The launch of a global 'War on Terror' in 2001 by the George W. Bush administration was a historic moment in US foreign policy which was to have profound and lasting consequences both internationally and domestically. To date, the 'War on Terror' and successive counterterrorism efforts have entailed two major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, significant military operations in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Georgia, and elsewhere, a global intelligence and rendition programme, the expansion of US military bases to new regions, increased military assistance to new and old client regimes, an extensive international public diplomacy programme, the articulation of new national security doctrines and priorities, and a major domestic reorganization of and increased investment in the military, domestic security agencies, policing, the legal system, and numerous other agencies - among a great many other important developments. Furthermore, despite widespread expectations to the contrary, the election of Barak Obama in 2008 to the presidency has not yet resulted in any significant changes to the overall structures and practices of US counterterrorism, domestically or internationally (Jackson 2014, 2011; McCrisken 2011). A decade later, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the so-called 'War on Terror' is in many ways comparable to the Cold War in terms of expenditure, institutionalization in government, and continuing impact on numerous aspects of US foreign policy, external relations, and domestic politics.

And yet, understanding or explaining these developments is not a straightforward task. It is not obvious that attacks by a small group of dissidents aggrieved by the US military presence in the Arabian Peninsula, as devastating as they were, should have generated such an expansive and far-reaching response from the world's only superpower, or that the response should have involved all of the specific elements we have thus far witnessed or be so resistant to change. In the first place, as on-going contestations over the meaning and significance of the Pearl Harbor attack (Rosenberg 2005) or the Kennedy assassination clearly demonstrate, acts of political violence do not necessarily 'speak for themselves'; they have to be narrated and interpreted in meaningful ways within a particular social, cultural, and historical context. The attacks on New York and Washington were potentially open to a number of different interpretations, only one of which was as an 'act of war' necessitating a military response. The choice to launch a potentially unlimited and durable global war that would encompass subsequent administrations is all the more puzzling given the relatively limited extent of the terrorist threat to human life (certainly compared to climate change, disease, or poverty for example), and the ultimately foreseeable consequences of specific actions such as intervention in Iraq, the Guantanamo Bay detentions, extraordinary rendition, torture, the drone killing programme, and so on. Despite more than a decade of effort and some limited successes, including the death of Osama bin Laden, it is nonetheless far from clear that the elimination or even significant reduction of the terrorist threat has yet been achieved.

A key puzzle, therefore, lies in understanding why military-oriented counter-terrorism or 'War on Terror' was chosen over other foreign policy or counterterrorism frameworks by key foreign policy decision-makers, why it took the form that it did, and why it has continued largely unchanged into the Obama administration. Traditional accounts of international relations and security (most notably realism) would provide at best a partial and at worst a misleading account of the US government’s foreign policy choices and practices in this context, emphasizing as they do the central role of material distributions of power, the rational calculation of the national...
interest, and the presence of existential security threats. In this chapter, we argue that a constructivist perspective provides a productive and informative analytical lens through which to understand how the 'War on Terror' and military-based counterterrorism emerged as the dominant US foreign policy discourse after the events of 11 September 2001, taking on the particular form/s that it did, and why it has continued under Obama. We suggest that a focus on ideational factors characteristic of a constructivist approach to international relations - narrative, framing, identity, norms, contestation, and negotiation, among others - provides particularly important insights into the emergence, institutionalization, and durability of US counterterrorism since 2001.

The chapter begins with a necessarily brief overview of constructivism, outlining its origins, variants, shared assumptions, and ontology. The second section examines the application of constructivist insights to US foreign policy in the period of the 'War on Terror' since 9/11, focusing in particular on the inter-subjective social construction of the 'War on Terror' itself and some of the ways in which it has evolved into a durable social and political structure. In the conclusion, we reflect on the utility of the constructivist approach for understanding US foreign policy.

