Global Cultural Change and the Transnational Campaign to Ban Antipersonnel Landmines: A Research Agenda

By

Andrew Latham

Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science, Macalester College
St. Paul, Minnesota, USA
Latham@macalester.edu

Introduction[1]

Since the end of the Cold War, the international community has devoted considerable energy to negotiating a global prohibition regime for antipersonnel landmines (APMs). Beginning in the early 1990s, these weapons became the focus of a vigorous global campaign involving more than 1000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from over fifty countries. This campaign was initially focused on securing a comprehensive ban on the production, stockpiling, trade and use of APMs at the 1995 Review Conference of the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW). When CCW negotiators failed to agree to such a ban, however, APM negotiations shifted to two new sites: the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and an autonomous negotiating forum called the 'Ottawa Process'. While the CD negotiations quickly stalled, by late 1997 the Ottawa process had resulted in an international agreement, now signed by more than 130 governments, that formally proscribed APMs as a legitimate weapons of war.

How do we account for the evolution of this global prohibition regime? The conventional wisdom focuses on the role international NGOs – especially the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) – and certain states in mobilizing global public opinion in favour of a ban on these weapons.[2] According to this account, pressure to ban landmines began to build in the early 1990s as a result of the political opportunity afforded by the requirement to review the CCW and the vigorous mobilizing of certain 'moral entrepreneurs' who campaigned to 'expose' the 'intrinsic inhumanity' of landmines and to heighten awareness of a 'landmine crisis'. Drawing on international humanitarian law, advocates of a ban were ultimately able to demonstrate to an increasingly concerned global public that landmines were inhumane and that they should therefore be banned. Once this had been accomplished, various grass-roots non-governmental organizations formed around the issue and were subsequently able to lobby many

2. This is the logic underpinning the decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to Jody Williams and the ICBL.

national governments to support a ban. Ultimately, or so the argument runs, these lobbying efforts (facilitated and amplified by the new electronic media environment) resulted in a number of politico-diplomatic initiatives to regulate landmines and landmine use, culminating in the successful conclusion of the Ottawa Treaty negotiations in 1997.[3]

While superficially compelling, however, this explanation is ultimately unpersuasive for at least three reasons. First, given the incontrovertible cruelty of all instruments of warfare, such an argument cannot by itself provide a sufficient explanation for why some weapons (in this case landmines) are invested with a heightened degree of moral opprobrium while others are considered mundane or 'conventional'. Simply stated, there is nothing intrinsic to landmines or other 'inhumane weapons' that renders them (or their use) any more or less 'humane' than any other weapon; for all weapons are cruel and destructive, and in actual battlefield conditions (and representations of the so-called 'Revolution in Military Affairs' notwithstanding) most weapons can be used indiscriminately and in ways that cause needless human suffering. Second, such arguments ultimately shed little light on why inhumane weapons have come to be the focus of global attention in the *1990s*. Weapons such as anti-personnel landmines have been in widespread use throughout most of the twentieth century and during almost all of that time were considered unexceptional (and even militarily indispensable) instruments of warfare. They were certainly not the focus of Western non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament activities, nor was there any widely-shared perception that there existed something which might be called a 'landmine crisis,' despite the fact that such weapons had been used more or less indiscriminately (and with manifestly 'inhumane' consequences) for decades.[4] Finally, arguments focusing on NGO mobilization ignore or under-value the crucially important *independent* leadership role played by certain states in advancing the

---

3.   For an excellent, and quite persuasive, example of this perspective see Richard Price, 'Reversing the Gunsights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Land Mines', *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 3 (Summer 1998), pp. 613-644.

4.   As one ICRC report found, under actual battlefield conditions APMs are almost always used in contravention of international humanitarian law and national doctrine, whether they are used by Western, Third World or insurgent armies. See ICRC, 'Anti-Personnel Landmines – Friend or Foe? A Study of the Military Use and Effectiveness of Anti-Personnel Mines,' document available at www.icrc.org/icrcnews/48da.htm., (28 March 1996); and Andrew Latham, 'The Military Case Against Anti-Personnel Landmines,' *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 26:3 (Spring 1997), pp. 30-31.

cause of a global APM prohibition regime. Historically, it is *not* the case (as some assume) that many of the key states involved in the campaign to ban landmines were persuaded to take the lead as a result of NGO lobbying. Rather, the reverse appears to be the case: many states became responsive to pro-ban NGOs only after they had already opted to adopt a pro-ban posture. To the extent that this is true, it raises the question of how it is that in the aftermath of the Cold War many states (including many which neither use nor suffer from APMs) have come to frame their respective 'national interests' in terms of promoting a landmine prohibition regime where this had not been the case for most of the history of these weapons.

How, then, should the effort to develop a global prohibition regime for landmines be conceptualized? In this paper, I outline a research agenda which argues that it should be understood primarily as a result of changes in the culture of the world polity that took place in the early 1990s. Somewhat more specifically, drawing on the insights of 'constructivism', sociological neo-institutionalism, and critical geopolitics I will advance the following arguments:

C   that in the aftermath of the Cold War, a new hegemonic geopolitical discourse (neoliberalism) has evolved;

C   that this discourse, emerging out of the West but rapidly (if still only partially) institutionalized at the global level, has provided a kind of 'ontological narrative' or 'cultural script' that specifies identities, interests and appropriate forms of conduct for 'responsible members of the international community';

C   that an important element of this new ontological narrative is an exhumed script of 'civilized warfare' that requires 'responsible members of the international community' to demonstrate their commitment to certain standards of 'humane' conduct in times of war (where 'humane' has an historically and culturally specific meaning related to the 'proportional' and 'discriminate' use of force);

C   that the CCW Review Conference and the various diplomatic gatherings associated with the Ottawa Treaty process provided important occasions for enacting the new script; and,

C   that the successful negotiation of a landmine ban in 1997 is largely a result of this performative dynamic.

The language of this argument differs sharply from that found in much of the extant literature (and informal discourse) dealing with the campaign to ban landmines. The conventional view, of course, is rooted in an essentially rationalist ontology that views global politics in terms of the interaction of a variety of concrete political actors (states, firms, NGOs) each of which has 'objective' and self-evident' interests which it purposefully pursues through the more or less utility-maximising selection of means and methods. On this view, the international campaign to ban landmines is understood to be a rational response on the part of purposeful states and NGOs to the objective humanitarian crisis posed by the widespread and indiscriminate use of APMs in protracted social conflicts. This project, however, employs a 'critical constructivist' methodology that is premissed on a very different set of ontological assumptions. To begin with, it does not accept the rationalist premiss that actor identities are given, stable and unproblematic. Rather, it assumes that the agents that comprise the world of international politics are constituted through intersubjective processes of representation and interpretation that both define specific subjects and endow them with (derivative) interests. Second, this project rejects the premiss that state action is rational, purposeful and instrumental. Instead, it takes as its point of departure the view that social action is inherently performative and dramaturgical. In other words, it assumes that state action, rather than deriving from the pursuit of 'objective' interests, is in reality a function of state officials enacting the 'cultural scripts' that are entailed in their socially-constructed representations of the nature of the state. Finally, this project rejects the essentialism that underpins rationalist analyses of technology. Instead, it assumes that material artefacts have no *intrinsic* political meanings or moral valences, but are made politically and morally meaningful through complex processes of interpretation, representation and meaning creation.

