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STILL MISSING THE OTHER HALF

World making *and* sense making

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The *world* as (we think) we know it must somehow be implicated [by the “turn to theory” in international relations and international law, AW]. This world is neither the natural world as such nor the sum of every single person’s experience. Instead it is the *modern* world, the world of *our* experience, the world we moderns have made for ourselves.¹

(Onuf 1994, 3–4; emphases in original)

Introduction: people – rules – society

Nick Onuf’s work, which has long acquired a firm place on required reading lists in political science, international relations theories and international relations.² Like all major intellectual contributions, the main message of his oeuvre leads beyond the confines of the academic ivory tower. By putting rules at the centre of his encompassing efforts to explain the mutual constitution of people and society (Onuf 2013, 4), Onuf’s work harbours a forceful and convincing invitation to act. His text works as an encompassing speech act to the community of Constructivist hearers, to responsibly engage Constructivist theory. The call entails for us to make the most of the tools Onuf lays in front of us and to apply them in order to make sense of the world, by accepting that it is our world, and one that is of our making (if not, of our own choosing). While adopting the social Constructivist paradigm of world making, which becomes possible by bestowing agency on those who re-enact the rules and created institutional patterns in the process (2013, 5, 8). Onuf also engages in the normative project of sense making which is made possible by turning to sets of rules and institutional patterns constituted in earlier times. Both world making and sense making involve agency, which is to a certain extent the readers’ (as the hearers of Onuf’s speech act) choice. “Exercising choices, agents act on, and not just

in, the context within which they operate, collectively changing its institutional features, and themselves, in the process" (2013, 5–6). Reading Onuf's theoretical texts with the benefit of hindsight following a string of intellection interactions over the past decade, they have almost acquired the form of speech acts themselves. For, if a speech act is defined as the "act of speaking in a form that gets someone else to act" (Onuf 2013, 10), and if hearers are required in order to turn an assertive speech act into an accepted proposition (2013, 120), then surely, Onuf's engagement with the rules of international society is an invitation for his readers to engage with his speech acts about them. The concept of 'rules' is not only the mid-point linking people and society, it is the central focus of Onuf's manifold theoretical deliberations about the roots, the process and the progress of international relations as a social practice carrying Classical constitution over modern institutions into late-modernity. Constructivism's objective is therefore studying and, thereby, reconstituting this social practice. For:

Constructivism holds that people make society, and society makes people. This is a continuous, two-way process. In order to study it, we must start in the middle, so to speak, because people and society, always having made each other, are already there and just about to change. To make a virtue of necessity, we will start in the middle, between people and society, by introducing a third element, *rules*, that always links the other two elements together. Social rules (the term *rules*, includes, but is not restricted to, legal rules) make the process by which people and society constitute each other continuous and reciprocal.

(Onuf 2013, 4)

The point of the following is to appreciate this research objective by critically engaging with it. Two aspects will be addressed in particular. The *first* aspect concerns the missing other half, by which the stress on world making rather than sense making of an emerging neo-Constructivist generation is highlighted. The *second* aspect concerns the question of agency in Onuf's world. For, Onuf defines international relations as relations among countries (2013, 4). Is the project of sense making, however, possible at all, if world making is primarily understood as a process that involves the constitution of international society through interactions among countries? And does the principle of heteronomy (as partnership among 'brothers' [sic] (Onuf 2009, 1)) offer a viable alternative for twenty-first century stable and peaceful international relations, beyond contesting the principle of anarchy? The two aspects will be discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter. By elaborating on the 'missing half', the following *first* section addresses the origin and development of the two makings. The *second* section critically assesses the conception of agency in international relations, juxtaposing Onuf's international relations (countries) with Wiener's inter-national relations as inter-cultural relations (agency with distinct national roots). And finally the *third* section discusses the challenge of sense making as the missing other half.

The missing half

With his early claim that the world is “of our making” (Onuf 1989), Onuf also connects the act of engaging in the process of “making sense” of the world (Onuf 2013). While in his most recent book the metaphor of “work” tells us “how pervasive social construction is, even in the absence of immediate or conscious design” (Onuf 2013, 33–34), the world making is but one half of the two ‘makings’ that turn the world into “our world”. In turn, sense making follows the assumption “that parts working together constitute working wholes” (Onuf 2013, xv). That is, the task of re-/constituting the substance remains, as “we make the world make sense to us by making it work for us” (Onuf 2013). And by calling for the reconstruction of the enlightenment project from the ground up, Onuf places himself squarely in distance from post-modern constructionists, while working with the insights of Kant and Aristotle as ultimately constitutive for the rules of modernity he critically engages with today. It is in that sense that Onuf comes to qualify himself as both a Kantian Constructivist and a post-Kantian. Enter, the obligation that we – as academic thinkers – have to the project of making worlds and making sense.

