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Towards a Constructivist International Political Economy of Climate Change

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Climate change has recently become an internally important political issue with many countries and international organizations quickly responding to both public and scientific demand for action to halt the consequences of climate change. If the damages and consequences of climate change are to be mitigated then the majority of the responses to it must occur in the institutions of our societies; policies and economies must adapt and respond to climate change in order to preserve the ecological stability of the planet as well as our market economies. In the last few decades, these beliefs have become their own environmental movement, and this movement has grown in cultural and political value as well as the acknowledgment that humans are currently consuming resources in an ecologically detrimental fashion. Historically, however, meaningful environment policy-making has been hindered by the adherence of policy-makers to purely materialistic and rationalist discourses. Conversely, my argument asserts that there has been a rise in environmentalism morality, or norm, that is challenging the standard notions of international political economy's rationalist and material discourse. That is why I propose to do a constructivist analysis on the international political economies of climate change in order to show that the strong normative claims about the probable dangers and catastrophes of climate change are influencing policy-making surrounding climate change. In particular, I will argue in this paper that the rise in environmentalism—which is the awareness of the anthropomorphic effect on climate and environmental degradation—is going to influence policy-making in order to produce political economies centered less on the consumption of CO_2 emitting fuels.

The argument of my paper will be broken down into four main movements. Firstly, I will describe the theoretical background and basis of constructivism and how I am applying it to international political economy (IPE). Secondly, I will explore what the environmentalism norm is and the history behind it. In particular, I will examine key international environmental policies that have been influenced by its normative claims. Next I will explore how the normative value of environmentalism is being used by current political economies to rationalize seemingly antithetical behaviors. This section will mainly show that while the cognitive recognition of climate change and the moral imperative to respond to it are present in popular discourse, the adjustments in actions to conform to this norm are not. More specifically I will show how the norm of environmentalism is being used to rationalize norm-deviant behavior. However, in the final movement of my paper, I will show how this norm has the potential to overcome this false rationalization and restrict political and economic actors' behaviors in accordance to the normative value. In this sense, I will show how the norm of environmentalism passes through the dialectical struggle of first being enslaved by the materialist framework through misappropriation, to then overcoming this framework and constructing the political and economic actors' behaviors within this moral ideology. However, I will resist calling this a resolved struggle because of the unpredictability of future climate changes and will instead posit that the environmentalism norm will need to be continually reexamined in order to ensure the integrity of the norm.

I. Theoretical Foundation: Constructivism and Its Virtues

The central claim and argument of constructivism is that ideas have an influential affect on social actors' behaviors and can give a more compelling explanation for those behaviors. More specifically, constructivism posits that ideas shape actors' decisions and behaviors: "The central insight of constructivism is that collectively held ideas shape the social, economic, and political world in which we live."[1] Furthermore, when constructivism is applied to international political economies it assumes four basic assumptions: that "ideas, values, norms, and identities of individuals, groups, and states are socially constructed"; "Ideas and values are social forces that are as important as military or economic factors"; "conflict and cooperation are products of values and beliefs"; and "change can be explained by examining changes in the values and beliefs of actors over time."[2] (The most important assumption to my argument will be the first; however, aspects of all four can be seen throughout my paper.) Basically, constructivism examines how the ideas and beliefs individuals hold affect their behaviors. Central to this is the understanding that ideas construct norms that affect the scope within actors will behave: "The realm of *conceivable* behavior in a given social structure is normatively determined and it is not as wide as the realm of behavior that is physically possible."[3] The main tension running through constructivist theory, especially constructivist IPE, stems from its origin as a dissenting explanation to the prevailing materialist and rationalist explanations.

