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## THEORY TALK #11

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### PETER HAAS ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM, THE MANAGEABILITY OF THE MARKET AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

#### Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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# PETER HAAS ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM, THE MANAGEABILITY OF THE MARKET AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE



**After globalization, the environment is probably the hottest subject on the current International Relations agenda. According to Peter M. Haas, the big question is how to resolve which environmental problem, or rather: how do we govern the environment. In his quest for an answer, he focuses on the way actors learn about the environment through international and environmental regimes. In this *Talk*, Haas explains why it is important to understand how politicians frame problems, how governance precedes the market and why the environment is in most cases not a security issue.**

## **What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR?**

The biggest contemporary challenge is understanding and explaining globalization. Some of the major new or emergent forces and concepts involve multiple actors, networks, complexity, uncertainty, and framing. We need to better understand reflexive change, agency and multi-level dynamics.

The analytic challenge is to mix and match theories. It is clearly well beyond the ability of individual theories or even perspectives to provide a clear grasp on globalization.

To a large extent there seems to be a generational interregnum in terms of grand debates. Those involved in the rationality/constructivism are burnt out, and the emerging generation of scholars are more interested, rightfully so, in mid-level, more pragmatic analysis.

## **What is your position or response to this challenge / in this debate?**

We need a better description of legitimate authoritative relationships than the tired dichotomy of hierarchy and anarchy, which clearly doesn't apply to globalization.

Theoretically we should continue to be rigorous, and, despite the need for multi-paradigmatic approaches that remain sensitive to avoiding epistemological and ontological incompatibilities between the frameworks we are applying. Some possible examples include efforts that include

non-rational choice liberalism and constructivism; or network analysis that looks at national and international level forces.

### **How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?**

I'm not sure where I am in IR, to be honest.

History and autobiography always makes more sense looking backwards. I grew up interested in international travel and the environment. I was also inclined towards becoming an academic, as I grew up in an academic household, and it looked like a pretty good job. I guess I went into the family business, as my father is Ernst B. Haas (here is an interesting constructivist tangent about the constitutive role of relational terms: he is my father, rather than was my father. Despite the fact that the physical Ernst Haas died in 2003 he is still my father in terms of the developmental influence he had).

So international environmental politics seemed like a perfect combination of my interests. When I went to graduate school in 1979 there weren't many programs around that paid any attention to it, so I ended up at MIT where they did international science and technology, and they gave me some money.

Doing field work around the Mediterranean for my dissertation made me realize that formal rationality assumptions simply didn't apply, and what was going on was the framing effects of networks of experts. Government officials who had to formulate their countries' positions on Mediterranean pollution treaties basically admitted they had no idea what were the issues and who was responsible – they basically quoted scientific evidence from the United Nations on the respective issue, because they themselves clearly didn't have any idea what the issue was – while, in the majority of the cases, the UN agenda was not at all the appropriate one. This proved to me, that domestic accounts of materialistic interests simply didn't apply because none of these actors knew what their interests were. It also proved that international norm regimes such as those of international institutions like the UN really do change the way states think.

Thus seeing social constructivism being proven by everyday politics, my interests have morphed into globalization and governance more broadly, but I remain empirically grounded in international environmental politics because there is a long history and it so exemplifies the broader features of globalization that intrigue me.

Throughout my career I have been lucky to work with a number of other interesting scholars, so I feel I have continued to learn, even past graduate school.

### **What would it take for a student to become a specialist in IR?**

Well, specialization requires an advanced degree. As everyone else has said on your website, you have to start with a Ph.D. In the USA it is easier to get a job with a political science degree than from an interdisciplinary IR program.

Peter Katzenstein used to say it required 'fire in the belly'. Specialization also requires a good dissertation, one with a compelling question, whose answer is going to be interesting regardless of what it is. That is, a well formulated question that tells us something about politics and theories of politics regardless of whether the answer is 'yes' or 'no'.

The field seems to be growing increasingly methodologically driven. I think that is unfortunate, as it is a sign of premature maturity. People should use the methods which help them answer the questions that interest them, rather than answering the questions that can be answered by a particular technique or even techniques.

**You study the 'globalization of environmental governance'; how should we define the environment according to you? As a goal with intrinsic value in itself; as something essentially valuable for humans; or, as realists tend to do, as a means to survival or source of conflict (e.g., a security matter)?**

'Environment' is an essentially contested concept. No one has yet done a good piece on the intellectual history of the 'environment'.