Because it is rooted in a critical constructivist framework, the argument advanced in this research project departs in important ways from the conventional understanding of the nature and purpose of the landmine campaign. Perhaps the most fundamental difference in this regard has to do with the ontological status of anti-personnel landmines. The prevailing common-sense view, of course, represents these weapons as 'inherently inhumane' – that is, as being subject to a special degree of opprobrium because of their objective properties or essential qualities. Thus, it is supposed, landmines are not inhumane simply because they cause suffering (presumably all weapons do that), but rather because they are 'indiscriminate', 'disproportionate' (in the sense that the suffering they cause exceeds their military utility) and 'persistent' (a variation on indiscriminate) – all properties that make them self-evidently and qualitatively different from 'conventional' weapons such as machine guns and artillery. As these properties inhere in the very technology of landmines, or so the maximalist version of this argument runs, the problem is not just that these weapons can be *used* in an inhumane fashion (suggesting that their use might be more effectively *regulated*), but that they are *essentially* inhumane (indicating that they must be *banned*).

In contrast to these essentialist arguments, this project is premised on the assumption that artefacts – even military artefacts such as landmines – have a specific history and politics that can be interrogated and explored. Somewhat more specifically, it is based on two interrelated ontological assumptions regarding inhumane weapons in general and landmines in particular. First, the argument is based on the assumption that the category of 'inhumane weapons' is itself a culturally-embedded and historically-produced social construct with no natural, objective or self-evident meaning. As noted above, all weapons are cruel and destructive; and all can be (and most have been) used in ways that would fall within the broad, common-sensical meaning of the word 'inhumane'. From ancient times until today, however, societies have invested certain weapons (usually a small minority of those available) with a special degree of moral odium. This has occurred, not because of the intrinsic inhumanity of these weapons, but because all societies seem to feel compelled to 'humanize', 'civilize' or otherwise limit the institution of war by specifying two broad categories of practice and/or technology: those that are morally acceptable and those that are morally unacceptable. The process of specifying these categories, of course, is both socially- and historically-specific, with different societies, drawing on different cultural resources, constructing their own specific moral

rules regarding the legitimate limits of organized violence. It is these rules, and not the intrinsic properties of certain technologies, that give rise to the specific moral distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate practices/technologies that are operative in any given socio-historical context. Second, the argument assumes that the placing of *particular* weapons systems under one moral sign ('legitimate' or 'conventional') or another ('illegitimate' or 'inhumane') is also an historical and political process. In other words, it assumes that specific weapons do not self-evidently belong in one category or another, but come to be placed under a specific moral sign as a result of a process of interpretation. To be sure, once the defining criteria for each category have been established, some technologies will clearly fall under one moral sign or another. But most technologies are more ambiguous than this, and it is only as a result of what some have called 'strategic framing' (the active process of defining shared interpretations, usually involving moral entrepreneurs) that certain practices/weapons come to be coded as 'inhumane'.[5] A fundamental premiss of this study is that landmines are a military technology that has come to be understood as deserving proscription precisely because of this two-step process of socially constructing the category of 'inhumane weapon' and then framing APMs in such a way that they fall unambiguously within its conceptual purview.

Of course, it would be absurd to imply that inhumane weapons in general and APMs in particular are *nothing more* than social constructs. These weapons all too often inflict very real (and frequently lethal) wounds on all-too-corporeal human beings – a fact that imbues them with an undeniable materiality that precludes any such crude idealist formulation. But, that is not the point being made here. Rather, in arguing that landmines are socially constructed, I am simply making the point that the common sense understanding of these weapons as being invested with particular moral opprobrium is an inherently social process involving interpretation and the construction of meaning. On this view, landmines are now increasingly considered 'intrinsically inhumane', not because of their inherent qualities or characteristics, but because they have been actively and effectively framed

---

5.   Regarding 'strategic framing' see Mayer N. Zald, 'Culture, Ideology and Strategic Framing' in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 261-273.

by certain actors as fitting unambiguously within the socially-defined and historically-specific category of 'inhumane weapons' that is currently operative. It is this, and not some crude *idealism*, that underpins the arguments that follow.

A Research Agenda

This main goal of this project is twofold. To begin with, it will seek to trace historically the constitution and interpretation of global (or, at least, increasingly *globalized*) cultural standards of 'civilized' international behaviour and their corresponding effects upon shared understandings of anti-personnel landmines as instruments of organized violence. In other words, it will attempt to provide a sort of genealogy of the global campaign to ban landmines, tracing the long-term historical evolution of efforts to stigmatize and delegitimize these weapons against the backdrop of periodic changes in the global cultural script defining the nature of 'civilized' or 'responsible' international conduct. As importantly, however, it will also seek to shed some conceptual light on recent (and still ongoing) efforts to stigmatize and ban landmines on the basis of their putative 'inherent inhumanity'. In this connection, the goal is not so much to answer the question 'why have landmines been banned', but rather to address the question 'how has it become possible, indeed common-sensical, for certain states and non-state actors to understand landmines as being "inherently inhumane" and thus deserving of proscription'?

In developing this argument, I will divide my research into five broad areas. The first, outlined in the remainder of this paper, lays out the (constructivist) theoretical framework around which the project will be organized. The second area of research will examine the evolution of the category of 'inhumane weapons', paying particular attention to the historical and mutually constitutive relationship between the discourses of the 'laws of war' on the one hand and the politico-cultural identities of 'Christendom', 'Europe' and (most recently) 'the West' on the other. Against the conventional wisdom that the category of inhumane weapons corresponds directly to a genre of armament set apart from more 'conventional' forms of weaponry by virtue of certain objective properties, the argument made here will be that the definition and codification of the category of inhumane weapons is largely a by-product of European efforts to performatively affirm (to themselves at least) their collective belief that Europe was the very embodiment of certain standards of civilized international conduct. As scholars such as Gerrit Gong and Mark Salter have

convincingly demonstrated, by the end of the 19th century Europeans political elites had come to view the world as comprising 'civilized', 'barabarian', and 'savage' societies with Europe occupying the position of both the apotheosis and arbiter of the community of 'civilized' nations. The argument that will be developed is that once this self-representation had taken hold, European state officials began to enact the entailed cultural script in a variety of politico-diplomatic settings, in the process establishing norms of civilized international conduct in a variety of substantial issue areas. It will further argue that the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907 were particularly important in this respect because collectively they provided one of the most important occasions for the performative affirmation of European self-representations as the arbiter and apotheosis of 'civilized' international conduct. Finally, and most importantly, I will also make the argument that the resulting definition of 'civilized' conduct in war (a definition that 'outlawed' the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force) is crucially important to understanding the long-term evolution of the landmine ban. This is so, I will argue, because the codification of a standard of civilized warfare gave rise to the derivative discourse of 'inhumane weapons' – a discourse that would become recessive during the Cold War but that would be exhumed in the early 1990s and that would ultimately come to establish and define the very political terrain on which the recent campaign to stigmatize and ban landmines has been conducted.

The third area of research will examine the politico-diplomatic process through which landmines were for the first time brought within the ambit of the laws of war. In this connection, it will focus almost exclusively on two (related) phenomena. First, it will trace the history of the negotiations that ultimately resulted in the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) – and especially Protocol II, the so-called 'landmine protocol'. The argument made here is that, during the course of these negotiations, efforts to represent certain patterns of APM *use* as being inconsistent with the standards of civilized warfare codified in the Hague conventions were successful. As a result, the international community (or at least those few states that actually ratified the convention) agreed to certain restraints on landmine use. Although the legal restraints agreed to by the negotiators were weak (*inter alia*, they clearly privileged military necessity over humanitarian principles), the CCW is nevertheless an important episode in the history of the landmine ban in that,

for the first time, it brought APMs unambiguously within the legitimate purview of international humanitarian law.

The second focus here will be an exploration of why the CCW negotiations produced such a weak (and ultimately ineffective) set of legal restraints regarding landmine use. The argument that will be developed in this connection is that the weakness of the CCW regime can be directly attributed to the fact that the international community invested relatively little political energy in the negotiating process that produced it. As argued above, by the late nineteenth century the Western discourse of 'civilized warfare' had reached its apotheosis as it converged with a culturally-inflected European 'standard of civilization'. At this point, negotiations of the laws of war (especially the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907) became one of the key sites for the performative construction of a self-consciously styled and European-centred 'family of civilized nations'. As a result, during this period Western diplomats invested considerable energy in codifying the standards of civilized warfare and in specifying what constituted an 'inhumane' weapon or 'uncivilized' conduct in war; for it was through this process of civilizing that most uncivilized of all social institutions (war) that they demonstrated to themselves and each other that they were in fact members of a civilized community of nations. For most of the twentieth century, however, this discourse of civilized warfare has been 'recessive'. The reasons for this are complex, and are at least partly attributable to the shock of two total wars that severely strained Western faith in 'civilized' standards of warfare. Perhaps, more importantly, however, the muting of the discourse of civilized warfare was also a function of the emergence of a new geopolitical discourse (and a partial reconstitution of the idea of 'the West') following World War II. During the Cold War, of course, 'the West' as an imagined community of states was not constituted through a discourse of civilizational solidarity. Rather, during this period, 'Western' self-images were constructed and articulated through a narrative that focused on the West's difference from and superiority to communist states and the Soviet Union. In other words, the West came to view itself during this period as being defined in terms of a global struggle with an antithetical adversary. The language used to describe 'the West' shifted from one based on the 'standard of civilization' to one based on liberal democracy, capitalism and anti-communism. In this context, discussions of 'civilized warfare' or 'inhumane weapons' failed to resonate as they had at the end of the nineteenth century, for the simple reason that they were not

bound up with core self-representations. The inevitable result of this was that little energy was invested performatively constituting the West through negotiations about the laws of war. This was compounded by the narrative of the 'totality' of the struggle with the Soviet Union, which encouraged Western policy-makers to emphasize *kreigsraison* and the *utility* of military technologies (such as napalm) and practices (such as carpet bombing in Vietnam), rather than their putative *inhumanity*.

Given this context, it is perhaps not too surprising to find that during this era little effort was made to develop or give effect to legal restraints on the conduct of warfare. Moreover, such efforts as were made were never given much political support and resulted in poorly subscribed and largely ineffective international agreements. The most obvious example of this was the first Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, concluded in 1980. Negotiated in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, this agreement established that certain categories of weapons (i.e., certain types of APMs and incendiary weapons) were deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects and should therefore by regulated through international treaty. But the CCW was never invested with the kind of political energy necessary to make it an effective instrument of international humanitarian law: it was riddled with loopholes; it unambiguously privileged military necessity over humanitarian principles; it was signed by only a few states (and ratified by even fewer); and it is generally recognized to have had little direct effect on the conduct of armed conflict.[6] As a result, and despite the fact that there were organized and well-articulated popular demands for humane limits on the conduct of warfare following the Vietnam War (during which widespread and indiscriminate landmine use had been customary practice), no effective limits on landmines were negotiated in the late 1970s.

The fourth area of research will examine the recent social history of landmines, focusing in particular on the negotiations leading up to the 1995 CCW Review Conference and the subsequent negotiation of the Ottawa Treaty. The argument that will be developed here is twofold. First, I will

---

6.   See Louise Doswald-Beck and Peter Herby, 'Land Mines: A Critical Examination of Existing Legal Instruments.' document available on the WWW at www.icrc.ch/icrcnews, (1 May 1995).

demonstrate that the emergence of the landmine issue and the eventual negotiation of a ban in the 1990s was not simply a function of changing 'objective conditions' such as a vast increase in the number of APMs used or more indiscriminate patterns of use. The failure to negotiate a ban (or even effective restraints) on APMs in the aftermath of the Vietnam War suggests that this rationalist explanation is inadequate; for, if widespread and 'inhumane' use of landmines in the 1960 and 1970s (not to mention the period from WWI through the Korean War) did not result in the emergence of a coalition of states and NGOs capable of successfully negotiating a ban in the 1970s, it is difficult to see how the widespread and 'inhumane' use of these weapons in the 1980s could produce such a coalition in the 1990s. I will then go on to demonstrate that, in fact, landmines emerged as a political issue for an entirely different and far more historically contingent reason: specifically, that one of the provisions of the 1980 CCW explicitly called for a Review Conference to be convened within fifteen years of the date the Convention was deposited (i.e., in 1995). As this date approached, both state parties to the Convention and a number of humanitarian NGOs began developing their negotiating positions and strategies in anticipation of the preparatory meetings of experts and the eventual Review Conference. It was for these reasons, and not because of some long-brewing but suddenly acute landmine 'crisis', that APMs were placed on the global political agenda in the early 1990s.

A second argument that will be developed here is that both the landmine campaign and the resulting ban are primarily artefacts of a new geopolitical discourse – one that involves an exhumed set of narratives, self-representations and scripts dealing with 'civilized' standards of international conduct. Somewhat more specifically, the argument developed in this section is that the landmine campaign/ban are products of the contingent convergence of a number of developments, specifically: the emergence of landmines as a politico-diplomatic issue (as a result of the CCW's review provisions); the efforts of certain 'moral entrepreneurs' (especially certain humanitarian NGOs) to mobilize support for a ban; and, the evolution of a new geopolitical discourse that not only made key Western (and other) states receptive to claims that landmines had to be banned on humanitarian grounds, but that actually provided a script of 'civilized' international conduct that many states subsequently enacted in the context of the CCW and Ottawa Process negotiations. Of these three factors, the third is particularly important, though completely ignored in extant accounts. While not

denying the obvious cruelty of APMs or impugning the important work done by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines to bring this to the attention of the global public, it is clear that the reconstitution of the West (and Western interests) following the end of the Cold War has played a crucial (even decisive) role in the construction of the 'landmine crisis' of recent years. Simply stated, the shift in Western self-representations in the early 1990s is crucially important in that it established the discursive terrain upon which national and international NGOs (and certain states) were able to campaign for a ban on landmines in recent years. In the absence of this discursive shift, it seems unlikely that Western states would have been any more responsive to calls to ban APMs (or would have exercised any more leadership in this regard) than was the case during the first CCW negotiations.

Finally, this research project will conclude with some general observations about the politics of stigmatization – stigmatization of both landmines and of those social actors that challenge the representation of landmines as deserving of special opprobrium. The argument to be developed here is that, as with *sati* in British India and female genital mutilation today, efforts to ban 'obvious' evils are necessarily bound up with producing and reproducing power relations. This is not to argue that *sati*, female genital mutilation and landmines are not 'evil' and worthy of being stigmatized and proscribed. It is, however, to suggest that in all three cases, such efforts are implicated in broader discourses and cultural narratives that produce and naturalize social and political hierarchies. The British campaign to ban *sati*, for example, was bound up with British efforts to represent Indian men as uncivilized brutes and Indian women as needing to be rescued from them (presumably by the 'civilized' British). In turn, and despite the fact that *sati* was never as widespread a cultural practice as the British made out, these representations provided part of the justification and legitimation of British rule in India. My argument is that a similar logic is at work with respect to the stigmatization of landmines: the end might be worthwhile, but the framing of landmines as being 'inhumane' ultimately rests on the prior existence and operation of a (dangerous) geopolitical discourse that represents the world as being divided into the West (the apotheosis and arbiter of civilized international conduct), the Rest (the vast majority of countries), and so-called 'Rogue states' (the antithesis of the West). In the conclusion to this study, I will attempt to expose the relations of power that are both productive of and sustained by efforts to stigmatize landmines. In the remainder of this

paper, I outline the (constructivist) theoretical framework around which the research project will be organized.

Theorizing the Landmine Ban: Geopolitics, Cultural Scripts and the Laws of War

Understanding State Action

Underlying these arguments is the assumption that state action – rather than being the instrumental pursuit of objective interests by a unitary, rational actor – is, in fact, a form of social practice. Realist analyses, of course, take as their analytical point of departure the assumption that state action is a more or less unmediated reflection of the 'national interest'. On this view, self-interested states purposefully pursue policies that are intended to maximize their (objective and self-evident) interests, while minimizing the risks posed by (equally objective and self-evident) threats to those interests. But as a number of scholars working within the constructivist tradition have pointed, out this assumption is, to say the least, highly problematic. For while the 'national interest' is clearly an important explanatory variable in accounts of state action, contrary to realist claims these interests are neither 'objective' nor 'self-evident'. Rather, they are the product of inherently social *interpretive* processes – processes that produce specific and meaningful understandings of what constitutes the national interest and threats to the national interest. As Jutta Weldes puts it:

> In contrast to the realist conception of 'national interests' as objects that have merely to be observed or discovered, then, my argument is that national interests are social constructions created as meaningful objects out of the intersubjective and culturally established meanings with which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the state in it, is understood.[7]

This means that while state action continues to be guided by the regulative ideal of the national interest, these interests have to be understood, not as more or less obvious correlates or derivatives of the concrete 'realities' of the international system, but as products of the 'ubiquitous and unavoidable process of representation through which meaning is created'.[8]

---

7. Jutta Weldes, 'Constructing National Interests', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 280.

8. *Ibid*., p. 283.

To the extent that this is true, understanding state action requires an understanding of the processes of representation and interpretation through which the national interest is produced. In this project, I will argue that such an understanding requires a recognition that the representational process is inherently *storied* and that the constitutive representations that govern social life are profoundly narrative in form. Somewhat more specifically, I argue that the meanings that structure social action are produced through the pervasive and inescapable practice of knowing the world and one's place in it through the construction of *ontological narratives*. These narratives are the stories that actors construct out of available cultural and linguistic resources to create meaning out of the disorder of lived experience. Unlike *representational* narratives, then, which are descriptive and explanatory stories (and which have long been the stock-in-trade of historians, for example), ontological narratives are *constitutive* stories – that is, they actually produce (rather than simply attempt to reflect) social facts. They do this by generating the specific forms of knowledge, consciousness, 'common sense', practice and identity that allow people to understand – and thus act in – the world.

Ontological Narratives and Social Action

The relevant literatures suggest that ontological narratives have three principal characteristics. First, all such narratives involve a *dramatis personae* that represents the world as being populated by a range of different actors, each of which is endowed with specific forms of identity and assigned a specific role to perform within the broader dramatic context. These identities may be 'multiple, ambiguous, ephemeral or conflicting',[9] but they nevertheless serve to specify both the general types of actors comprising the world and the fundamental characteristics or 'nature' of specific actors.[10] Moreover, in specifying identities, ontological narratives also play an important role in the constitution of *interests*; for the very act of self-representation necessarily defines an actor's basic portfolio of interests. Rationalists, of course, assume that interests are objective and self-evident – that is, they are the necessary preferences of self-interested actors located within specific social

---

9. *Ibid*.