Constructivism developed in response to the insufficiency of the materialist and rationalist theories to entirely explain the motivation behind choices. The constructivist critique of standard IPE theory is doubled-pronged: the failure of the actor to follow a mechanistic rationality in the decision making process[4], and the lack of a fully objective world devoid of any non-materialist meaning.[5] These two prongs are not distinct from each other, but are two aspects of an overall critique of standard IPE theory's privileging of rational materialism to explain behaviors in the IPE. However, constructivist IPE's main critique of standard IPE theory is not that actors are not rational, but that they inhabit a world marked by its uncertainty and act in accordance to ideological factors as well as material ones:

> *While people are fairly rational and their views and actions indeed vary with their material surroundings, views and actions also vary a great deal in terms of the myths, identities, symbols, norms, and conventions that people construct to motivate and prioritize their actions. From this point of view, not even the least uncertain material environment is free of potential variation in meaning.*[6]

The object of the constructivist critique, which subsequently becomes the foundation of constructivist theory, is the materialist and rationalist claim that the world can be reduced to objective factors which then the rational actor can decide upon. To the constructivist, the world is material only in the sense that the parameters of the material are drawn by the collectively held beliefs and ideas of the agents: "Indeed, a strong version of meaning-oriented constructivism holds that societies and policymakers rarely, if ever, interpret the world around them in purely materialistic terms. Rather, they endow the economies in which they are embedded with social purposes."[7] Not only what is conceivable behavior is limited by the collectively held ideologies, but also the physical landscape around them. Accordingly, policymakers and economic agents can only act rationally, insofar, as they are limited to what appears to them to be possible policy

and economic transaction. Standard IPE theory fails to explain how in various instances, rational actors fail to reach a rational outcome, or rather, how rational actors act in unexpected manners, influenced by non-materialistic factors.

II. Climate Change and the Rise of the Environmentalism Norm

The moral imperative to protect and preserve the environment is a norm that developed primarily in the 20th century. Originating in the endangered species protection movement, the environmentalism movement went through three primary moves, each with influential factors, before it became the norm it is today: firstly, it moved from a national norm to an international norm; secondly, its structure shifted to combine governmental and non-governmental elements; and thirdly, it developed into a norm with an international focus, which is different than a national norm spreading to other nations while still having a domestic focus.[8] One of the key aspects of the development of the environmental movement was the resolution in rhetoric, and consequential discourse, between conservationists (who wanted to conserve the environment for exploitative purposes) and preservationists (who wanted to preserve the environment for its own sake).[9] Furthermore, the environmental movement grew out of the species protectionism movement with the establishment of ecology as a scientific discipline[10]: the interconnectivity that ecology proposed and made the focus of its investigation challenged assumptions and beliefs about the distinction between specific actors, or organisms, and its environment. The environmentalism norm became a state identity in 1972 with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, with international states coming together to create protections for the environment in order to adopt the attitude of a "green" society[11]. The transformation of the environmentalism norm into a state identity formalizes its adoption into the political and economic systems; through its adoption as a state identity, the norm now has the ability to frame what is acceptable behavior in legislation.

The proliferation of the environmentalism norm and its effect on constructing political economies depends on its adaption into states' identity. States' identities influence their behaviors because the identity contains within it norms and ideas that construct the field of possible actions. More specifically, since states interact with each other internationally, a state's identity is partially a social construction: as constructivist forefather Alexander Wendt writes, "*Social* identities are sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object."[12] The social identity of a state determines the actions of the state, in the sense that how it perceives itself and how it perceives other perceiving itself influence the willingness of a state actor to behave in certain ways. Again, the materialist rationalist explanation is not in contrast to this constructivist approach, but that it gives an incomplete account of how states assume identity: state identities are not determined by the actions a state makes, but its *raison d'être* for the actions in the first place. As Wendt further elaborates, states have a psychological construction in place that the realm of conceivable action before acting: "social identities have both individual and social structural properties, being at once cognitive schemas that enable an actor to determine 'who I am/we are' in a situation and positions in a social role structure of shared understandings and expectations."[13] In an international political economy, how a state defines itself is in relation to how other states define themselves and the shared meanings behind these norms and identities. Therefore the desire of a state to become a "green" one as Epstein discussed earlier, depends upon internationally set and

shared meanings of what a green identity is. For instance, Epstein examines how the ban on whaling became an internationally defined marker of countries' greenness and has significant impacts on a state's standing in the international anarchic social hierarchy: older states used this measure to build its green credentials and newer states used this measure to join "this exclusive club of developed state-members that was taking a green turn."[14] However, the environmentalism norm has shifted out from anti-whaling and endangered species protection and has been defined in relation to a state's response to the increasing threat of climate change.

At the heart of the contemporary environmentalism norm is the notion that human behaviors are creating climate change and this increase needs to be curbed. Human behaviors are causing the earth's climate to become warmer which may have long-term detrimental impacts on the global ecosystem. Two key undisputed facts emerge in the climate change debate: that greenhouse gases trap energy near the Earth's surface causing it to warm and that human activity has lead to an increase in these gases.[15] However, current models and scientific data are inconclusive on the affects of these two facts on the earth in the future; there is no concrete forecast about how these facts will impact the Earth in the long-term. All that can be determined are the possible impacts that increased greenhouse gas emissions and the resulting global warming could have on the Earth: including extreme weather events, tropical storm intensity, increased global evaporation and precipitation, and decomposition of methane hydrates (a key greenhouse gas).[16] However, despite the uncertainty that the future holds, key to the environmentalism norm is that these possible impacts are detrimental enough that they should be avoided even in the absence of surefire proof that they will happen. Therefore, the environmentalism norm seeks to shape actors behaviors so as to avoid these possible outcomes, even though the material evidence is not there to validate their rational choices.

As a consequence, international policies and agreements have been implemented under the influence of the environmentalism norm. In particular, the birth of the United Nations Framework on Climate Change can be seen as establishment of an international multinational manifestation of the environmentalism norm. Furthermore, out of the UNFCC, two major international policies were created: The Kyoto Protocol and The Copenhagen Accord. The Kyoto Protocol is the development of a method of tracking a country's greenhouse gas emission and through voluntary agreements attempt to prevent the increase in these emissions while having methods through which countries can attempt to offset these emissions.[17] Although ambitious, the Protocol is restrained by the fact that it is a voluntary agreement, which makes it difficult to enforce the greenhouse gas emission reductions at the core of its mission. This is not a flaw specific to the Protocol but the general problem with any international agency since, as McKibben and Wilcoxen point out, "no international agency can coerce countries to comply with a climate change agreement they find significantly inconsistent with their national interest."[18] However, a country's national interests are determined by the norms it follows: a national interest is not dependent upon its material concerns, but by how a country understands and perceives its many possible material concerns. Therefore, the Kyoto Protocol, and similarly any other international agreement or agency will fail to implement a global environmentalism norm unless enough states develop a national identity in accordance to this norm.

The Copenhagen Accord, similarly to the Kyoto Protocol, has as its central aim the reduction of global emissions. However, what distinguishes the Accord from being an emissions reduction

reiteration of the Protocol is its established of a 2 degrees Celsius limit to allowable increase in global temperature, and the commitment to "reduce global emissions so as to hold the increase in global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius," while similarly asserting that "deep cuts in global emissions are required."[19] What makes this declaration particularly normative is that the Accord's concern is not for economic or political gain (a focus that would make it of the material rationalist viewpoint), but is response to the growing concern about consequences of climate change. Indicative of environmental norm's influence in the Accord, is the strong normative tone it establishes from the beginning: "We [members of the Conference of the Parties] underline that climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time."[20] This statement betrays the strong environmentally normative framework the Accord was born out of; it establishes as certain a reality that is only speculative and consequently shaping the visions of possible actions. Furthermore, the Accord symbolizes the defensive stance ready to be taken in response to the *potential* consequences to climate change and proclaims the need for global call-to-action: "Adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change and the potential impacts of response measures is a challenge faced by all countries."[21] Yet, similar to the Kyoto Protocol, the weakness of the Accord is contained within itself: preventing an increase in global temperatures is a goal that *must* be ratified and followed by *all countries.* Similar to the Protocol, the success of the Accord rests upon the global dominance of the environmentalism norm; all countries must recognize the same speculative vision of the consequences of climate change as *the* legitimate outcome of increased global emissions.