**Constructivism**

Constructivism is a broad social theory rather than a substantive theory of international politics, in essence, constructivists working in international relations are concerned with the (social) constitution of world politics. Based on the view that world politics is a social rearm characterized by a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between agents (principally states) and structures (principally the nature of the international system or society), constructivists are concerned with the processes through which the world has come to be as it is: the dynamics of interaction between actors, the meanings that actors give their actions, and the frameworks and patterns of interaction between those actors. In this process they are concerned with offering a more sociological account of global politics in which ideational factors (norms, rules, identities, and forms of representation) play a central role. As such, they offer the possibility of a more holistic, multidimensional understanding of political processes, dynamics, and actions.

Constructivism has emerged relatively recently as a distinct approach to international relations, linked to a series of academic and practical developments. While building on insights in disciplines such as sociology, early constructivist authors such as Alexander Wendt (1987), Nicholas Onuf (1989), and Friedrich Kratochwil (1989) drew also upon the more radical critiques aimed at orthodox approaches to international relations by theorists working within the critical theoretical and post-structural traditions, such as Richard Ashley (1984) and R.B.J. Walker (1988). In the process, they were more readily accepted within mainstream academic circles than these radical alternatives, at least in part because they were perceived as less alien and threatening to the canon of international relations.

The 'constructivist turn' in international relations was given further impetus by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, occurring as it did without any significant shift in the distribution of capabilities in the international system and largely through domestic political transformation enabled by strategic actors (see Fierke 1997). This seriously undermined the explanatory power of traditional approaches which had failed to predict, and had no real basis for understanding, such revolutionary transformations in the international system (Kratochwil 1993). In this way, international change provided a catalyst for theoretical change. It is important to reiterate here that despite occupying a prominent theoretical position in international relations thought today, constructivism's entry to the discipline was relatively recent, certainly in comparison to more established variants of international relations thought associated with realism and liberalism.
Since its emergence, constructivism has developed in a number of different directions, depending upon the specific theoretical traditions drawn upon, the central focus of the research, and the main methodological approaches employed by the researcher. As a consequence of these fault-lines, there is now an increasing variety of labels for constructivist scholarship, including: critical, conventional, modernist, postmodern, thick, thin, narrative, strong, systemic, and holistic - among others (Adler 1997: 335-6; Barnett 2005: 258). Perhaps the most important distinction is the broad division between conventional and critical approaches (see Hopf 1998: 181-5). Conventional constructivists tend to employ the epistemology of traditional approaches and focus on examining relationships of causality in asking 'why' questions (Katzenstein 1996; Wendt 1999), while critical approaches are closer in approach and scope to more radical theoretical alternatives and examine relationships of constitution through asking 'how possible' questions (Doty 1993; Barnett 1999). In approaching international participation in the 'War on Terror', for example, a conventional approach might focus on examining why different states were active participants or not (see Katzenstein 2002), while a critical approach might focus on how political actors within different states were able to render possible their preferred responses through strategic forms of representation to national audiences (see Jackson and McDonald 2008). The role of identity is central to both, although in conventional accounts it is usually viewed as relatively sedimento (to the point of compelling state action), while in the latter identity is the focal point of competition over action: attempts to justify or contest particular policy preferences.

Despite this distinction, however, constructivists share a number of core assumptions about international relations. First, constructivists view the world (and reality generally) as socially constructed. Rooted in sociological theory, this notion has a number of related elements, including the claim that the perceptions, identities, and interests of individuals and groups are socially and culturally constructed, rather than existing outside of or prior to society. Related to this, constructivists point to the existence of social facts which are dependent on human agreement. The existence of social facts draws attention to the inter-subjective nature of reality: even apparently natural institutions, actors, and norms (such as states, anarchy, and sovereignty) are the products of processes of social construction between different actors, and only ever appear natural or inevitable because they are presented and accepted as such. Critically, recognizing the inter-subjective and socially constructed nature of reality - produced through processes of negotiation and contestation - allows us to recognize possibilities for (even structural) change.