As the introductory quote indicates, the fact that we are responsible for the world of our making, that is, we do bear an ongoing obligation to make sense of it and keep making that so. In my reading this is a call for agency, but an agency that is not exclusively directing their view towards the future (of social construction). Yet, the second half has gone missing as Constructivist generations developed. How this happened and to what degree it was achieved, remains to be more fully explored and accounted for. Curiously, however, it appears as if, despite the enormous popularity his work has generated, especially among younger generations of international relations scholars, that invitation to act still remains to be fully embraced. Much work thrives on the social construction of this and that, but ultimately leaves the very practice of sense making to one side. How to embrace this double act of ‘making’ has been laid out in front of us by: (1) Onuf’s numerous texts; (2) the scholarship that has developed in close connection with these texts including Kratochwil as well as Fierke, Gould, Kornprobst, Lynch, Prügl and Zehfuss, in particular; and (3) numerous direct conversations with colleagues and students at international workshops and conferences as well as in classrooms around the world.

The following section begins with the observation that while social Constructivists have whole-heartedly embraced the part about the social construction of reality, many – dare we use the word – neo-Constructivists of the younger generations have left behind the deeper questions of how norms “work” that were raised by the founding fathers of the movement (Kratochwil 1984; Onuf 2013). Instead, they have become besotted – some would think obsessed – with methodological detail, thereby leaving the bigger questions of how the world might actually be enabled to achieve peaceful progress and to normatively advance, based on serious contestations, to the former. In my reading, Onuf always refers to both methodological detail and the larger normative questions in order to advance knowledge.³ It remains for us to pick up that ball running. The following section suggests one way of doing this by focusing on

Onuf's instructions on 'promise' and 'obligation' as the pre-conditions for 'normativity' and the special role Onuf's core concept of 'rules' has for this project, noting, in particular that "obligation is the beginning of normativity, but only a beginning" (Onuf 2013, 121). The interrelation between these concepts demonstrates the importance of the speech act as a rule-making requirement, in the wider context of large historical change (compare e.g., Tilly, Skocpol and Hobsbawm). Together they transport a sense for constructive contingency not reduced to heuristics. Yet, the latter theories seem to have become the 'missing other half' in much of the neo-Constructivist literature that is more preoccupied with the techniques of social science than with its role as a thing and a process to advance knowledge.

Representation and instantiation of rules through performative language

In the form of a speech act, the word is the concept that is central to the salvation of the enlightenment project based on the "reconstruction from the ground up" (Onuf 1994, 4). True to his perception of not only society, but also scholarship as "a thing and a process, a series of texts and, in a familiar simile, a conversation through texts" (Onuf 1994, 1), Onuf notes, that this "conversation is public" (1994, 1). "Through these conversations causes are promoted, allies secured, empires built, egos gratified, scores settled, reputations made, and, most of us would like to think, knowledge advanced" (Onuf 1994, 2). And not surprisingly, some of his sharpest observations on the progress of others (or the lack of it) with regard to sense making were made in academic debates at international events – such as, for example, the Roundtable at the International Studies Association meeting in San Diego 2012 from which the present volume emerged.

Attention to the social construction of anything requires bringing the two makings – *world* making and *sense* making – together: a process which Onuf has identified as siding with the inductive and reconstructive approaches to the social sciences and philosophy. Both have been formative for scholarship that critically builds on and moves beyond the leading assumptions of 'late-modern' processes of world development. Reconstruction and induction are the matching methodological inclinations required to pursue this goal. The now well-known theory which has moved this project on (i.e., the project of Constructivism) expresses Onuf's "belief that individuals and society continuously constitute each other through the medium of *rules*, and that *rules* depend on the performative power of language." This power lies in the instantiation of reason rather than in the representation of "the world as it is" (Onuf 1994, 4, emphasis added). Onuf's insistence on the performative effect of language sits well with his Aristotelian roots. It holds despite his clearly stated allegiance with the camp of "late-modern" as opposed to "post-modern" meta-theories. In fact, it is quite important for the challenge of making sense which this chapter identifies as the missing half of making worlds. The interesting twist here comes to the fore in the perception of Onuf's work by others who take it

mainly as a post-modern inspiration, thereby overlooking his insistence on conducting the reconstruction of the enlightenment project from the "ground up". Therefore, part of the theory remains unexplored or at least lagging behind. Yet, it is this late-modern theory which has most decidedly driven Onuf's project and taken it further towards becoming an important bridge between Political Theory and IR Theory (for instance in Onuf 2009, 1–2). The following section elaborates upon this point.