However, both the Kyoto Protocol and the Copenhagen Accord have seen only marginal success when compared to another highly publicized international environmental policy, The Montreal Protocol. As shown in figures 1 and 2 below, the reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases, starting before the Kyoto Protocol's ratification to just after the agreement on the Copenhagen Accord, can be argued as a success because many countries that have actively reduced their greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, many countries, especially major industrious nations like the US and Canada, have actually increased their emissions (which is not surprising because the US failed to ratify the treaty and Canada has recently pulled out it), not only falling below their scheduled emission reductions, but adversely increasing their emissions.

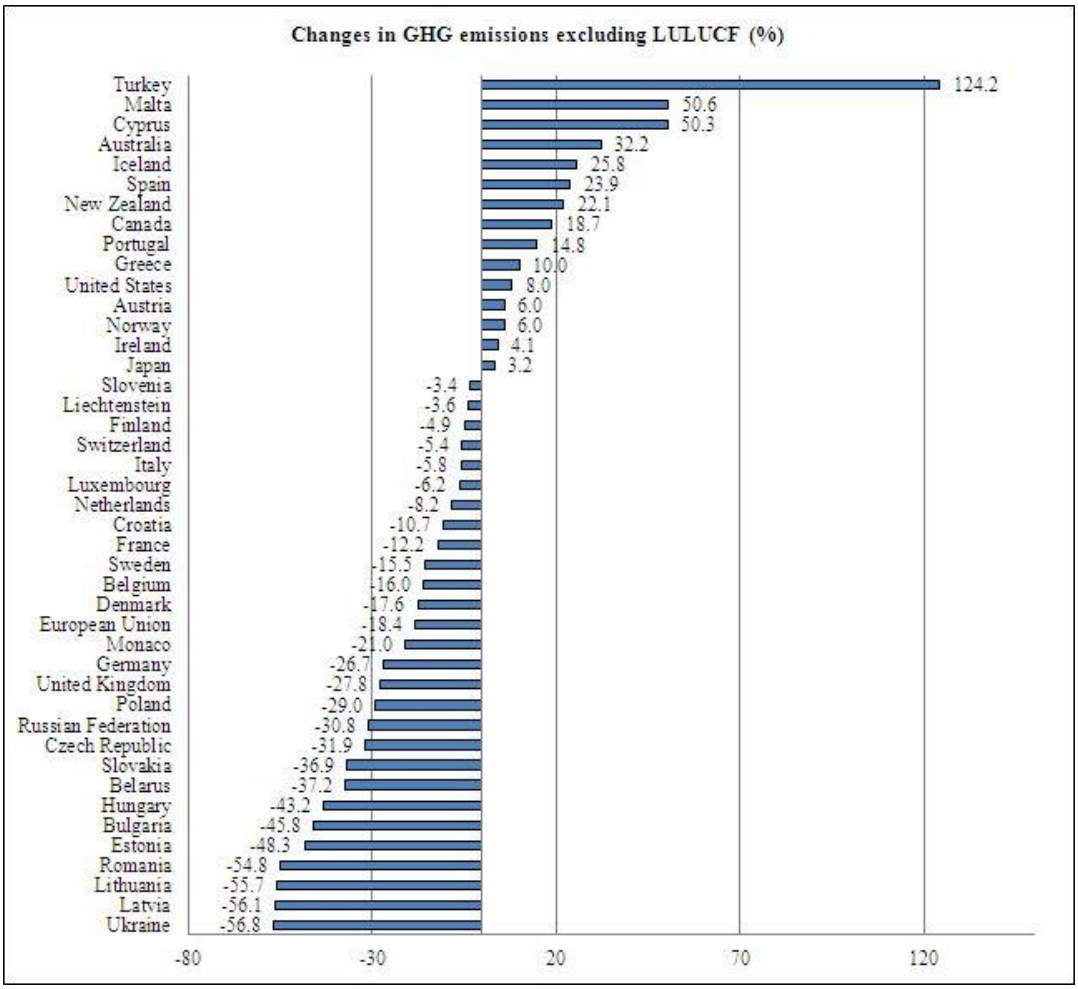

Figure 1. This figure, released by the UNFCCC, shows the "changes in total aggregate emissions of individual Annex I Parties" from 1990–2011. In particular this figure excludes actives in the Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry sector, such as reforestation and afforestation.[22]

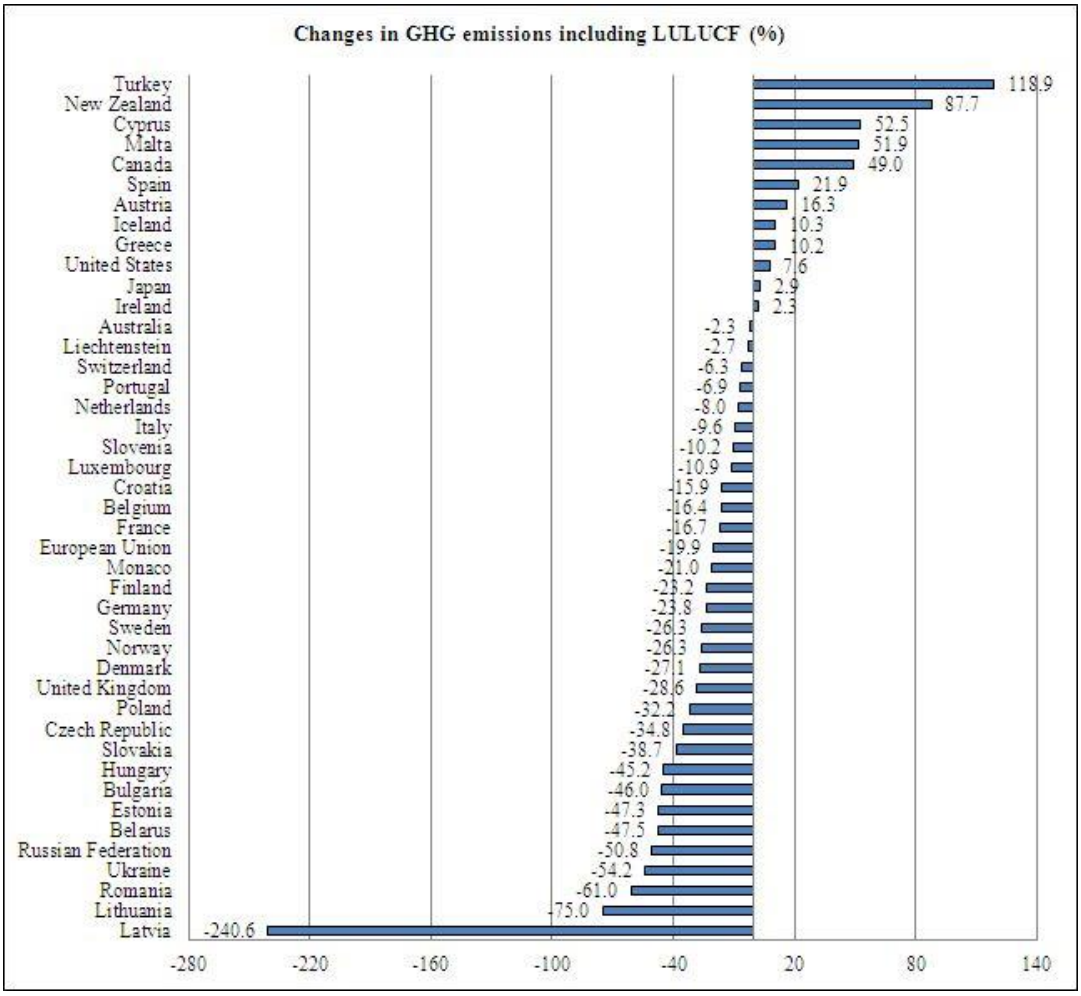

Figure 2. This figure, released by the UNFCCC, shows the "changes in total aggregate emissions of individual Annex I Parties" from 1990–2011 In particular this figure includes actives in the Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry sector, such as reforestation and afforestation.[23]

Unlike the Kyoto Protocol and the Copenhagen Accord, the Montreal Protocol has seen much more than marginal success. The Montreal Protocol was established in response to the depletion of the ozone layer and the discovery of a hole in the ozone layer above Antarctica in the late 1980's.[24] In particular, the Montreal Protocol was designed to put a freeze on the production of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and to cut their usages drastically in the future years.[25] Underlying the Montreal Protocol's reason for reducing CFCs was the scientific linkage between the continued use of CFCs and ozone depletion, which posed serious environmental and health consequences for human beings and animals alike. However, at the time, these findings were, as Cass Sunstein notes, "generally taken as authoritative," despite the contestation of their legitimacy by global leaders, especially European ones.[26] Yet, soon the effects of ozone depletion were accepted and the favorability of CFC's decreased leading to the call for their banishment. Particularly revealing is that before the Montreal Protocol was created, major chemical companies began phasing out the use of CFCs and supported the international controls on the substance, the reason for the shift, however, Sunstein says is "unclear."[27] However, it would be rash to dismiss this pre-legislative economic shift as a "public relations concern," as Sunstein does, because this diminishes the affect that the environmentalism norm has upon the

adoption of the Montreal Protocol.[28] These actions, by economic powers displays the power that the norm has in shaping, not only the extent of actions, but the scope as well. CFCs became, not economically harmful, but morally transgressive, which ultimately led to their discontinuation. The momentum behind the phasing out of CFCs and the alarm raised by ozone depletion, came before the scientific conclusions were certain, and the shifts in industry appear to be caused by the normative declaration of a healthy ozone, more than scientific ruling mandating the cease of CFC usage. The reason for the economic shift away from CFCs is similar to the reason for Montreal Protocol; it became morally impermissible to allow the ozone layer to deplete, which would have global consequences. The beginning of the shift in the chemical industry can be seen as the rise of the environmental norm, asserting with recognized authority that the environmental consequences of ozone depletion will not be tolerated. The reception of the Montreal Protocol was successful, and "new damage to the ozone layer has essentially ceased, the ozone 'hole' is shrinking, and ozone concentrations are expected to return to natural levels by 2068."[29] Whereas, the results of the Kyoto Protocol and the Copenhagen Accord are still yet to be seen, the Montreal Protocol was successful in accomplishing its normative mission: to stop the depletion of the ozone layer.

III. False Consciousness: Perversion of the Norm for Materialist Reasons

Before going into the perversion of the environmentalism norm, it is important to note that a state is not a singular entity: a state may make distinct independent actions, yet they do not possess an individual coherent cognitive system. The beliefs of a state are not tied to a sovereign individual, but are the collective manifestation of the citizens of a state. These may be manipulated, but for a norm to create a collective identity it must be held in the collective minds of the citizens that constitute the state. Therefore, when I speak of the environmentalism norm being perverted what I mean is that despite the cognitive recognition that the environmentalism norm is important and constitutes the actors field of perception, it is still contestable and in its evolution[30] may wane and wax in its intensity.

