

# Preface

Why a Book on Contestation? This book's theory of contestation is motivated by two recent developments in the field of international relations theories. *First*, most constructivist and liberal researchers in the field of international relations are by and large in agreement that the realist view, which considers states as the main explanatory source of war and peace in a context of international (read: interstate) relations that are merely structured by the principle of anarchy is no longer adequate to understand global governance in the 21st century. Instead, constructivists have begun to examine state behaviour as bound by communities with given identities. In these communities, norms as routinized practices have turned into unwritten laws, revealing specific societal patterns that inform behaviour. Subsequently, those in the know obtain guidance. Yet, does replacing the state ontology by a community ontology really help, given that international relations is practice by actors who move across borders in the increasingly open space that is created through globalisation and global governance? Knowing how to behave establishes security based on modes of presentation and forms of communication in global politics, to be sure. Yet, how do these routinized practices and unwritten norms play out once borders are crossed and contestation kicks in?

This book's theory of contestation seeks to answer that question. It argues that while the recent, 'practice' literature in international relations theory generally takes a cosmopolitan perspective rather than applying a communitarian ideal of world political organisation, the pattern of socially organised communities is problematic. For, by replacing the neo/realist assumption of interstate encounters that are diplomatic at best and belligerent at worst, the liberal constructivist reliance on communities of practice has thrown the international baby out with the bathwater. That is, if international relations are defined as relations among actors of different national roots, the community ontology makes the norm-generative practice of international relations (understood as relations among actors of different national roots) almost impossible. This situation is due to the underlying assumption that norm following (i.e. compliance with a norm) depends on the prior existence of a community providing the social environment that generates social recognition and appropriateness. Absent a community, both become impossible to obtain. The assumption that agents need to be operating within communities of practice in order for competent performance to be recognised by others (Adler and Pouliot 2011) raises two questions: First, how do communities of practice emerge,

if not through practice? Second, how is the norm-generative capability of practice addressed by the underlying community ontology?

As this book argues, the community ontology relies on a fixed community. It implies that any contestation about the normative structure of meaning-in-use, which guides actors in international relations as they enact that normative meaning, remains bracketed. This bracketing of the norm-generative dimension of practice forfeits the central interactive potential of contestation as a social practice that is not limited to notions of opposition, questioning or protest, but which also represents the basis of legitimate global governance. This matters for all research in international relations, which seeks to understand change—be it through contentious struggle of social movements, moral justifications or through more formalised practices of contestation such as deliberation or arbitration. Notably, according to this concept of community, contestation may confirm the existence of a community, yet by definition it does not have the normative power to change it.

This leads to the *second* motivation for writing a book on contestation. While ‘contestation research’ has become an accepted term in international relations (Geis et al. 2010), the concept’s meaning and analytical potential remain to be addressed beyond using the term in merely descriptive ways. Consider, for example, the suggestion to distinguish “justificatory contestation” from “applicatory contestation” (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2013: 7–8), which by and large aptly replaces the earlier Habermas inspired terminology of “arguing and bargaining” (Müller 1994, 2004; Risse 2000; Deitelhoff and Müller 2005) in international relations theories. The distinction between types of contestation will be of central importance for the range of theories on global governance and global constitutionalism, to be sure. And this book therefore addresses them in detail. Yet, it is not obvious how each of these two types of contestation actually differs from their Habermasian predecessors of arguing and bargaining.

Accordingly, a main concern is that the increasingly popular reference to ‘contestation’ comes at a loss of conceptual precision. The multiple and broad descriptive application of the concept has led to a thinning out of its analytical potential, especially with regard to the normative power of this social activity and its legitimisation potential for global governance. By undertaking critical investigations into international relations theories, this book intends to reverse that process. As a social activity with normative power, contestation still remains to be more systematically explored in order to apply the concept for research that examines contested norms and the related normative change. To recover and establish the *normative* power of contestation as a practice that is norm-generative, because it involves re-/enacting the normative structure of meaning-in-use at any time, the book turns to three *thinking tools*. The tools are conceptual stepping-stones, which are developed with reference to social science theories and public philosophy. They include the normativity premise, the diversity premise and the concept of cultural cosmopolitanism. Overall, the book’s bifocal approach, which guides this critical investigation into international relations, considers international relations as interactions that mobilise *individual* sociocultural background experience and thereby re-/enact the normative structure of meaning-in-use (Milliken 1999; Wiener 2008).

This individually diverse mobilisation of experience draws on normative roots (Reus-Smit 1997; Bjola and Kornprobst 2011). As such, its mobilisation towards contestation leads beyond the habitual application of background knowledge that is activated by mere ‘competent performance’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011). This distinction brings the norm-generative force of intersubjective practice back as a central concept in international relations theories.

This book was inspired by Jim Tully’s pioneering work on Public Philosophy, and moved along through ongoing conversations. The first draft of the manuscript was written during a writing retreat under conditions that were, in the best possible sense, conducive towards thinking (compare Hannah Arendt in Margarethe von Trotta’s recent portrait, 2013). The *Geltinger Birk*, a secluded nature reserve on the German Baltic coast, facilitated the combination of walking, thinking and writing—and ‘thinking through writing’ (Sontag 1967)—that made it possible to bring threads together and think through a theory which had been in the making over the past decade. It follows earlier work about ‘contested compliance’, for example, in the rather hasty process of enlarging the European Union eastwards, where Eastern compliance with long-probed Western norms was expected without facilitating access contestation in order to negotiate normativity prior to accession. Thinking, then, while beating the weather, is among the most favourable of conditions; working from an enclave without the constant demands, offers and temptations of the Internet. All of which allowed for a period of pure thinking, periodically enriched by interaction with nature, the elements or friendly neighbours, including not least the majestic white eagle, Canada geese gathering for their long haul towards other longitudes, and, last not least, the ever friendly black coots in their ongoing struggle for standing space on a rock protruding from the water right in front of the cottage.

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