggestion implicit in Klotz’ very interesting discussion is that to understand how norms work in a community setting we really need to focus not on the great powers but on the mid-level actors. (Compare the finding of Labov’s sociolinguistics or Bourdieu’s sociology that the principal agents of change are the hypercorrecting lower middle class.) IR should be looking more carefully at countries like Spain or Mexico or Turkey or Poland, and—to get at this interaction of norms and interests in identity formation—at countries in transition seeking to position themselves amid a range of possible communities. What do the wannabes want to be, and how do they choose among their plausible options?

POLITICAL AND SCHOLARLY PERFORMANCES

Fierke’s two articles are so conceptually rich that I could take them paragraph by paragraph, and I urge you all to do this yourselves: instead, I’ll try to speak to the most general issues raised.

The “Links” article does a great service, in my view, by making visible the role of language in even the most positivist social science work—there, indeed, above all, an ideology of language is essential (and much of the recent work on linguistic ideologies from anthropology and the more historical branch of science studies—Steven Shapin etc.—should be of interest to your field). I’ve often been frustrated at Mershon lectures by listening to quite sophisticated people to whom it never occurs that language might not be a perfectly transparent vehicle for getting from, say, individual psychology to public political behavior—and in this case what disappears along with language is society.

Fierke turns to Wittgenstein for assistance in describing the transition in political science from a positivist assumption of language as picture of the world to a
constructivist assumption of language as game negotiated between actors—with certain theorists getting a bit lost in the middle. I’d like to praise her attention (and, I gather, Doty’s) to the history of political relationships, as opposed to Wendt’s—I must say truly bizarre—“first encounters” on Planet Theory. I’d encourage her to pay attention to Bakhtin as well as Wittgenstein as she thinks about history and dialogue; I’ll return in the last section to the idea that we are not free to construct anything whatsoever.

The abyss between picture and game could be bridged by exploring a third analogy: language as drama. (Mind you, I am not suggesting abandoning the other analogies—they all have their uses; cf. Geertz 1983.) I draw here, of course, on Kenneth Burke’s dramaturgy (1945), in which he analyzes both the figurative language of literature and the theoretical language of social science as staging devices that declare contexts, assign roles and responsibility to actors, attempt to set up narrative outcomes, and so on. I’d also urge you all to explore James Fernandez’ related work on metaphor as predication of concrete features upon inchoate situations so that they can be staged and manipulated (1986). The drama analogy has a dynamism lacking in the picture, and it’s perhaps easier for us to grasp the constructed character of a play than that of a photograph: we see the stage machinery, we recognize the actors from other productions, we groan at the too-familiar devices of a given playwright (or theorist), and so on. But drama is nonetheless representation, as the Romance words for performance remind us—and here it has a power lacking in the game analogy, which too easily suggests a self-contained situation. Political struggles are, after all, about something. We cannot represent transparently or adequately or disinterestedly, but that doesn’t mean we’re not trying.

The dominant paradigm among sociolinguists, folklorists, and anthropologists since the 1970s has been performance: a notion that unites representation and action (or interaction), and allows some slippage between drama and game in our modelling of social encounters. Though this imprecision is inelegant, it does capture a lot of what goes on. And I’d suggest that the dramaturgical analogy might allow Fierke to address the UNSCOM crisis with a more economical conceptual vocabulary, building on her fine discussion of “as-if” behavior.

Some minor observations first—skip two paragraphs if you are bored:

Fierke asks, I think, about the consequences for the analyst of assuming monologue vs. assuming interaction. But we could also ask the consequences for the actors. Is the US these days simply not hearing certain responses? Certainly it is refusing I-thou relationships to a large number of potential interlocutors and reducing most of the world to a third-person “it” (Buber is still very much worth reading on dialogue). In general, I’d be interested to see her think more about the similarities or differences between actors’ and analysts’ language games, especially given that political actors and analysts have such a wide zone of contact in the world of policymaking.

Some thoughts about acting as if. There’s a lovely study of child language acquisition by Jerome Bruner (1983), showing that mothers treat the unformed utterances of children as if they had meaning and respond to them as such. From this pattern of response the child eventually catches on to the consequentiality of her utterance and begins to grasp first the principle of dialogue and next the principle of representation through language. To be sure, in the recent inspections the French and others were looking for any evidence of Iraqi action and calling it compliance, and it’s not clear that
such a strategy would ultimately have drawn Saddam more fully into dialogue. Another puzzle about illocutionary acts: Shoshona Felman writes that when Don Juan tells you he’ll love you forever, he really means it; the problem is just that he gets distracted later (1980). The promise is a real promise, but it’s not kept (Clinton was a politician in this vein—he genuinely felt our pain when he felt it). Saddam certainly entered into negotiations in 97-98—but did his performances lead to anything? Or were the “felicity conditions” inadequate? How would Fierke answer today the U.S. charge that Saddam was “just acting”?