I am informed to a large extent by the organizational theorists of the 1960s like Emery and Trist and Todd La Porte. The environment is the policy environment. Evolving human understanding defines which features of the environment are salient for human purposes. That definition is expanding. There are real political constraints on how broad the definition should be. This isn't a normative judgment; this is analytic based on studies of tactical and substantive linkages.

My broader argument throughout my work is that the shared understanding of the environment is expanding, as a consequence of social learning from 30 years of collective efforts at environmental regime creation that has developed incrementally. Policy makers are gradually understanding the fundamental linkages between human societies and the physical environment, as well as between policy domains that were previously regarded as discrete. I am still interested in how appreciation of environmental linkages lead to broader appreciation of policy linkages. In terms of norm development, I think that environmental preservation norms have emerged internationally after an appreciation of the causal links within the environment. Thus the emergent understanding of the environment exceeds that of realists, or of economists.

**Can environmental degradation lead to international conflict?**

I'm skeptical about the so-called environmental security agenda. [Daniel Deudney](#) to me convincingly pointed out its' limitations. One of them is that resource scarcity doesn't lead to conflict, or in a low number of cases. Another error is tactical in nature: if you frame the problem of environmental degradation as a security issue, you put Realists in the military in charge of making environmental policy. And that leads to policy outcomes we might want to avoid. It is certainly true, though, that *some* environmental issues give rise to security threats, but that's not the same as saying that every environmental threat is a problem of national security.

**Related to that question, I would like to ask what you think about debates that go on about initiatives like sustainable commerce, the underlying thought of which is that the market can govern the environment better. In other words, where lies the ultimate or biggest responsibility in the governance of the environment: with governments, companies or civil society/individuals?**

All sorts of new green markets are emerging, and increasingly (or perhaps again, with the high price of oil) people seem to be shifting towards an appreciation that environmental protection is

everyone's business. But we also know from collective action theory that nobody performs everybody's business. I think that growing concern with green business is quite salutary, but it isn't emerging from normative change. Well, maybe a little is, amongst the ranks of the Age of Aquarius higher echelon CEO's, or those who are bullied by their young children who are exposed to environmental views in school. But the larger force I believe is that of regulation and environmental governance by governments which has actually created the markets that companies are now seeking to fill. Gus Speth makes this argument in his new book, *The Bridge at the End of the World*.

**In studying environmental governance, one has to study concrete problems. But do you also distinguish a fundamental or underlying problem when thinking about environmental issues? (Like, for example, the unsustainability of our current mode of production or sub developed institutions?)**

Paul Shepherd called ecology 'the subversive science.' As I said earlier, I see dealing with environmental problems as part of a cumulative process of social learning about larger policy projects. The typical idea people have is that our current mode of production is to blame, but I'm not sure if that's always the case.

In terms of public policy there is the underlying question of finding the appropriate level of decomposability for dealing with environmental problems: which problems are solvable by which means? Not all are attributable to fundamental problems of our modern industrial system.

Consider stratospheric ozone, a little regulation and bingo, a silver bullet. Marine pollution isn't that much harder. Global warming is. Depletion of the natural resource base of the earth may be, although lets not fully discard technological change in response to price increases.

**Does saying that market incentives can help resolve environmental issues imply that these issues are not irreversible?**

I'm not sure; all environmental issues are intertwined, and the degree and rate of irreversibility probably varies per issue, which politically is good. There's simply not the political will or knowledge available to transform the nature of modern production. But dealing with problems individually is leading incrementally to environmental progress. The ozone hole is a good example of a problem dealt with in isolation. With a little bit of regulation, technological change was forced and the problem was more or less fixed. Same story for European acid rain: sometimes technical fix work. The big question is when they work and when they don't, and which environmental problems can be de-coupled and which ones can't be treated in isolation.

If you ask me which problems are irreversible, I would say climate change and the loss of biodiversity. In order to curb these problems as much as possible, it's the responsibility of social scientists to study the mechanism of broad scale social learning where governments and individuals learn of the environmental consequences of their actions, and change their behavior.

**Both science and politics are processes of 'trial and error'. Do we need an error to duly take serious environmental problems?**

Here you have to distinguish between two kinds of learning. In terms of policy learning by policy makers and diplomats, or rather, 'learning' to change political behavior, we need crises: a crisis shocks, focuses attention, and generates delegation of decisions and agency to epistemic communities, who subsequently educate and inform policy makers. Just not too big a crisis, and not too often: one Chernobyl every 20 years is enough.

In terms of 'scientific' learning, constructivism asserts that scientists can learn from other peoples' errors; scientists, if they pay attention, can just learn about other people's learning process of trials and subsequent errors, and can even point out errors in other people's trials.