10. It is important to note that these identities are not fixed, either in the sense of being 'natural' or 'unchanging'. As is now widely (though by no means universally) acknowledged, identities are constituted through complex social processes of identification and differentiation that produce historically contingent understandings of Self and Other. This being the case, it is more appropriate to think of identities as inherently unstable (and, therefore, evolving) social constructs that emerge out of the pervasive and inescapable processes of interpretation through which meaning is produced.

contexts. As a variety of constructivist scholars have argued, however, interests are in fact social constructions that emerge out of the representations of identities and situations assembled by social actors out of the cultural material at hand. Simply stated, the argument advanced in this connection is that 'interests are entailed in these representations because they (seem to) follow from the specific identities of the of the objects represented and the relations posited to obtain among them'.[11]

Another feature of ontological narratives is that they necessarily involve the superimposition of some form of structure or *plot* upon the potentially overwhelming complexity of lived experience. Through this structuring process – usually referred to as *causal emplotment* – meaning is created by depicting the actions and interactions of the constituent units of a social field as connected parts of an unfolding drama that is itself structured and meaningful. In effect, plot provides the basic syntax and grammar of ontological narrative. In the absence of plot, representations of the world take the form of chronicles or annals that simply catalogue events. Emplotment, however, converts these mere *events* into meaningful *episodes* within iterated, coherent, temporally sequential, and more or less well-developed story line*s* – story lines that are by their very nature always and necessarily derived from the broader cultural milieu within which social actors are located.

It is important to bear in mind that the process of causal emplotment is unavoidably *reductive* and *selective* in nature. Ontological narratives do not comprise perfectly faithful mimetic renderings of the objects, actions, events and relationships of 'world as it really exists'. Rather, they necessarily involve a selective appropriation of 'relevant' facts from a 'potentially limitless array of social experiences deriving from social contact with events, institutions and people'.[12] This selective appropriation takes place as a direct result of the filtering and organizing effects of emplotment. A story line necessarily invests actions or events with varying degrees of significance, and then arranges 'significant' events into meaningful chains of causality and relationality. Emplotment, then, rather than simply providing an unmediated reflection of developments in the 'real world',

11. Jutta Weldes, 'Constructing National Interests', p. 282.

12. Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson, 'Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Construction of Identity', in Craig Calhoun, ed. *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 60.

determines how these developments are processed and invested with meaning and significance. In so doing, it actually 'creates' the world within which social actors exist and act.

Finally, because 'people act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives...', ontological narratives are crucially important to understanding agency.[13] Simply stated, such narratives give rise to social action though a three stage process involving the practically related but analytical distinct mechanisms of 'articulation', 'interpellation' and 'enactment'. In the first stage of this process (*articulation*) 'meaning is produced out of extant cultural raw materials or linguistic resources'.[14] This is achieved in the manner described above – that is, through the construction of meaningful ontological narratives that create specific characters or subject-positions within a dramatic scheme. In the second stage (*interpellation*), 'concrete individuals come to identify with these subject-positions and so with the representations in which they appear'.[15] In other words, once specific identities and roles have been narratively constituted, individual actors come to recognize themselves in these identities. In the third stage of this process (*enactment*), actors, having recognized themselves in the dominant ontological narrative, necessarily (if reflexively) enact the 'institutional script' entailed in that narrative – i.e., they perform the role appropriate to their narratively-derived sense of identity. This means that, contrary to the assumptions of rationalist theories, social actors engage in certain practices not because they are motivated by 'objective' interests, but 'because not to do so would fundamentally violate their sense of being at that particular time and place'.[16] It also means that actions can only be intelligible if we develop some understanding of both the various ontological narratives through which identities and plots are created and the scripts which are necessarily entailed in these narratives.

Geopolitical Discourses and State Action

Social life, then, can be said to be constituted through a diverse but ultimately limited repertoire of culturally-derived ontological narratives. At the level of *global* politics, such narratives take the

---

13. *Ibid*., p. 61.

14. Jutta Weldes, 'Constructing National Interests', p. 284.

15. *Ibid*., p. 287.

16. Somers and Gibson, p. 67.

form of *geopolitical discourses*, which can be thought of as those systems of representation that combine extant cultural and linguistic resources into meaningful (and so constitutive and regulative) stories regarding the social field called 'international relations' (something is missing here, or the "or" should be deleted).[17] As Gearóid Ó Tuathail has argued, such discourses can usefully be conceptualized as forms of 'discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics in such a way as to represent a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas'.[18] Like all ontological narratives, geopolitical discourses are structured by characterization, employment, and selective appropriation. Also like other such narratives, they are constitutive: at the level of practice and social consciousness, these discourses organize the world into a meaningful place by populating it with actors, investing those actors with identities and (derivative) interests, and by scripting the defining dramas of global political life. Because those warranted to act on behalf of the various socially constructed actors that comprise a particular world order do so on the basis of this shared consciousness, these discourses can be thought of as entailing a kind of 'cultural script' that both creates certain forms of identity (and hence interests) and prescribes/proscribes certain forms of behaviour in specific contexts. This means that any given geopolitical discourse, rather than simply providing a more or less accurate reflection or map of the 'objective' realities of a particular world order, is in fact profoundly productive of that order.

It is possible to specify two different types of geopolitical discourse. At one level, geopolitical narratives clearly operate within what might be called a 'national circuit'. In this sense, geopolitical discourses can be thought of as ontological narratives that emerge out of local history and culture and that give rise to widely-shared understandings of 'identity' and the 'national interest' within a

---

17. As Somers and Gibson argue, 'a relational setting is pattern of relationships among institutions, public narratives and social practices'. See 'Reclaiming the Epistemological 'Other': Narrative and the Social Construction of Identity', in Craig Calhoun (ed), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 70.

18. Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, 'Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy', *Political Geography 11* (1992), p. 192. Agnew and Corbridge define geopolitical discourses as the 'rule and conceptual resources that political élites use in particular historical contexts to 'spatialize' the international political economy into places, peoples and disputes'. See John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge, *Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory and International Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 48.

particular state. These representations are particular to each state and largely account for the 'unique' aspects of its foreign policy. On another level, however, geopolitical discourse also operates at the level of *global* or *world* culture (the cultural framework of the global system). At this level, geopolitical discourses are more properly understood to be part of that ensemble of representations, practices and organizational forms that are endowed with legitimacy by the 'international community' of policy elites, where such elites are understood to include 'the whole community of government officials, political leaders, foreign-policy experts, and advisors throughout the world who conduct, influence and comment upon the activities of "statecraft"'.[19] These *global* geopolitical discourses are common to all states and largely account for the remarkable isomorphism in social and political practice that exists within the inter-state system.[20]

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that the most important geopolitical discourses – i.e., those that actually create and animate the units that comprise the international system – are primarily those that are *global* rather than local or indigenous in nature.[21] Somewhat more specifically, this literature – which comprises both *neo-institutionalism* (sociology) and *constructivism* (IR) – makes two (related) arguments. First, both neo-institutionalists and constructivists argue that the basic *forms and motives* of the state are intersubjectively constituted through institutionalized meaning systems created through interstate interaction.[22] On this view, the institutional ensemble known as 'the state' is not an ontological given; nor is it simply the end product of indigenous historical-material processes. Rather, the state is viewed as a social construct – that is, as a product of global or systemic cultural representations that establish the legitimacy and

---

19. Agnew and Corbridge, *Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory and the International Political Economy*, p. 48.