This contestability then allows for the possibility that in the initial period of a norm's acceptance in a state for it to be used to justify norm-deviant behavior. With the environmentalism norm, this period of contestability is now. For instance, as sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard observes in the rhetoric of the Norwegian policymakers that, under the guise of environmentalism, are advocating for the expansion of natural gas extraction (which produces a known greenhouse gas) while withdrawing from international environmentalism norm influenced agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol. In particular, Norgaard notes that the Norwegian government's focus in this move shifts from the national level, of Norway withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol, to the international, supplying a 'less harmful' greenhouse emitting gas: "the Norwegian government claims that increasing oil production is the best thing it can do for the global climate, even though these activities increase carbon dioxide emissions and are in direct opposition to their agreement under the Kyoto Protocol!"[31] In this case, it seems the environmentalism norm was not necessarily adopted by the Norwegian government with their initial agreement to the Kyoto Protocol and later the Copenhagen Accord: their willingness to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol, and run afoul of the emissions reductions of the Copenhagen Accord, as soon as material conditions proved more advantageous to do so means that the norm is not influencing the actor's behavior. Behind the motivations of the Norwegian government is the current trend of trying to frame one greenhouse gas emitting resource as a more "greener" option than another.

This particular trend has been largely responsible for the rise in popularity of the fracking for natural gas movement. This strategy can be exemplified by a 2006 International Energy Agency brief that suggests that the switch from coal to natural gas has helped reduce the rate of greenhouse gas emissions.[32] Using the turn to environmental consciousness that the environmentalism norm has caused, the norm deviant natural gas industry is trying to sell itself as being a 'green' option. This is a case of a norm being used to justify a non-normative behavior, suggests the failing of the norm to construct the actor's behavior. However, I argue that this case shows the power of the environmentalism norm since it is being used as a tool for legitimization. The problem of course is that it is being used illegitimately, but this is due to its current state of contestability. Furthermore, the use of this norm to justify norm-deviant behavior will eventually delegitimize that behavior because that behavior relied upon the proliferation of environmentalism normative discourse, increasing the norm's success in its current contestability.

IV. The Dialectic of Environmentalism: Constructing Materialist Behaviors

The materialist rationalist use of the environmentalism norm to justify its behaviors is inevitably going to delegitimize and negate the behavior it is seeking to justify because it is inadvertently proliferating the norm, which condemns that action. Theoretically, this inadvertent proliferation occurs due to not only the increased circulation of the environmentalism norm, but also the reinforcement of it as a behavioral criterion of legitimacy: the appeal to environmentalism frames environmentalism as *the* norm to appeal to when constructing a cognitive framework of legitimate actions. Therefore, the circulation of environmentalism, even in justification of environmentally harmful behaviors, will restrict the future availability of these behaviors for the rational actor because the norm will construct a new vision of possible actions in which these norm deviant ones are partitioned out of sight, such as in the case of whaling in most of the developed world.

Examples of the environmentalism norm curbing state actions are already emerging in contemporary society. The most notable example of the environmentalism norm restricting state behavior is in the heated issue of fracking and natural gas extraction. In particular, many European countries have begun to ban the practice of fracking, despite the uncertainty that still surrounds the impact that fracking would have on the environment. Most recently, France Bulgaria have banned fracking citing "environmental protection," while other European countries, such as Britain and Germany are considering following suit.[33] Most interesting about these cases is that they, for the most part, are due to public pressure on the governments. In a seeming irrational act, citizens have publically and politically stated that they are willing to endure higher energy costs instead of allowing fracking and natural gas extraction to happen within their borders.[34] This sentiment is influencing the mindsets of economic and political leaders, with chief executive of the French global energy company, Christophe de Margerie, reflecting that, "the issue is not shale gas […] people are against carbon, against fossil fuels, and we are missing important opportunities."[35] This statement is revealing because it shows the limitation that environmentalism norm is having on the material possibilities: because citizens are adopting the environmentalism norm, they are putting political pressure on the state to restrict the environmentally detrimental behaviors it commits, not only in mining for natural gas,

but also for the proliferation of any carbon emitting fossil fuel. Business in France will not, and cannot, be the same: the norm has spread and the behaviors must be limited.