Second, constructivists hold that agents and structures in world politics are mutually constitutive (Wendt 1987). That is, agents constitute structures through their beliefs, actions, and interactions, while structures constitute agents by helping to shape their identities and interests. Such a conception is particularly important in bringing human agency back into international political analysis, a contrasting position to the structural determinism of approaches such as neo-realism.

Third, constructivists view ideational factors - representation, identities, beliefs, perceptions, and norms - as central to the dynamics and processes of world politics. As the world is socially constructed between actors, forms and processes of communication become crucial. Constructivists suggest - following post-structuralists - that it is only through representation that we are able to give meaning to material 'reality' and to events like acts of political violence. In the process of representing, narrating, or framing reality, actors go about constituting that reality as well as contesting and potentially marginalizing alternative accounts and enabling particular forms of policy or actions (Laffey and Weldes 1997; Weldes et al. 1999; Hansen 2000). For critical constructivists what is crucial is the extent to which policy can be defined or justified in such a way as to resonate with a domestic constituency, through 'hailing' core identity narratives or providing compelling historical parallels for action (Weldes 1996; Holland 2013). This is
particularly applicable to the question of how particular forms and frameworks of policy - such as the 'War on Terror' - become possible.

The central role of representation is clearly applicable to the role of norms: standards of legitimate behaviour in an international society. For constructivists these norms are central to world politics, constituting that society as well as conditioning the interests and realms of possible action for states within it. As Michael Barnett (2005: 255) has argued, the norm of sovereignty not only regulates state interactions but also makes possible the very idea of the sovereign state and helps to construct its interests. While norms can become sedimented and serve to define the limits of feasible political action, they are also susceptible to change, not least through the strategic action of 'norm entrepreneurs' (Keck and Sikkink 1998) or norm revisionists. As will be noted, attempts under the Bush administration to revise norms of preemptive self-defence and torture within the 'War on Terror' should be viewed in this context.

Constructivist research has to date examined a range of subjects relevant to the broader understanding of foreign policy, including, among others: national security and the decision to use force (Katzenstein 1996; Williams 1998); the construction of national security threats (Weldes 1996; Howard 2004); national security cultures (Gusterson 1998); military doctrine and military strategy (Johnson 1995; Kier 1997); US counter-insurgency policy (Doty 1993); and culture and war (Mertus 1999; Alkopher 2005). There are also a growing number of constructivist analyses of the 'War on Terror' and US counterterrorism since the Bush administration which we draw upon in this chapter (see for example, Katzenstein 2003; Murphy 2003; Croft 2006; Cramer 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2007; Thrall 2007; McKrisken 2011, 2012; Jackson 2005, 2011, 2014).

**Constructivism and US Counterterrorism**

The above account of constructivism suggests a range of possible avenues for exploring US foreign policy in the context of its counterterrorism approach from 2001 to the present. The following discussion is therefore necessarily brief and selective. Its main aim is to provide a window into how constructivist analyses might illuminate key dimensions and dynamics of US foreign policy on counterterrorism. We focus here on a number of key concepts associated with constructivism, namely: norms; identity and narratives; and change.

**Norms**

Constructivists pay significant attention to norms and normative frameworks in their accounts of world politics generally and the interests and actions of states specifically. Norms can be defined as shared expectations about appropriate or legitimate behaviour by actors with a particular identity. For constructivists these socially constructed expectations can constitute the interests - and constrain the room to move - of even the most powerful actors in the international system: states. While realists dismiss the disciplining effect of norms - suggesting either their total irrelevance or their role exclusively as a source of justification for action (Krasner 1999) - constructivists point to the ways in which actors have adjusted their actions to adhere to norms associated with colonialism (Crawford 2003a) and the use of nuclear weapons (Tannenwald 2007). For theorists working in this tradition, norms (like other ideational factors) can come to be incorporated into a state's conception of its national interests (Finnemore 1996).