20. For a discussion of the homogenizing effects of world culture see Meyer *et al.*, 'World Society and the Nation-State', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 103, no. 1 (July 1997), pp. 144-181.

21. *Ibid*.

22. For constructivist analyses see, *inter alia*, Emmanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1992), pp. 101-145; Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 2 (1992), pp. 391-426; and Alexander Wendt, 'Constructing International Politics', *International Security*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1995), pp. 71-81.

'naturalness' of the nation-state form of political organization. Moreover, they argue that the ubiquity of this organizational form is less the result of common task demands or functional needs than of the operation of a now-universal ontological narrative or geopolitical discourse that first specifies the generic attributes of statehood and then confers legitimacy on those actors that can adopt these forms. According to neo-institutionalists and constructivists, then, states have the structural form and defining purposes they do not as a result of 'rational' responses to objective material demands or systemic realities – nor even because of its alleged functional advantages over other forms of political organization when it comes to providing security and extracting revenue – but because people warranted to act on behalf of 'imagined communities' reflexively enact the 'institutional script' of statehood that is entailed in the dominant geopolitical discourse of the modern era.

Second, in addition to specifying the generic form of the constituent units that comprise the global political system (in the modern era, the nation-state), both neo-institutionalists and (most) constructivists also argue that dominant geopolitical discourses typically entail much more specific cultural scripts that prescribe and proscribe certain forms of state behaviour or practice in specific contexts. The neo-institutionalist literature in particular is replete with studies of the way in which the global cultural environment has shaped the behaviour of states in policy areas such as socioeconomic development, individual citizenship rights, the administration of justice, environmental management, and foreign relations. The common thread running through all of these analyses is that global cultural rules 'define appropriate institutions, goals, data systems, organization charts, ministry structures and policies' for member of the international community.[23] They also share the view that these global cultural models necessarily entail scripts that are then enacted by state officials; for, as argued above, not to do so would violate their basic sense of who they are at that particular time and place. In slightly different language, then, geopolitical discourses not only specify the generic form of the state (with its associated basic portfolio of interests) but also provide specific scripts that govern the conduct of such states in specific circumstances. As these

---

23. Meyer, *et al.*, 'World Society and the Nation-State', p. 158.

scripts are enacted in the relevant institutional contexts they give rise to the practices through which both the state *qua* state and the international system are produced and reproduced over time.

It would be absurd, of course, to argue that *global* geopolitical discourses are exclusively or exhaustively definitive of the institutional scripts enacted by state officials; for, as John Agnew argues 'the identities and interests of states (and other actors) are formed in interaction with one another and in the nexus between global and local social practices'.[24] Nor is this the argument being advanced here. Rather, the point I wish to make in this context is that while it is important to recognize the constitutive role of local scripts and cultural narratives in global politics, it is also necessary to pay careful attention to systemic or global meaning systems that shape state identity and practice. Beyond this basic point, I also want to argue that, Wendt's 'systemic constructivism' notwithstanding,[25] these global meaning systems do much more than simply constitute states as legitimate political actors and specify a minimal portfolio of derived interests. Geopolitical discourses also exercise a powerful influence on the definition of *specific* national interests in *specific* politico-diplomatic contexts, primarily by providing scripts that specify not just the basic attributes of stateness (sovereignty, self-interestedness, etc.) but also how particular *types* of states ('civilized', 'Western', 'responsible' etc.) should act in specific dramatic contexts. Thus, during the nineteenth century the prevailing geopolitical script delineated appropriate forms of conduct for 'members of the family of nations', requiring 'civilized' states to performatively constitute themselves as such in two ways: first, by abjuring *sati*, polygamy and slavery on the one hand and abiding by international law; and, second, by adhering to the accepted rules of diplomacy.[26] Similarly, in the contemporary era, an analogous discourse is operative, although today the scripts entailed in this discourse are more likely to specify appropriate forms of conduct for members of 'the

24. John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 55.

25. This term is used by Price and Reus-Smit to distinguish Wendt's constructivism from a more 'holistic' variant that pays greater attention to the constitutive role of local and global meaning systems. See Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, 'Dangerous Liaisons: Critical International Theory and Constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 3 (September 1998), pp. 259-294.

26. See Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of Civilization in International Society (*Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

West' or for 'responsible members of the international community' than the 'family of civilized nations'.

Implicit within this argument are a number auxiliary propositions and qualifications that require further elucidation. First, it needs to be said that none of this is meant to suggest that (state) actors are merely 'bearers of culture' that automatically enact the appropriate global scripts in the appropriate politico-diplomatic contexts. Clearly, this is not the case. To begin with, it is not always obvious which scripts are to be enacted in any given setting. Social actors are invariably embedded within multiple, contested, conflicting, competing and even contradictory discourses that shift over time and thus preclude categorical stability of action. As a result, while those warranted to act on behalf of the imagined community might enact one script in one set of circumstances (because it is required by their narratively-derived sense of being at that particular time and in that particular setting), in another set of circumstances alternative narratives might be triggered – narratives that involve a different sense of identity/interest and that entail different scripts of appropriate action. Additionally, state officials do not enact narratively-derived scripts without reflection. Rather, they approach the social world *reflexively*, acting in terms of their *interpretation* of the relevant cultural rules rather than being governed directly by them. This means that social action cannot simply and unproblematically be read off a given script. Instead, understanding action requires a recognition that situated actors actively interpret both scripts and the circumstances within which they find themselves.

Second, narrative theories of state action, while recognizing that geopolitical discourses are ontologically significant, emphatically do not make the claim that such discourses take precedence over, or render irrelevant, the material dimension of global political life. In the first place, such an approach recognizes that discourses themselves have a certain materiality in that they are not just clusters of ideas but 'symbolic technologies' embedded in and productive of concrete social *practices*.[27] As Stuart Hall has put it, discourses are always 'materialized in concrete practices and

27. Regarding 'symbolic technologies' see Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, 'Beyond Belief: Ideas and Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, vo. 3, no. 2 (1997), pp. 192-237.

rituals that operate through specific state apparatuses'.[28] This means that the distinction between material and ideational factors is perhaps less stark than commonly assumed. Perhaps more importantly, however, narrative approaches to state action acknowledge that the discursive and material conditions of possibility of any given era are dialectically interwoven. In other words, this approach recognizes that the technological, economic and socio-military realities of everyday life are shaped through narrative representations just as surely as narrative representations are shaped by the prevailing material conditions of possibility.

Third, as a number of scholars have pointed out, it is important to recognize and acknowledge that geopolitical discourses are by their very nature imbricated with, and implicated in, relations of power. This is so because dominant ontological narratives – i.e., those narratives that are actually materialized at the level of international politics – do not simply emerge out of the interaction of juridically equal actors but are produced through, and reflective of, specific relations of social power. Simply stated, prevailing geopolitical discourses are not innocent and neutral reflections of the world. Rather, they are hegemonic narratives that, because they have been forged within a specific matrix of power relations, are necessarily imprinted with the culturally-inflected desires, anxieties, fears, and visions of the dominant social forces within the global political system. In one sense, then, geopolitical discourses can be said to *embody* social power. However, to the extent that such representations actually produce the 'categories of practical consciousness' that shape the *gestes répétés* and define the prevailing 'common sense' of a given era, geopolitical discourses are also deeply involved in the ongoing *production and reproduction* of relations of power.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that geopolitical discourses are not transhistorical – that is, they are not fixed and unchanging but can and do evolve over time. Societies in different historical epochs differ in the ways in which they define roles, in their ascription of meaning to different sorts of activity, in the legitimacy they accord to various enactments of identity, and so on. Historical change, however, seldom means that new narratives are made out of whole cloth. More typically,

28. Stuart Hall, 'The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 46

new ontological narratives evolve as a result of a process of *bricolage*, involving the re-combination, re-valuation and re-presentation of existing culturally-derived narrative resources and their re-assembly into new stories, roles and forms of identity. This means that while geopolitical discourses evolve over time, each new discourse contains within it the 'sedimentary deposits' of previous narratives.

To summarize the argument to this point: to a significant extent, the identities, (national) interests, policies and policy practices of individual states are often less a function of indigenous social (or even cultural) dynamics than they are an enactment of prevailing global cultural scripts. Against competing accounts that view the state as a rationalized bureaucratic structure evolving in local contexts as a result of specific socio-economic and/or socio-military dynamics, neo-institutionalists and constructivists see the contemporary nation-state as a cultural artefact of global society – i.e., as a socially constructed actor that is organized and legitimated in terms of a (now) universalized ontological model that specifies its basic nature, form, purposes, and portfolio of interests. Thus, they argue, while locally-derived ontological narratives or geopolitical discourses often impinge on representations of the *specific* identity and interests of *specific* nation-states, it is the prevailing and dominant set of cultural rules operating at the global level that gives rise to the basic institutional ensemble and bundle of practices that constitute the state. In other words, it is the dominant *global* (rather than indigenous) geopolitical discourse that defines the constitutive ideals around which basic patterns of 'stateness' are created. They also argue that prevailing global cultural rules narratively specify appropriate forms of behaviour for membership within what might be called 'transnational imagined communities' (such as 'the West') as well as the 'family of nations' or 'international community' more broadly.

Global Cultural Scripts and the Laws of War

The conventional view is that the laws of war have evolved over time as increasingly civilized societies have sought to 'restrain' the conduct of warfare for humanitarian reasons.[29] According to this perspective, the social purpose of the laws of war is to reduce 'needless human suffering' in times of war by defining the limits of the legitimate use of force. This has been achieved, or so the argument runs, by counter-balancing the demands of *kreigsraison* (the logic of war or military necessity) with two humanitarian principles. The first of these is the doctrine of 'proportionality', which holds that weapons should not be used in a manner that is unnecessarily injurious to combatants; the second is the principle of 'discrimination', which proscribes deliberate attacks on non-combatants.

The conventional account also – if only implicitly – represents the history of the laws of war as a story of the progressive taming and humanizing of war through the ongoing negotiation and application of a legal framework based on 'reason', 'natural justice', and universal standards of humanity. On this view,

> as civilization progressed through the Enlightenment, the laws of war balanced the traditional demands of military necessity with developing considerations of humanity. This process culminated in the codification of the modern laws of war in the nineteenth century, which supposedly achieved a decisive humanitarian advance from earlier custom and practice, bringing the horrors of war under the rule of law.[30]

In this sense, it can be said to be premissed on a kind of *Whig* historiography that sees the history of the laws of armed conflict as part of a broader historical dynamic involving the progressive

---

29. There are in fact two bodies of law in this regard: the Geneva conventions and the Hague conventions. The Geneva conventions protect certain types of war victims (especially wounded combatants and prisoners of war), while the Hague conventions regulate the application of military technology and conduct on the battlefield. This study focuses exclusively on the Hague conventions. For the sake of clarity the terms 'laws of war', 'laws of armed conflict' and 'international humanitarian law' will be used interchangeably to refer to the Hague conventions and more recent conventions that focus on restraining battlefield violence; they will not be used to refer to the Geneva conventions.

30. Chris Jochnick and Roger Normand, 'The Legitimation of Violence: A Critical History of the Laws of War', *Harvard International Law Review*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Winter, 1994), p. 59.

triumph of an ever more enlightened and civilized humanity over the atavistic forces of militarism, barbarism and illiberalism. By extension, the landmine ban is viewed as the natural culmination of this historical process – i.e., as the latest stage in the long historical march from savagery to civilization marked by the progressive extension of the rule of law to the social institution of war.

Despite these claims, however, and as even the most cursory review of the history of war indicates, the laws of armed conflict have not in fact tamed, humanized or otherwise meaningfully restrained the conduct of organized political violence.[31] Indeed, quite the contrary appears to be true: 'the development of a more elaborate legal regime has proceeded apace with the increasing savagery and destructiveness of modern war'.[32] This is so for at least three reasons. First, efforts to negotiate weapons bans have typically sought restrictions on a very narrow range of enumerated weapons, leaving all sorts of other armaments unregulated and thus open abuse. Simply stated, while it is true that at different times certain weapons have been subject to legal proscription, at any given point in history these banned technologies have accounted for only a tiny percentage of the overall destructive potential available to combatants.[33] The practical effect of this has been the creation of two distinct categories of weaponry. The first, 'inhumane weapons', comprises a few technologies that are stigmatized, de-legitimized and proscribed; the second, 'conventional weapons', includes the vast majority of armaments that are considered legitimate and unexceptional – despite the fact that their effects can be equally horrific, murderous and brutal. Ironically, then, the actual (as opposed to intended) effect of international humanitarian law has been to create a narrowly constructed conceptual category ('inhumane weapons') that applies to only a few technologies and that in effect suspends the application of moral judgement to other violently cruel weapons.

31. This is not to argue that there have never been restraints on the conduct of war; clearly, these have always existed. Rather it is to point out that military, political, economic and even cultural factors are more important than international law in creating and giving practical effect to these restraints.