Inter-national relations under the rule(s) of international society?

"Aristotle's general model of social relations ineluctably leads to forms of rule" (Onuf 2009, 8). A central mark of Onuf's project of reconstituting international society is the notion that these rules begin from the mind and are generated through iterated relations among partners. The result is an international society, which has emerged through mutual constitution. While it binds states as sovereign partners, it does so through the process of mutual constitution, rather than – liberal – choice. Membership in this heteronomous international society is not as easily reversible as that in liberal communities or Hobbesian polities that have been set up under the assumption of anarchy. For these societies build on these socially constructed rules that bind together partners – on an individual level as well as in international relations among states:

Thanks to the principle of sovereignty and the practice of recognition, states have made themselves partners (friends of sorts) in an exclusive club. They are formal equals, possessed of rights and duties, always free to choose their friends (of another sort), rivals or enemies. When one partner no longer wishes to be a rival, for example, then the rivalry ends, but not the underlying partnership. Clearly this is not anarchy, whatever scholars of the field of international relations want to think.

(Onuf 2009, 9)

Instead, the reconstruction of partnership relations accounts for the constitution of the recognition of sovereignty by states due to, firstly, their social relationship as partners (heteronomy), and secondly, their role as members of the society of states regulated by the principle of *sovereignty* (international society).

The question that is raised for the state-plus world in the twenty-first century is whether we can still count on this type of social recognition without falling into the trap of handling international society as an ontological given? For it is the assumption of the powerful liberal community of values as the type of quasi-global polity that is grounded on the United Nations' founding documents which has contributed to the misleading assumption of Western liberal scholars that blue-printing United Nations (UN) norms will be desirable or even feasible to any actor involved in the process of norm implementation other than the norm-entrepreneurs

themselves. The failure of this liberal community assumption has been handed to us by the current situation of multiple crises in the world (including the constant crisis in the Middle East, the more recent crises in the WANA region, crises in the Ukrainian–Russian border region, crises generated by the Islamic State atrocities, and, most recently, the looming global rule of law crisis that is fabricated at the US White House under the lead of President Trump). The concept of mutual constitution, however, implies the ongoing input of society as the thing and the process. That is, “by making, following and talking about rules people constitute the multiple structures of society; through such rules societies constitute people as agents.” Accordingly, the “co-constitution of people and societies is a continuous process” (Onuf 2009, 6–7).

Experience and expectation weigh in on the power of social recognition as a socially constituted habit that warrants obligation with customary norms. Onuf brings this social experience to bear when discussing the contested notion of Kant’s principle of hospitality (2009, 11, referring to Kant’s Third Definitive Article; Kant 1984; Kant 1991, 105–106). While some Neo-Kantian cosmopolitans take the principle of hospitality to include friendship,⁴ Onuf rightly notes that Kant never intended friendship to be involved in the principle of hospitality (see also Waldron in his rebuttal of Benhabib; Waldron et al. 2006). Nonetheless, true to his Constructivist colours, Onuf considers that those expecting hospitality displayed towards strangers when knocking at foreign houses far afield will do so based on experience. “[N]ot knowing what local custom requires, the stranger has cause to expect hospitality only insofar as such customs are to be found in many places” (Onuf 2009, 11). But this reliance on customary norms bears a certain risk. Drawing from the experience of recent encounters between foreigners and local residents, the principle of hospitality has turned into a contested norm, and relying on compliance with it after crossing the borders between distinct societies may become a matter of life or death. This includes the experience of foreign aid workers being taken hostage or worse, as well as that of refugees moving along trails that mostly involve movements from the global South to the North. Notably, these encounters not only contest the Kantian principle of hospitality as an organising principle facilitating the implementation of world citizenship and, through its iterated practice, a global constitution (Kant 1984, 22). But they also raise questions about the power of norms within the global realm, more generally.

This chapter argues that in order to constructively engage with that conflictive potential of norms, and so long as inter-national relations are understood as inter-cultural relations, the erstwhile question “why do states comply with international law?” (Koh 1997) requires rephrasing in two significant ways. *Firstly*, given that compliance with inter-nationally constituted norms is no longer an exclusive issue of states, research on obligation requires a better understanding of what kind of encounters are at stake. *Secondly*, given that obligation is always understood to be the result of an interactive process, it is suggested to rephrase the question and ask: why *should* actors comply with norms in inter-national relations? What are the normative and practical conditions that make actors comply and thus consider legal obligations as legitimately

of “their” concern (compare Kahn 2000)? In a way the challenge is a classic paradox (i.e., a paradox that can never be solved) insofar as that obligation with international texts – in the absence of a community – cannot draw on the fundamental constitutional norms and the constitutional frame that fixes obligation based on fundamental constitutional principles in the domestic context of national states or other contexts that allow for the stipulation of legally binding norms such as, for example, regional organisations.