Such accounts of the disciplining effects of norms might intuitively seem to have little purchase in accounting for US foreign policy, particularly in the early days of the 'War on Terror' declared immediately after 9/11, given the extent of US power and the invocation of an exceptionalist rhetoric that suggested America alone would decide upon the legitimacy and limits of its actions in seeking to protect its citizens from terrorism. Yet even here a constructivist account of norms has some explanatory power. Indeed, for many the failure to recognize the
importance of international perceptions of the legitimacy of the 'War on Terror' was central to the problems encountered in Iraq, for example (Nye 2004; Reus-Smit 2004). And even as it employed an exceptionalist rhetoric, the United States nonetheless attempted to locate its actions in international normative frameworks, in some cases attempting to redefine existing norms so as to justify its own behaviour. Later, the Obama administration similarly engaged with international normative frameworks as it sought to reaffirm its commitment to the anti-torture norm, while at the same time continuing attempts to revise international norms on the targeted killing of terrorist suspects through drone strikes. In other words, over the entire period since 9/11, the United States has frequently acted as a 'norm revisionist' in a number of different areas related to counterterrorism.

Despite unease over the conduct of the war in recent years, the invasion of Afghanistan was widely accepted internationally as a form of self-defence, unlike the invasion of Iraq. In the case of Iraq, the United States acted as a norm revisionist through its re-statement of the legal-normative claim of imminent threat, with Bush declaring that we need to 'deal with those threats before they become imminent' (in Kaufman 2005: 23, emphasis added). This was a central legal-normative claim for intervention linked rhetorically to suggested links between Saddam Hussein and terrorists and to his alleged WMD programme. And while in the UN Security Council and elsewhere this justification failed to convince a host of other states, the Australian Prime Minister and Japanese Defence Minister both subsequently elaborated their own definitions of preventive war in the context of concerns about the threat of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism in Southeast Asia and North Korea's WMD programme respectively (McDonald 2007a). Later, Obama withdrew US forces from Iraq largely citing tactical rather than normative reasons. However, at the same time, he expanded the drone-targeted killing programme in Afghanistan and Pakistan, once again justifying it to domestic and international audiences in terms resonant of the imminent threat argument. Obama argued that terrorist suspects, including US citizens, who posed an imminent threat to US citizens or military personnel because they may be plotting future attacks could be legitimately placed on a 'kill list' or terminated in military operations on foreign soil, as was the case for Osama bin Laden (Pious 2011; Rohde 2012). For constructivists, such developments need to be viewed in the context of (even partial) changes in the normative context allowed by the US justification of preventive war, or, in Obama's case, preventive assassination of terrorist suspects.