The movement of the environmentalism norm, through its initial contestation to later proliferation and acceptance, can be seen as a dialectical movement ultimately ending in the discontinuation of certain material actions. The dialectic in this case is between the environmentalism norm and the materialist rationalist actions: pitted against each other are the norm and the actions it seeks to restrict. During the initial phase the norm is contested, the materialist rationalist actions prevail and are widely used, unaffected by the norm. However, as the norm's influence grows it is reflected in the rhetoric of the material rationalists; they try to manipulate the norm in order to justify their actions, validating the norm as the criterion of legitimacy. The final phase is the environmentalism norm's overcoming of the initial inequality between it and the materialist rationalist actions; its influence spreads enough so as to restrict the scope of acceptable actions, negating the former actions of the material rationalist. All three of these phases can be seen in the history of the environmentalism norm: firstly, in its birth it did not impact the actions of policymakers; next it was used by governments, like Norway, and various companies to justify their own actions showing the beginning of a norm change; and lastly, the environmentalism norm has begun to restrict the scope of legitimate actions, such as is seen in France, Bulgaria and other countries. However, in true dialectical fashion, the last stage is not resolute and constantly open to contestation from new norms that emerge. Given the uncertainty that the future holds surrounding climate change, we can either see the proliferation of this norm to more states or its retraction due to the success of a new norm. The success of environmentalism can only be seen in time and optimistically, not wistfully.

V. Notes

[1] Rawi Abdeiai, Mark Blyth, and Craig Parsons, "Introduction: Constructing the International Economy," in *Constructing the International Economy,* ed. Rawi Abdeiai et al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 2.
[2] David N. Balaam and Bradford Dillman, "Alternative Perspectives on International Political Economy," in *Introduction to International Political Economy: International Edition,* ed. David N. Balaam et al. (Boston: Longman, 2011), 113-114.
[3] Ann Florini, "The Evolution of International Norms," *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1996): 366.
[4] Abdeiai, "Introduction," 17.
[5] Abdeiai, 9; Balaam, "Alternatives," 108.
[6] Abdeiai, "Introduction," 9
[7] Ibid.
[8] Charlotte Epstein, "The Making of Global Environmental Norms: Endangered Species Protection," *Global Environmental Politics* 6, no. 2 (2006): 39.
[9] Ibid., 38.
[10] Ibid., 41.
[11] Ibid., 42.
[12] Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (1994): 385.

[13] Ibid.
[14] Epstein, "Environmental Norms," 51.
[15] Warwick J. Mckibben and Peter J. Wilcoxen, "The Role of Economics in Climate Change Policy," *The Journal of Economics Perspectives* 16, no. 2 (2002): 108.
[16] Ibid., 113.
[17] Ibid., 124.
[18] Ibid., 115
[19] Ibid.
[20] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its Fifth session, held in Copenhagen from 7 to 19 December 2009*, FCCC/CP/2009/11/Add.1 (30 March 2010), available from http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2009/cmp5/eng/l09.pdf, 5.
[21] Ibid.
[22] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *National Greenhouse Gas Inventory Data for the Period 1990-2011,* FCCC/SBI/2013/19 (24 October 2013), available from http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2013/sbi/eng/19.pdf, 9.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Cass Sunstein, "Montreal vs. Kyoto: A Tale of Two Protocols," Harvard *Environmental Law Review* 31 (2007): 13.
[25] Ibid., 16.
[26] Ibid., 14.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 22.
[30] I am referring to Ann Florini's critical notion of the gene-like nature of norms, which contains a stage of contestability before being accepted by individuals. See Florini, "Evolution," 364 for further discussion.
[31]Kari Marie Norgaard, "Climate Denial: Emotion, Psychology, Culture, and Political Economy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society,"* ed. John S. Dryzek et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 407.
[32] Robbie Moore, "Fracking, PR, and the Greening of Gas," *The International,* March 15, 2013, http://www.theinternational.org/articles/369-fracking-pr-and-the-greening-of-gas.
[33] Steven Erlanger, "As Drilling Takes Off in the U.S., Europe Proves Hesitant," *The New York Time,* October 9, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/10/world/europe/as-drilling-practice-takes-off-in-us-europe-proves-hesitant.html.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

VI. References

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