32. Jochnick and Normand, 'The Legitimation of Violence: A Critical History of the Laws of War', *Harvard International Law Review*, p. 55.

33. Thus, for example, while the use of poison gas was proscribed by international treaty in 1925, in the intervening years precious little has been done in the way of banning napalm (surely equally horrific in its effects), small-caliber munitions (needlessly injurious by any standard) or, indeed, any of a whole host of equally murderous and brutal weapons.

Second, the laws of war have been written in such a way as to privilege *military necessity* (or even *utility*) over moral principle. As a result, the noble humanitarian sentiments often expressed by those responsible for negotiating the laws of war are only partially and imperfectly reflected in the actual corpus of positive international humanitarian law (which permits and legitimizes any conduct consistent with military interests). As Jochnick and Normand put it in connection with the seminal Hague conventions:

> Despite a public outcry for humane limits on warfare at the turn of the century, the sovereign nations that drafted the Hague laws were overwhelmingly concerned with protecting their military interests. Predictably, the resulting laws banned only those means and methods that had no military utility while permitting new and destructive technologies, like aerial warfare, to develop unhindered.[34]

Third, even in those cases where weapons and/or practices have been 'successfully' regulated by international law, under actual battlefield conditions these legal restraints are quite often simply ignored by soldiers faced with the exigencies of combat and suffering the brutalization of war. During WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, for example, aerial bombing was carried out on a massive scale by the United States in complete disregard for the humanitarian principles of discrimination and proportionality. For all these reasons, it is impossible to conclude that the contemporary laws of war have exercised a substantial civilizing or humanizing effect on the modern battlefield. Indeed, as a number of observers have concluded, while individual treaties may have banned specific technologies or regulated specific military practices, all the evidence suggest that the battlefield has become decidedly more (rather than less) brutal and murderous since the Hague laws were negotiated at the end of the last century.

Given the failure of the laws of armed conflict to achieve (even minimally) their putative purpose (reducing needless human suffering), one is moved to inquire precisely why it is that states periodically devote considerable time and effort to negotiating and promulgating these laws.

---

34. Jochnick and Normand, 'The Legitimation of Violence: A Critical History of the Laws of War', *Harvard International Law Review*, p. 68.

Rejecting the conventional wisdom, and drawing on the insights of critical legal theory,[35] this research project will attempt to address this question by focusing not on the (negligible) battlefield effects of the laws of war but on the political-diplomatic process through which these laws are negotiated and framed. In this regard, it is based on three assumptions. First, this project assumes that the laws of war have more to do with legitimating the social institution of warfare than with actually humanizing or civilizing the battlefield. Somewhat more specifically, it assumes that the laws of war serve to create the illusion that the institution of war – because it is governed by civilized rules of conduct – is itself civilized and thus legitimate.

Second, this project is premissed on the view that the laws of war, by stigmatizing a narrow range of military technologies and techniques while legitimizing any conduct consistent with military necessity/utility, actually work to suspend the application of moral judgement to the vast majority of weapons and battlefield practices (almost all of which are violently cruel). In other words, it assumes that by narrowly defining the impermissible, the laws of war have in practice insulated that vast majority of military means and methods from critical moral scrutiny and have thus promoted, rather than restrained, wartime violence.

Finally, and most importantly, this project is premissed on the assumption that the real importance of the laws of war lies not in their *implementation* but in their *negotiation*. By this, I mean that the true significance of the laws of war is that the diplomatic processes through which they are negotiated provide an opportunity for the performative construction, representation and reaffirmation of state identities. In slightly different language, the various negotiating fora within which the laws of war are drafted can be viewed as constituting a kind of stage on which the dominant global cultural script of an era is enacted. Thus, during the late 19th century, the Hague conferences provided the dramatic setting within which diplomatic representatives of 'European' states enacted a script in which the 'civilized members of the family of nations' sought to humanize the conduct of that most barbarous of institutions: war. Similarly, at the end of the twentieth century, the CCW

---

35. For a good introduction to this literature see Chris af Jochnick and Roger Normand, 'The Legitimation of Violence: A Critical History of the Laws of War', pp. 49-95.

and Ottawa Treaty negotiations have provided a analogous stage on which to enact the post-Cold War global cultural script – a script which calls for responsible members of the 'international community' (and especially members of 'the West') to conform to certain standards of 'civilized' international relations.

Concluding Remarks

Studying the genealogy of the landmine crisis makes three contributions to the study of historical change in the discourses and practices of global security. First, and perhaps most obviously, it says something about the processes through which certain weapons are stigmatized or rendered illegitimate. Much of the existing literature dealing with the landmine crisis assumes that the 'inhumanity' of such weapons is self-evident. Treating the inhumanity of landmines as a settled issue, however, effectively blinds us to the historicity of both the landmine crisis and the specific representation of landmines that underpins it. It also prevents us from asking questions about how the inhumane nature of certain types of weapons (such as landmines) is fixed and settled historically via politico-diplomatic practices. In other words, it forecloses investigations of the way in which the practices of diplomats, scholars and other actors (such as NGOs) stabilize the distinction between 'legitimate' and 'inhumane' weapons. Such an assumption also conceals the way in which the 'landmine crisis' is implicated in, and bound up with, the rewriting of the global cultural script in the aftermath of the Cold War. As a partial remedy, a genealogy of the landmine ban is useful not only in that it exposes the constructed nature of cultural depictions of landmines, but also because it illuminates the complex and often occluded politics of representation that underpin these depictions

Second, a genealogy of the landmine ban says something about the performative constitution of collective state identities. Such identities, of course, are not primordial or pre-given; and the West is not a 'thing' with an 'essence' or 'objective' reality. Rather, it is an 'imagined civilizational community' constituted through specific practices and representations that operate at a number of different sites. Collectively, the politico-diplomatic negotiations related to landmines constituted one of these sites. Thus, tracing the genealogy of the landmine ban affords an opportunity to explore the processes through which 'the West' is produced and reproduced over time.

Finally, a genealogy of the landmine crisis/campaign/ban says something about the evolving contours of the post-Cold War order and its associated geopolitical discourses, ontological narratives and global scripts. Specifically, it highlights the way in which, in the aftermath of the Cold War, world order has been partly reconstituted around a thinly-veiled (and alarmingly Orientalist) civilizational discourse which places the West in the position of arbiter and champion of 'civilized' standards of international practice within the global Neoliberal Order. In addition to being an moral issue in and of itself, this is important because it draws our attention to the way in which moral discourses can be bound up with producing and reproducing relations of power at the global level. Simply put, the argument here is that the 'the politics of stigmatization' that has driven the anti-landmine campaign has ultimately anathematized not just APMs but also those social actors that have challenged the now prevailing view that landmines are inherently inhumane.