Norms surrounding torture - the intentional infliction of 'severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental' particularly on prisoners and detainees (UNHCR) became an important focal point of criticism, given revelations of coercive interrogation and humiliation of detainees at Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib in Iraq in 2004. A significant component of the government's response at the time was that while the US government sought to distance itself from the actions of its military personnel, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued that 'what has been charged [in Abu Ghraib] thus far is abuse, which I believe is technically different from torture' (in Blumenthal 2004). This followed an earlier memorandum prepared for Bush's legal counsel Alberto Gonzales which suggested narrowing the definition of torture to include only those 'extreme acts' entailing physical pain 'equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious injury' (Erskine and O'Driscoll 2007). In other words, one of the key ways in which the Bush administration attempted to revise the anti-torture norm was through a redefinition of the meaning of 'torture'. Interestingly, Obama made a number of normative arguments about upholding American (and universal) values when he announced an end to the Bush-era torture policy. However, critics have argued that Obama's subsequent actions in relation to so-called 'enhanced interrogation' have functioned to maintain secrecy regarding specific cases, provide loopholes (Murray 2011: 86), especially in relation to the CIA, and shield previous and present officials from investigation and prosecution for abuses (Forsythe 2011; Pious 2011).
While some might suggest that attempts to redefine norms of preventive war, targeted killing, and torture constitute little more than an instrumental attempt to justify preferred actions, constructivists would rightly suggest that these attempts are nevertheless important for several reasons. First, such attempts can serve to redefine the normative context of world politics, particularly if undertaken by a state with the material and social power of the United States. The invocation of US definitions of preventive war or targeted killing elsewhere (in Australia and Japan, for example) suggests at least a partial shift in the parameters of what constitutes appropriate behaviour regarding the use of force, reminding us that as social constructions, norms are liable to change. The spread of drone technology and the expansion of the targeted killing programme by the Obama administration may induce further normative change in the way terrorist suspects can be dealt with internationally. Second, in locating actions within (again even altered) norms and rules of international society, the United States potentially strengthens this international society and its constituent components through positioning them as legitimate standards of appropriate behaviour. This can also serve to provide a basis for critique, particularly if the government is seen to be falling short of standards it set for itself (Krebs and Lobasz 2007). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, constructivists would suggest that the failure to convince international audiences of the legitimacy of these redefinitions and military-based forms of counterterrorism more broadly is not simply a speed-bump on the road to the realization of the national interest. Rather, the failure to act in such a way as to be seen as a legitimate actor carrying out a legitimate set of practices is central to the failings in Iraq and the steady erosion of (increasingly required) international support for US counterterrorism efforts generally (Reus-Smit 2004). It is here that constructivists would retort to realists’ suggestion that they ignore the role of power in international politics by suggesting that theirs is a fuller, more realistic, and more convincing account of power that takes account of the central role of normative and social power and the central importance of international legitimacy (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Barnett and Duvall 2007). Even states as powerful as the United States are restricted and conditioned by the normative context in which they make decisions.

Identity and Narrative

As noted, constructivists view identity as central to the dynamics and practices of global politics. For constructivists, we cannot know ‘what we want’ unless we know ‘who we are’, a notion articulated by President Obama in 2008. Put another way, the way in which the core values of a particular political community are denned at a given moment will underpin the (foreign policy) goals of that community and potentially also the way in which it will go about attempting to realize or advance them. This view stands in opposition to traditional assumptions of national interests determined by the structure of the international system and actions determined by varying levels of material capacity.

The notion of mutual constitution is particularly important for constructivist views of identity, not least as it applies to security policy and practice. Some (more conventional) constructivists tend to focus on the role of sedimented discourses of identity almost compelling actors to engage in particular types of action (see Katzenstein 1996), while other (more critical) constructivists tend to focus on the role of strategic actors in enabling policy through instrumentally locating that policy in particular narratives of identity and marginalizing others (Barnett 1999). However, as more sophisticated variants of these approaches argue (see Fierke 1998; McSweeney 1999; Williams 2007), any sharp distinction between agents (political leaders, for example) and structures (discourses of identity, for example) is imperfect. The reality is of course that some identity narratives might be more powerful and resonant than others, providing both an immediate limit to alternative stories of a group’s core values and militating against the emergence of a strategic actor not already implicated by such narratives or discourses. But even in these contexts there are possibilities for variation, both in terms of the
In the case of US counterterrorism since 2001, the key agents constructing the global counterterrorism campaign - the Bush administration and its allies - did not have complete and unfettered freedom in its construction. Relatively sedimeted and powerful historical and identity discourses certainly predisposed key political actors, media, and the broader populace to particular interpretations of September 11, and particular political responses to it (Jackson 2011). In an immediate sense, analyses inspired by post-structuralist approaches to the role of discourse suggest a common pattern in the elaboration of discourses of threat over the course of the twentieth century. The positioning of terrorism as a fundamental and existential threat to America's core values (principally of freedom and democracy) certainly had powerful historical precedent, as analyses of the Cold War (Campbell 1992) and Ronald Reagan's first 'war on terrorism' (Jackson 2006) suggest. Importantly, Cramer (2007) suggests that over time such designations and responses to threat helped established a militarized political culture that in turn might be linked to the nature of the response to the threat of terrorism. And the sedimentation of freedom and democracy as core American values can also be viewed as a powerful narrative of identity, linked to the notion of the United States as the 'Chosen Nation' or 'light on the hill' (Hughes 2003). The power of these stories of identity and history certainly predisposed the Bush administration to a particular type of response to the September 11 attacks, and they have continued to influence Obama's practices of counterterrorism since then (see McKrisken 2012; Jackson 2014).