OK—the UNSCOM crisis as drama. Fierke takes on another very important disciplinary problem in this article: that of surprising outcomes. She makes a very clever argument, following Peirce, about the role of abductive reasoning—hypothesis formation spurred by the observation of an anomaly—in bringing about a shift between language games. More things to read: the historian Carlo Ginzburg has made an interesting use of abduction in dealing not with anomaly but with insufficient information—certainly another frequent feature of international political encounters. (See Ginzburg on the “evidentiary paradigm,” 1989, and Muir and Ruggiero for a clearer account of his approach to abduction, 1991.) It’s a valuable addition, I think, because the emphasis on imperfect knowledge can remind us of the need for humility in our hypotheses, keeping us more flexible and open to alternative constructions. Fierke does us all a real service in making us conscious of the role that abduction plays for both political actors and the scholars who study them.

I’m a bit bewildered trying to summarize Fierke’s argument here, but let me translate it into dramaturgical terms: The actors’ typifications of patterns of action in particular contexts we might call stagings, and what we have here is a competition of stagings of the situation. Saddam doesn’t have to infer anything abductively once the US has already done so and declared Saddam a criminal. Saddam simply plays the role in which he’s been cast, as it gives him the best available opportunity for protagonism. The UN, fearful of the likely narrative outcome of such a casting, offers an alternative staging that can change the genre and hopefully bring about a less violent dénouement. This staging wins a wider assent among actors and audience—it gives everyone a way of acting that will win them some applause without demanding that they lie dead on the stage at the end.

Fierke talks of two steps in the process: establishing the game—in which abduction has a place—and playing it; perhaps to be equated with Klotz’ constitutive norms and regulative/procedural norms? Of course these two stages are always recursive and overlapping, and here there has been some interesting thinking in the area of “social drama” by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1981 for a useful summary) about the phases in which a social crisis is defined and manipulated by actors. Turner’s model, developed for a small-scale tribal society, has more recently been revised to address the competition of actor-authors to name and stage situations in societies with more heterogeneous dramaturgical resources (Wagner-Pacifici 1986, 2000; Noyes 2000). Fierke might stress more strongly that it’s not just the observation of an anomaly but the plurality of actors that allows an existing game to be disrupted, and she also needs to think about the importance of validation by an audience: her account sometimes seems to fall into the dyadic thinking of game theory.

Now for the stage itself.
Klotz makes an enormously interesting point: an international regime that legitimates itself through norms creates opportunities for weak actors, whereas those based on market forces or military might are perhaps less easily manipulated from below. In part this is an empirical question, one I’d very much like to see addressed comparatively. But let me play for a moment with its implications. Norms are not a limited good—we can all construct our fill of values and culture and identity, and this levels the international playing field to a certain extent. There’s a dark side, to be sure, to our post-Marxist transcendence of vulgar materialism: the let-them-eat-culture school who declare the problem of inequality solved. (We folklorists have lately had to walk warily in the zone of multicultural policy.) Nonetheless I think James Scott has something when he talks about public languages that create room for maneuver—norms to which the powerful as well as the powerless can be held (1990). Different political language games, in practice or in the scholarship observing it, give the advantage to different actors, and have different material consequences. We need to notice how and when and why language games shift between realism, institutionalism, and constructivism, whether in global or in disciplinary power struggles.

Both epistemologically, as Abdelal et al. point out, and politically, we need all the room for maneuver we can get: plural methods in the service of plural language games. I’d like to see them illustrate some of the possibilities of the methods they delineate: their language of “measurement,” which to me suggests a single quantitative scale, seems less appropriate for their goals than a “how to do things with words” approach showing how different ways of reducing identity to representation allow you to do different things with it analytically.

I’d argue for methodological pluralism grounded in a certain materialism—so I want to ask Klotz not to give up on interests and Fierke not to give up on representation. Yes, we construct our reality, but we construct it out of stuff: inherited languages and narratives and genres and material resources that carry history with them (cf. Bakhtin, and Neumann in this conference on the materiality of discourse). The more resources we command, the more easily we can convince ourselves that we are Lévi-Strauss’s engineers, creating ex nihilo, but we are really all bricoleurs, arranging and rearranging what is there (see also Scott’s latest, 1998). Our performances, political or scholarly, require a stage; they need props, languages, the bodies and voices of actors, the genre conventions that allow us to communicate with an audience and, not least, the audience itself. Insofar as that audience is made up of people with mortal bodies that can prosper, go hungry, be satisfied, undergo torture, or die in battle, we all have a primary commitment, ontological if you will, to a reality out there. Vico and Dilthey were right: the reality humans make for themselves is different. But it is metaphorically and metonymically linked to the world. We need to be aware of our staging devices and not mistake the performance for the world. But without the moorings of some referential relationship between the two, we float in the unbearable lightness of theory.
REFERENCES (a little spotty as I am away from my library)


