



## Things & Ideas: Explaining Moral Evolution in International Relations

By Amy Eckert

**Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention** by Neta C. Crawford. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 466pp.

What role do normative rules play in international relations? Skeptics might feel justified in claiming that they play no role. The recent US-led war against Iraq may render naïve the assertion that norms play any part in political life. After all, the prohibition on aggression is one of the peremptory norms of international law and enjoys widespread support. As such, the principle of nonaggression enjoys a prominent position in the UN Charter, article 2(4) of which limits the use of force to manners consistent with the Charter, which include self-defense and collective self-defense. Refraining from the use of force appears to be as settled a normative principle as possible. Yet, with the slimmest of arguments for self-defense, the United States invaded Iraq over the objections of other permanent members of the Security Council, including France and Russia, as well as opposition from Germany. These other powers were not persuaded by American claims that Iraq posed an imminent threat to global peace and security. Yet the force of this norm, even supported by the majority of the Security Council's permanent members, failed to curb an America bent on war.

In such a context, it may seem apparent that norms do not wield any influence over great powers. Yet, in some cases, even where vital national interests are at stake, norms can be influential and even determinative of the course of international relations. This is so in the case of colonialism. Why, Neta C. Crawford asks, did colonialism end while it was still profitable—or, at least, believed to be profitable—for the great powers that held colonies? If power and self-interest alone could explain international politics, the demise of colonialism while it still benefited colonial powers would be incomprehensible. In a world ruled by only power and national interest, why would powerful colonizers ever agree to yield their imperial holdings while they were still capable of holding them? Crawford herself poses the problem as follows: “why did one of the most enduring practices of world politics come to an end so close to the peak of its practice?” (2). Her question underscores the fact that slavery and colonialism disappeared while they continued to be useful (or, at least, perceived as useful) to those engaging in these practices. That this practice did come to an early end evidences the fact that norms do play an influential role over the behavior of states, even that of great powers. In addition, Crawford advances the position that norms are not simply epiphenomenal reflections of powerful parties' interests, as realists sometimes claim, because slavery and colonialism became illegitimate while the great powers still had an interest in maintaining their colonial empires.

Crawford traces the growth of these norms through her study of the arguments that contributed to the emergence of those norms.

In her sweeping work, *Argument and Change in World Politics*, Crawford examines the role of arguments, ethical and otherwise, in the context of debates over the legitimacy of slavery, colonialism, and humanitarian intervention. She develops a framework for understanding various types of argument, dividing them according to their function. These types of arguments include practical arguments, scientific arguments, ethical arguments, and identity arguments. Though they may all be advanced to persuade people of a point, perhaps even the same point, each type of argument serves a specific logical function. A practical argument, for instance, is an assertion about the best way to reach a desired goal, such as the platitude: “If you want peace, prepare for war.” A practical argument, though, is subject to attack on the bases of its feasibility and the desirability of the goal, among others. Like practical arguments, scientific arguments also address cause and effect, but they tend to focus on laws of the natural world. Scientific arguments become more persuasive as they present more plausible accounts of the natural world. Ethical arguments, by contrast, assert arguments not about how actors do behave, but how they should behave. The final type of argument, identity argument, is similar, but it rests on the self-identity of the actor asserting it. If civilized peoples do not hold slaves, colonize others, or commit aggression, and we are civilized people, then such an argument contains clear behavioral guidelines.

Underlying these various types of arguments is a larger and more significant meta-argument that provides a common epistemological and ontological framework within which the other types of arguments have meaning for their participants. Defining or redefining the terms of the meta-argument can allow an actor to control the debate and define the issues. In fact, the underlying epistemological and ontological meta-argument determines whether or not an issue is even perceived by the parties. If the meta-argument does not include a framework within which parties can understand a problem, then we may not even see an issue as a significant factor in political life. This was certainly the case with early arguments about colonialism that did not recognize the claims of those living in the colonies as relevant to the debate over colonialism as a practice. Those who succeed in defining the terms of the meta-argument, then, enjoy tremendous power over the content of the argument, including the practical, scientific, ethical, and identity arguments discussed above. Prior to particular claims being asserted, the argument may be largely won or lost on the basis of the meta-argument and its terms. It was a shift in the meta-argument that allowed opponents of slavery and colonialism to successfully alter the perception of these issues and portray them as illegitimate.