Notwithstanding the power of these understandings, most constructivist analysts would suggest that there remained room for choice and strategic action in both advancing particular understandings of identity or history, and in linking them to counterterrorism. Narratives are central in this regard, understood here as particular stories about who we are that are linked — through framing - to particular policy action (see Barnett 1999). For constructivists, myths, historical parallels, symbols, and ideas can be deployed instrumentally by elites as a kind of 'symbolic technology' (Laffey and Weldes 1997) to enable action and the actors who undertake them. The initial political choice to represent the counterterrorism campaign as a 'war' and September 11 as an 'act of war'; to link the event itself to Pearl Harbor and the threat posed to that of communists or Nazis; to invoke the language of 'good' and 'evil'; to define intervention in Iraq and elsewhere as consistent with the goals of 'freedom' and 'democracy'; and to link the narrative of the 'Chosen Nation' to the administration's broader position on multilateralism, among a range of other identity narratives (on these points, see Jackson 2005, 2011) must be recognized as just that: a choice. These were choices arguably defined in such a way as to speak to a particular set of audiences and marginalize alternative accounts of US identity and foreign policy (see Cramer 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2007). They were certainly neither inevitable nor rooted in rational assessment or investigation, a point applicable also to assessments of the extent of the terror threat (Kaufmann 2004).

It is important to reiterate here, as constructivists argue, that foreign and security policy is a site of inter-subjective contestation and negotiation about the nature of a particular political community's core values, the threats to those values, and the means that might be employed to advance or preserve those values. This contestation and negotiation takes place in the context of significant power discrepancies and a constraining set of socio-cultural norms and structures, but is ultimately one in which a range of actors seek to develop accounts of political action that resonate with who a particular political community considers itself to be. In this sense identity is central to interests and to the dynamics of world politics, and recognizing its role gives us a richer understanding of US foreign policy, particularly as it relates to counterterrorism in the post-September 11 era.
Change

The above account of the relationship between identity, narratives, and resonance suggests an almost permanent state of instability in global politics and in the levels of legitimacy the United States might enjoy in its prosecution of international counterterrorism, for example. If contestation and negotiation are relatively permanent features of the processes through which foreign policy is constructed, then constantly shifting policies and practices might be expected in response to interpretations of new events and dynamics. But constructivists are generally eager to point out that such an image of flux and instability potentially overstates the case for possibilities for change. In the context of US counterterrorism, the constant reiteration of its central principles and the institutionalization of practices tied to it mean that counterterrorism has become a powerful discourse and set of material interests, providing a lens through which a range of policy is viewed across all sectors of society (see Jackson 2011, 2014). It is significant to note here that presidential candidate Obama opposed the occupation of Iraq, suggesting that the amount of resources committed to the invasion and long-term occupation of Iraq served to undermine the real goals of fighting Al Qaeda. After his election, he subsequently followed through on his promise to withdraw US troops from Iraq. However, such an approach does not fundamentally contest the overall thrust of US counterterrorism (Jackson 2014); rather, it reinforces its position of dominance by using it as a standard against which foreign policy is judged and a lens through which foreign policy generally is viewed. The dominance of this discourse, and its continuation under Obama, has become possible through its institutionalization within and constant reiteration across American society and government.