**In 2002, the (then) French president Jacques Chirac openly supported a World Environmental Organization (WEO). Is a World Environmental Organization viable on the short term?**

To update that, in February 2007 he got a number of francophone countries and NGO's to endorse the proposal, and it is presently on the table at the United Nations General Assembly as part of a broader package of institutional reforms. I think that Chirac's version of a WEO is politically feasible; the German version of a GEO is not at this point. But in the end, I think that neither is the right way to go.

**In 1993, you've written a book with Robert Keohane (Theory Talk #9) called *Institutions for the Earth*; you've formulated as the biggest policy issues building national capacity, improving the contractual environment, and elevating governmental concern. Did these priorities change (and for the good or for worse) in the meantime?**

Clearly, each of the C's represents a different theoretical take on environmental governance. Calling it the 3C's was a compromise to avoid more fundamental ontological disagreements. I am happy to go along with the notion that there are different tools for different problems of environmental governance – what Oran Young has called diagnostics. But the more enduring challenge is to map which problems are hindered by what barriers, so we know which combination of Vitamin C to apply.

**What's the biggest policy issue we should work on in environmental institutions?**

In the last 10 years global climate change has become fashion and has run away with the environmental agenda. I'm just not sure whether it's the most important environmental problem for everybody in the world. We know, for example, that if saving human lives in short term at the lowest cost is the objective of the international agenda, then sewage treatment and providing clean water in Africa would save more lives at relatively cheap price by greatly reducing infant mortality rates – responsible for five percent of deaths in Africa.

**Free-market advocate [Paul Driessen](#) coined the term 'eco-imperialism' referring to the (forceful) imposition of western environmentalist views on developing countries through, for instance, the precautionary principle, corporate social responsibility, demands for sustainable development and global environmental standards. Is it politically viable to ask for example the BRICs, who are in their conception following suit in industrial development, to be more sustainable?**

That's an argument often given by the radical extreme of civil society, including free-marketeters. But protecting the global environment is basically a collective-action problem; if the BRICs don't implement more sustainable technologies, everybody is worse off. Having it on the international agenda doesn't immediately imply being colonialist or imperialist. The question is rather: do they feel guilty about contributing to global warming? And: what sorts of mechanisms would they find acceptable to address international collective action problems? We should turn the matter around and ask developing countries about how far they are willing to go in trade-offs between their own sovereign development in the short term and the quality of global sustainability in the long term.

**Last question. There's a lot of people who argue that multilateral diplomacy, that is, policy decisions flowing from negotiations between all governments of the world, is too cumbersome to address environmental problems. How to seriously address climate change without relying on multilateral diplomacy?**

Most problems require multilateral diplomacy because they're collective action problems; but there are also regional problems, that don't necessarily require such extensive international collaboration. For example: there's matters that can be resolved between the rich countries, and including the poor countries would stall the issue. The whole world together doesn't arrive at solutions. For example, it would be possible to achieve more progress on climate change in the short term through coordinated technology spending by industrial countries and BRICs rather than negotiating a successor to the Kyoto rounds. It's all a matter of addressing the relevant actors. If you manage to include a core group of large economies to pursue cleaner technologies, then the new technologies will disseminate more widely when negotiations return to multilateral diplomacy.

The thought behind this is that governance creates markets. Look at the market in 1972: there was no market, because governance was in deep crisis when the US pulled let its currency float against gold. Then political actors revive governance, and the market comes back to life. Arguing that the market is faster, stronger than states, and that MNC's require stronger global environmental governance, is forgetting that these companies operate cleaner than national companies. American multinational corporations prefer to hold one environmental policy, the one in vigor in the States, and apply it wherever they operate. The people who work for those companies have to travel a lot, and it would be economically infeasible to make them adapt to all these different policies – regardless of the content of these policies – every time they cross borders, especially if assembly lines are global as well. So MNC's aren't as bad as people say, and governance does have a hold on these issues. One should focus on influencing those national policies governments apply to their companies.

**Actively engaged in the practice of global governance, Haas is co-author of the newly published *Global Environmental Governance*, part of the Foundations of Contemporary Environmental Studies series by Island Press. Haas, who is a prolific author, coauthor and editor of books, articles and chapters, is currently working on a book about the evolution of environmental governance since 1972. He has been a consultant to the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Commission on Global Governance, and the United Nations Environment Program, and his work has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, German Marshall Fund, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Institute for the Study of World Politics, and the Gallatin Foundation.**

*Related links*

- [Haas' faculty profile at UMass Amherst](#)
- Read Haas' *Addressing the Global Governance Deficit* [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Haas' *Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination* (International Organization, 1992) [here](#) (pdf)