To address these questions, the following section turns to Onuf’s work on the constitution of international society as a contingent process, based on his central dictum that “international society is a thing *and* a process” (Onuf 1994, 1, emphasis in original). I argue that, firstly, Onuf’s contingent conception of international society as entailing both material and intersubjective dimensions is crucial for the discussion of the contested conception of ‘obligation’ in inter-national relations and international law (Abbot et al. 2000; Finnemore and Toope 2001; Wiener 2004; Richmond 2012); and secondly, that in light of the changing normative pull of the international legal order in the new millennium, Onuf’s detailed elaboration on the social construction of the rules that constitute international society does offer important guidance for research operationalization, insofar as it allows for the conceptualization of stability based on both continuity and change.⁵

World making and sense making

The observation that normativity follows promise and obligation only under certain conditions opens an important angle for research on norm-generative practices within the larger process of constituting international society. It follows that in order to constitute shared understanding of normativity in the global realm we need to recall both the *beginning* of obligation – that is, the speech act of promise and its acceptance and the *generation* of normativity through a series of further speech acts. In general terms a speech act is “an utterance that serves a function in communication”⁶ and is an act in itself. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Austin and Searle, political theorists and international relations theorists have turned to speech act theory in order to relate meaning and practice. As Charles Taylor notes, for example, “[t]he practice not only *fulfills the rule*, but also *gives it concrete shape in particular situations*. Practice is [. . .] a continual ‘interpretation’ and reinterpretation of what the rule really means.”⁷ IR theorists have used the concept to explore the impact of utterances in international interactions as contingent yet constitutive of international relations (Fierke and Wiener 1999; Adler 2008; Pouliot 2010; Zaiotti 2011). According to Onuf, three distinctive and mutually exclusive types of speech acts matter for this chain of conversations: “They are assertive speech acts (I state that . . .), directive (I request that . . .), and commissive (I promise that . . .)” (Onuf 1994, 10). These speech acts are conceptualized as the locus of performative speech and hence the basis of rule-making. To reconstitute the emergence of normativity through social interaction therefore means to begin with this “primary unit of performative speech” then (Onuf 1994) Given the required probing character of these interactions, I will call this string of conversations a sequence of contestations, which ensue from the

'beginning' and are constitutive towards sustainable normativity. Both the beginning and the follow-up contestations are expressed through social interactions. After all, obligations follow the mutual agreement on a promise (Onuf 2013, 120). That is, in the case that A promises to protect B, if B obliges with condition X, and B accepts condition X, in order to obtain protection from A, *then* A's promise is valid and B's expectation of protective action is reasonable. "When *hearers* refuse to accept speech acts, they deny obligation in any measure" (Onuf 2013, 121, emphasis added). So who are the 'hearers' then? Are they there, or just 'out there'?⁸

The point comes to the fore most clearly and pressingly in light of the development of diplomatic practice. Watson refers to diplomacy as a "dialogue between states" (Watson 1982). Communication, and particularly communication to the end of ameliorating or facilitating the recourse to war, has been at the heart of the diplomatic tradition. Yet, diplomacy has not been a static concept and has changed over time. Public diplomacy, or the attempt by states to communicate with foreign publics, has dramatically changed the nature of this communication, as have processes of globalization, which, particularly since the end of the Cold War, has seen an expanding number of actors, from individuals to the media to NGOs, involved in communications regarding conflict or war. While diplomatic rules have, for a long time, provided a secure environment in which diplomats interacted according to well-known societal patterns (Adler and Pouliot 2012), this safe environment has dramatically changed with the establishment of diplomacy 2.0. Accordingly, we need to specify the question about the sequence of 'promise', 'obligation' and 'normativity'. For example, who are the 'hearers' conforming the promise in a world of multiple audiences, and a world where many non-Western powers, representing different cultural positions and often the victims of past diplomacy, play an increasingly important role? This perspective presents a theoretical alternative to liberal approaches that would expect diplomats to be operating within a community of shared values and norms. In turn, two changes in particular matter for today's diplomatic interaction in a globalized setting. Firstly, contemporary diplomacy involves communication with multiple types of audience, including various publics in addition to the closed circle of diplomats. Secondly, it increasingly highlights the role of cultural diversity in shaping the communications or miscommunications that form the diplomatic process.⁹

Engaging the mutual constitution of the rules of society and the individual, the contingency of legal order and individual encounters that shape our understanding and making sense of the world, requires special attention. Accordingly, a research programme on world making and sense making would need to focus on the normative contingency of world making. Taking account of social practice in context by reconstructing the normative structure of meaning-in-use and the way it is enacted in inter-national encounters would be a first step to recover the missing half. This focus is important with regard to answering Martha Finnemore's erstwhile question whether "legal norms, as a type, operate differently from any other kinds of norms in world politics?" (Finnemore 2000, 701). By suggesting that this might not be the case, Finnemore has opened a window towards refining the question of obligation.