In the first instance, the core narratives, assumptions, and approaches of counterterrorism discourse have been institutionalized in, among other things: government departments like the Department of Homeland Security; legislation such as the PATRIOT Acts; security doctrines, action plans, strategic plans, surveillance, and reporting programmes; reorganization and reforms to the security services, policing, the military, the justice system, immigration, banking regulations; political debate and speech-making; lobby groups and think tanks; and many other related activities and actors. Importantly, the discourse has also been institutionalized in counter-terrorism activities and programmes at the international level in the UN, EU, OSCE, and NATO, suggesting a normative spread of the 'War on Terror' paradigm beyond the United States. A range of analysts also point to the ways in which counterterrorism and its central assumptions are consistently communicated through government, the media, academia, and in popular culture and have become a part of contemporary American life (see, for example, Silberstein 2002; Croft 2006; Jackson 2011, 2014). These analysts point to the role of a range of actors in promulgating elements of the War on Terror discourse, from public bodies’ information campaigns (e.g. FEMA's Are You Ready? booklet) to retailers’ marketing of terror-related products (e.g. the sale of home WMD decontamination kits) and representations of the 'ubiquitous' terror threat in media and popular culture (see Croft 2006). Across American politics and society, counterterrorism has become a living discourse which creates a shared understanding of the new 'reality', and which creates a 'grid of intelligibility' through which to interpret events and make decisions. This shared understanding also provides a cultural resource which political elites can draw upon when trying to legitimize or 'sell' new policies and programmes.

But while constructivists have acknowledged that foreign policy discourses can become sedimented or dominant, the focus on negotiation and contestation enables some recognition of the possibility for change. Certainly, and as noted, constructivists have long argued that normative change is possible through strategic actors acting as norm entrepreneurs or revisionists, altering the normative structure of international society over a period of time. Constructivists have suggested that even structural change in global politics and the most important dynamics of global interaction are possible through effective strategic action. Karin
Fierke (1997), for example, argued in her analysis of the end of the Cold War that Gorbachev was able to act as a crucial agent of change through acting ‘as if another set of rules for the Cold War game (associated with a zero-sum security logic, suspicion, and militarism) were in place. More specifically, a range of contemporary analyses of US counterterrorism have pointed to possibilities for change through successful contestation in the form of the failure of political leaders to meet words with deeds. Drawing on critical theoretical insights of immanent critique, these approaches suggest that the fissures, inconsistencies, and tensions in counterterrorism discourse and justifications for policy provide resources for realizing change (Fierke 2007: 167-85; Krebs and Lobasz 2007; McDonald 2007b; McDonald and Jackson 2008).

While a number of analyses suggest that Obama is not a committed change agent in relation to counterterrorism (see McKrisken 2011, 2012; Jackson 2014), the second term of his presidency provides new opportunities for contestation and changes in some of the dominant narratives related to counterterrorism. At the least, Obama’s rearticulation of America’s commitment to ‘freedom and democracy’ has been criticized on the basis of the erosion of civil liberties through anti-terror legislation; the willingness of the US administration to diplomatically support allies despite their human rights abuses; and the rising civilian death-tolls in those countries being ‘liberated’ through militarized intervention, particularly in relation to Obama’s targeted killing programme. And of course a range of critics (and increasingly, branches of government) have suggested that the means employed by US counterterrorism are counterproductive. Here, critics suggest that military responses like drone warfare are likely to breed alienation, marginalization, and resentment that provide fertile ground for terrorists; that they are likely to make participant states targets of terrorism; and even that they undermine real security through diverting significant resources that might be spent on other ‘security’ programmes, from intelligence-gathering to healthcare or responses to environmental disasters (on these points, see McDonald 2007b; McDonald and Jackson 2008).

These criticisms constitute potentially promising avenues for successful contestation even of a discourse as sedimented and institutionalized as US counterterrorism discourse. And while the tools of immanent critique are more readily associated with critical theory than constructivism, constructivism’s focus on the role of contestation and negotiation align themselves well with the specific suggestions for (emancipatory) change found in critical theory. Constructivists suggest that large-scale public discourses such as the ‘War on Terror’ or the Cold War discourse before it are never entirely stable or hegemonic. Rather, they are inherently unstable, contradictory, vulnerable to destabilization, and prone to contestation; and in order to persist they must be continuously reproduced socially and forcefully defended by their supporters. Change is not always easy (Jackson 2014), but constructivists are right to acknowledge its possibility and identify processes through which it might be realized.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this chapter, constructivism is less a theory of international relations than a broader social theory that informs how we might approach the study of world politics. Indeed, this point has been noted by critics, who suggest that the breadth of constructivism is such that it militates against discrete forms of political analysis. Anything, for critics, might be explained or understood through constructivist analysis, although little predicted (Booth 2007: 153). At times, especially on questions of normative commitments and epistemology, the gap between conventional and more critical variants of constructivism appears large indeed. Critics from more radical perspectives suggest that (conventional) constructivist approaches give too much ground to traditional approaches on questions of epistemology and have problematic assumptions of the possibility for strategic action by political agents (Zehfuss 2002), while more traditional analysts suggest that the focus on ideational
approaches risks downplaying the central role of material factors and hard power in the
dynamics of world politics (Mearsheimer 1995).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage with these criticisms systematically,
although some raise important questions about future directions in constructivist research.
Constructivist approaches are certainly strong in theory on the question of the mutual
constitution of agents and structures, but their analyses at times suggest either independent
instrumental actors dissociated from society or 'cultural dupes' compelled to adhere to pre-
existing identity discourses. Similarly, while constructivists have responded convincingly to the
suggestion that they ignore material factors (pointing out that it is through the ideational that the
material is given meaning) the overwhelming focus of analysis on incremental progressive
normative change (regarding slavery, colonization, environmental change, human rights, and so
on) does little to dispel the myth that constructivists are unable to account systematically for
power politics. The increasing prevalence of constructivist analyses in international relations
literature suggests it will become more rather than less prominent as a framework for the study
of world politics in the foreseeable future. In this context, the nature of responses to criticisms or
tensions in the theory could feasibly have implications for the broader study of international
politics: the gaps and silences of the field and the central axes of debate between scholars.

We have argued here that constructivism provides a powerful lens through which to
understand US foreign policy, particularly as it relates to the continuities of counterterrorism
over the past decade or more. In drawing attention to the mutual constitution of structures and
agents; the inter-subjective social construction of world politics; and the role of ideational factors
such as norms, identity, and narratives, constructivism is able to offer rich insights into US
foreign policy in the 'War on Terror' era, particularly in illuminating the core question of how it
became possible. And while helping us understand the constitution of the present,
constructivism also has an often overlooked capacity to provide a framework for understanding
and imagining change.

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Notes

1 Indeed this is suggested by prominent realists' criticism of intervention in Iraq as an
abdication of national responsibility. See Mearsheimer and Walt (2003).
2 See Adler (1997). This is especially true of Alexander Wendt (1999), who sought to
position his work as a middle ground between positivist and post-positivist approaches through
employing an epistemology consistent with the former and, an ontology of the latter.
3 This point echoes Quentin Skinner's argument that even those determined to work outside
existing norms must engage with the existing normative context in order to do so, a point
captured in his oft-quoted observation that revolutionaries 'are obliged to march backwards into
battle'. See Tully (1988). We thank Cian O'Driscoll for drawing this to our attention.
4 The full definition of torture under art. 1 of the 1984 Convention against Torture is
5 For an application of this insight to US foreign policy in the 'War on Terror', see for
example, Neta Crawford (2003b).
6 On the latter, Michael Williams (2007: 25-31) employs Bourdieu's conception of habitus in
examining the security-identity relationship to suggest the importance of recognizing that even
strategically-minded political actors do not stand outside a community in deploying narratives to enable preferred outcomes, but are a product of (or at least implicated in) the social and cultural context in which they act.

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