Different types of arguments become persuasive over time as the objects of the argument may come to be viewed as socially created rather than naturally fixed. Crawford’s cases of slavery and colonialism are such instances. While it was once considered natural that some people should be held as slaves or under colonial rule, over time these relationships came to be recognized as social. The significance of such a transformation is that these relationships are formed and reformed by people rather than fixed by the operation of natural laws. Natural facts are subject to the laws of science and are properly characterized as true or false. By contrast, social relationships are the subject of ethical and identity arguments that reveal them to be good or bad. It is this sort of evolution that led to the demise of colonialism. Beginning with Aristotle, the view arose that some people naturally possessed a slavish disposition, while others had the capacity to rule not only

themselves but also others. By extension, colonialists justified themselves with similar arguments about entire societies. Such societies, colonial powers asserted, were “backward” and in need of guidance from more advanced societies. In the cases of slavery and colonialism, these claims were used to justify repressive and exploitative relationships that were beneficial to the slaveholder or the colonial power. As long as they could successfully characterize these relationships as natural, and in the best interests of the subjugated party, the beneficiaries of these relationships were able to avoid the ethical issues that surrounded such arrangements. Gradually, though, the meta-argument evolved and slavery came to be seen as a social relationship governed by ethical norms rather than a natural relationship governed by scientific principle. A growing abolitionist movement successfully challenged the legitimacy of slavery, and shortly after losing its veneer of legitimacy the practice of slavery was largely eradicated.

Colonialism soon underwent a similar transformation, triggered by the abolition of slavery. Since much of colonialism’s profitability lay in slave labor, the abolition of slavery altered the economics of colonialism, though, Crawford argues, colonial powers still perceived their colonies as profitable enterprises until the point that they relinquished them. However, the abolition of slavery had a larger effect on the legitimacy of colonialism beyond this economic consequence. In Crawford’s own words, “the victory of the anti-slavery movement challenged or changed core normative beliefs about colonialism and the colonizers’ relationship to the colonized. The ‘savage’ had economic and political rights and deserved progress in both those realms” (203). The recognition of those rights not only undermined the legitimacy of slavery, but also the acceptability of colonialism, which had been justified on humanitarian grounds. If holding an individual as a slave were wrong, how could it be right to hold an entire society in subjugation? These questions arose as reports of atrocities in the colonies trickled back to Europe. Those who supported colonialism for humanitarian reasons began to lose faith in the sincerity of those who claimed to rule the colonies for the benefit of those living within the colonized societies.

The legitimacy crisis that colonialism faced began not as outright abolitionism, but as regulation. When the horrors and abuses of colonialism came to light, support for colonialism within Europe began to wane. As Europeans learned more about the realities of colonialism and the brutality often required to maintain control, they began to withdraw their approval for what they once supported as a civilizing mission. Resistance in the colonies joined forces with opposition in the metropolis. The end of World War I marked a sea change in attitudes toward colonialism. With the end of the war, the colonies of defeated powers were placed into the League of Nations mandate system. Over time, the standards applied to these mandates came to be applied to all colonies. These standards attempted, at first, only to eliminate the worst human rights abuses against those living within the colonies. Over time, international standards evolved to require that the colonial territories be administered in the best interests of those inhabiting the territories. By the time the UN took control of remaining colonial territories after WW II, these regulations came to be synonymous with self-determination and political independence for the former colonies.

Crawford considers, but rejects, arguments that decolonization resulted from causes other than the evolution of these ethical principles. Specifically, she takes up the alternative explanations of stronger liberation movements, the increasing costs of empire, and the possibility of imperial overreach (344 *et seq.*). Crawford finds these alternative explanations to be unconvincing when

compared to the account she advances. Movements opposing colonialism, she correctly notes, had never been absent. While these movements may have enjoyed broader support and better organization after the Second World War, their military strength did not compare to that of the colonial powers, even in their weakened post-war state. She likewise rejects the economic arguments, particularly in light of the fact that colonies were perceived as the economic engine that would drive the reconstruction of Europe. While the profitability of the colonies was questionable, their economic benefits were not, in fact, questioned until well after decolonization had begun. Crawford also rejects explanations drawing on imperial overreach. Two factors cited in favor of imperial overreach—the numerical advantage enjoyed by those in the colonies and the military advantage in favor of the colonial powers—remained constant, while technological innovations had reduced the logistical difficulties involved in holding colonies (350). The evidence, then, does little to support these alternative explanations for decolonization. Another alternative explanation that may be worth considering, however, questions the source of norms favoring decolonization. Neo-realists—who assert that prevailing values reflect the values of dominant powers—would argue that the significance of norms against colonialism derives from the increasingly important role played by the United States. The United States, while exercising dominion over some other territories, had eschewed creating a colonial empire of its own. A neo-realist explanation for the norms to which Crawford attributes decolonization centers on the shifting international system rather than on argument or consensus. This is an alternative explanation that Crawford does not consider.

After World War II, the world witnessed a mass wave of decolonization. Colonies attained independence despite their continuing material value to the former colonial powers. That this happened testifies to the power of norms. But norms are sometimes flouted. Crawford acknowledges this in the case of South West Africa. The ethical mandate to manage colonial territories for the benefit of their inhabitants, and with an eye toward self-governance, was ignored in the case of Namibia, where South Africa maintained its colonial regime in defiance of ethical and legal obligations to withdraw. Not until 1989 were elections held in Namibia. Up until that point, South Africa maintained its grip on Namibia despite strong pressure from Namibia and the international community (339).