And as consistent and critical Constructivists have demonstrated, the implementation of international law depends on the “normative baggage” that the norm addressee has gathered through social interaction in context and over time. If this normative substance matches the norm (or rule), the likelihood of obligation grows, if it does not it would be indicated by a clash of meanings, followed by contestation rather than obligation. The researcher’s onus is therefore on systematic empirical research, in order to reveal hidden and changed meanings of a norm as part of a normative structure of meaning-in-use (Milliken 1999).

To recover the ‘missing half’ it is suggested to apply more diverse and encompassing conceptions of agency leading beyond international relations among countries towards involving inter-national relations among individuals. Based on the norm-generative practices of and through inter-national relations, it is possible to re-constitute re-enactments of the respective normative structure of meaning-in-use and their effect on world and sense making. This approach to sense making addresses the contingency of norms understood as a typological term, which is used in order to distinguish three types of norms (i.e., as fundamental principles, organising principles or standardised procedures) and how they work at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of global governance (Wiener 2014). In doing so, it includes the interaction that precedes obligation as central to generating sustainable normativity in the global realm and in addition to the mere interactions of countries. It is argued that in order to assess motives for (or against) obligation with international norms (including fundamental norms, organising principles and standardised procedures) it is necessary to reconstruct the ‘interactions’ that have taken place when the norms were constituted (Zwingel 2012, 122). In other words, in order to focus on the sustainable quality of normativity in international society, it is necessary to first establish whether interactive acts of promising and hearing actually did take place, and that, therefore obligation exists; and then second, examine sequenced contestations in order to identify the involved actors (for example, which type of actors are involved; are stakeholders with legitimate claims in a specific sector of global governance included?). To conduct research according to such a bifocal approach (i.e., linking normative theorising with empirical research) it would be helpful to consider for example UN basic texts, including the UN Charter and UN Security Council Resolutions, as ‘speech acts’. Subsequently, research would assess whether a sense of obligation is detectable. To that end, empirical research would follow the sequence of contestations. Based on the “cycle of contestation” (Wiener 2014, 21), this sequence enables the extension of contested normativity towards including social recognition and cultural validation as two additional normative segments: both are required in order to make the formal validity of norms comprehensible for a world of inter-nationals with distinct cultural background experiences. Norms (or in Onuf’s language “rules”) could thus be enabled to “work” (to use Kratochwil’s words) beyond the constitutive stage of norm implementation, thus reflecting the possibility of an agency that engages with “rules” not only in the middle of society and people but in the middle of inter-cultural encounters in inter-national relations.

Notes

- 1 The expression of incompleteness refers to the lyrics “still missing my other half” of the song *Good Night Ladies*.
- 2 Note that Onuf uses capital letters to distinguish the field (International Relations) from the object (international relations) of study (Onuf 2013). I usually apply the same rule, adding a third use, namely the interaction among actors of different national roots (international relations) (Wiener 2008; 2014).
- 3 Compare especially (Onuf 1989); (Onuf 1994); (Onuf 2009); (Onuf 2011) and (Onuf 2013).
- 4 For this misleading interpretation of Kant’s concept of “Hospitalität (Wirtbarkeit)” compare for example (Benhabib 2006) and the critical comment by Waldron in the same volume (Waldron, Benhabib, and Post 2006).
- 5 For a similar perspective compare other critical work on norm-generative practices of Constitutionalism and global governance, for instance James Tully’s *Public Philosophy in a New Key* (Tully 2008a; Tully 2008b).
- 6 See the definition provided by the University of Minnesota’s Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/definition.html.
- 7 See (Taylor 1993, 57); emphasis added AW.
- 8 On the concept of ‘listening’, compare Dimitri Karmis’s recent research (Karmis 2014).
- 9 These insights draw on a symposium on *diplomatic dialogue*, which was organised by Karin Fierke and Antje Wiener and held at the University of Hamburg in June 2009 with financial support by the Volkswagen Foundation.

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