This case demonstrates the limits of ethical principles and the influence that they hold over powerful states. A powerful scofflaw can, if it chooses, violate even a widely held norm, likely without serious consequences. What this means is that norms alone do not explain the entirety of international politics. Such an acknowledgement does not negate the value of norms. Neither material nor normative explanations alone can explain international politics. Both are necessary to provide a complete understanding of our world. The fact that norms ever influence behavior of states is a refutation of the view that power alone shapes our world. Moreover, to acknowledge these limitations is not to say that norms are insignificant or have no influence, even in situations where great powers do not comply with them. For instance, the United States did not comply with normative restrictions on the use of force in waging war against Iraq. But even in violating the rules, the US acknowledged their validity by attempting to characterize its behavior as preemptive self-defense. Self-defense is the one exception to the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force. While American arguments of self-defense failed to sway prospective allies, such claims underscore the validity of the rule against aggression and illustrate the influence of these rules. Though the US acted in violation of the rules, it did not act without reference to them.

The significance of norms in international relations in general, and decolonization in particular, has long been recognized, and the nature of those rules has been a major subject of consideration during the post-positivist era in international relations theory. Constructivists emphasize the social nature of the institutions that, in turn, shape the behavior of actors in world politics. Concepts taken as given by neo-realists, such as anarchy and structure, or interests and identities, are characterized by constructivists as social in nature. The very identities and interests of states and other actors are shaped by the social context of international relations in which they participate and these actions, in turn, form the structures of world politics. This insight into the nature of structures presents a fundamentally different way of understanding world politics. Far from being natural, fixed, and unchanging aspects of international politics, these structures are instead the product of the actions of agents participating in world politics. Structures and agents' interests represent the sum of actions by and interactions among states and other actors. The recognition that these aspects of world politics were socially constructed and could, potentially, be reconstructed in a different way opened up the possibility of change that neo-realism is incapable of understanding or explaining. This view of norms and ideas as having real political force laid the groundwork for Crawford's project.

The importance of norms and ideas has, then, been recognized in international relations generally and in the context of decolonization specifically. For example, in Quasi-States: Sovereignty Intervention and the Third World, Robert H. Jackson underscored the importance of self-determination in the dismantling of colonial empires and the transformation of those former colonies into self-governing states. Jackson, however, does not delve into the source of these new norms that transformed the world. Crawford's book makes a contribution to this body of knowledge in her meticulous examination of how the norms against colonialism and in favor of self-determination evolved over centuries through a consideration of the arguments that went into building those norms. Her meticulous explanation of arguments reveals the long evolution of apparently sudden changes in international life such as the dismantling of colonial empires and the rise of the norm of self-determination. Moreover, these changes often resulted from the actions and assertions of those who did not foresee the consequences of their rather moderate positions.

Where Crawford's account—and much constructivist work—encounters difficulties is in its apparent neutrality toward different outcomes. While Crawford traces the delegitimization of colonialism, her argument model does not require that anti-colonial arguments must necessarily win. Her model as easily accommodates the opposite result as well. In other words, her model possesses explanatory power at the expense of prescription. Without some moral compass, or objective standard by which we can evaluate the developments that she describes, Crawford's model, like most constructivism, floats adrift. Though she is clearly concerned with the ethical implications of the practices she examines, and applauds the outcomes of the arguments over slavery and colonialism, Crawford's model does not integrate this concern or offer any reason for us to believe that the de-legitimization of colonialism was inevitable, or even preferable. Those concerned with human rights and the spread of freedom might prefer a formulation of Crawford's model that incorporates the outcome of the arguments she describes. Such a model might recognize that the arguments favoring the spread of freedom were those that ultimately prevailed.

Despite this lacuna, Argument and Change is impressive in its scope and achievement. Crawford's broad view of history allows the reader to see for herself the course of normative

development with respect to the issues that Crawford evaluates. In surprising ways rules can shape the behavior of states, even in hard cases where security and material interests are at stake. Crawford's book underscores this with its well-researched and well-written cases. She provides a thorough consideration of argument and its role in international politics. The chapter on arguments and their functions alone makes the book worth reading, but who stops there would miss Crawford's application of her argument model to well-developed and relevant cases. By doing so, Crawford avoids falling into the trap of much of the post-positivist literature, which discusses what a post-positivist account *might* look like, but fails to provide such an account. Crawford's study will undoubtedly make an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the role of argument as well as slavery, colonialism, and humanitarian intervention, the substantive areas that she explores.

---

*Amy Eckert is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver, and an Instructor in the Department of Political Science at the Metropolitan State College of Denver.*

© 2004, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver.