

Defending the West: Occidentalism and the Formation of NATO*

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NEITHER the traditional realist explanation nor liberal and constructivist alternatives are adequate to explain NATO's formation. Existing explanations of the formation of NATO in International Relations (IR) theory all begin from the position that explaining NATO is a matter of explaining the specific decisions made by individual state actors. It is self-evident to most IR scholars that interstate alliances are arrangements produced by what *states* do, and that "action" in world politics means "state action." This reductionist explanatory position parallels a number of individualist stances in the wider sphere of social theory, drawing its intuitive plausibility from a posited equivalence between individuals in society and states in international society: states are, as it were, the "people" of international society.¹ But by adopting this reductionist stance, IR theorists also acquire the central explanatory weaknesses of an individualist approach, particularly inasmuch as they aim to combine an individualist focus with a desire for explanations of social outcomes based on necessity rather than contingency. This "necessity individualism" hampers existing accounts in their efforts to explain the existence of the Alliance.

In particular, two explanatory weaknesses characterize necessity individualist accounts. First, such accounts are characterized by a tendency towards the *teleological reconstruction of history*, in that they tend to read the stable bipolar situation of later years backwards into the incredibly ambiguous period of the period immediately following the Second World War. Second, necessity individualist accounts do not contain an adequate notion of *agency*, and as such deny the creative aspects of social action. As is usual in social theory, the empirical weaknesses of existing accounts are generated by their underlying theoretical problems; therefore, these theoretical problems must be addressed in order to generate a more robust empirical account. As necessity individualism is the underlying problem, it must be replaced with different theoretical

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¹Wendt 1999, pp. 215–18.

commitments—in particular, with a *relational* focus on processes of social transaction—if more adequate explanations are to be constructed.

A relational account of the formation of NATO turns on a somewhat surprising finding that emerges when one examines the contours of early postwar reconstruction and diplomacy without the restrictions imposed by necessity individualism. Although state representatives are clearly involved in the formation of the Alliance, if we examine their articulations closely we notice that they often claim to be speaking and acting on behalf of a quite different actor: “Western Civilization.” NATO thus purports to be—as Dean Acheson put it—“far more than a defensive arrangement. It is an affirmation of the moral and spiritual values which we hold in common,” and therefore an expression of a community rather than a grouping of individual states; it is the defense of this community which NATO is designed to accomplish.² Such claims are of crucial significance for a relational account, inasmuch as public claims are causally important to the ongoing process of bounding and sustaining social actors. If the actions leading up to the formation of NATO are framed as actions being undertaken in the name of “the West,” then in important ways “the West” is the relevant actor for the process, *not* the states which rhetorically subordinate themselves to that larger civilizational whole. The “rhetorical commonplace” of “the West” is revealed to be causally significant to the outcome, inasmuch as arguments deploying this commonplace are instrumental in legitimating the Alliance. Hence it is a feature of the social context, and *not* a feature of a set of putatively independent decisions by pre-social individual actors, which explains the outcome.

My argument proceeds in three sections. In the first section of the paper, I briefly sketch the problems with existing accounts, and trace these problems to a commitment to necessity individualism. In the second section I present an alternative *relational* approach, which focuses on the strategic deployment of rhetorical commonplaces so as to render policy options acceptable, and suggest how this approach solves the problems of existing accounts. In the third section, I provide an empirical sketch of the formation of NATO based on a relational approach to the articulation of policy, and indicate how such an account explains the timing, membership, and multilateral form of the Alliance in a theoretically consistent manner.

I. NECESSITY INDIVIDUALISM AND ITS LIMITATIONS

In general, there are three major schools of contemporary IR theory: realism, liberalism, and constructivism.³ Realist arguments involve the dangers of life

²DOSB, 1 October 1951, p. 527.

³Walt 1998. In this paper I will not address Marxist (e.g. Kaldor 1990) or poststructural (e.g. Klein 1990) approaches, inasmuch as they are not designed to produce *causal* accounts of events like the formation of NATO, but rather are concerned to illuminate how certain broader

under anarchy, and characterize the formation of NATO as a case of *balancing*; liberal arguments stress mutual gain and characterize the formation of NATO as a case of *credible binding*; constructivist arguments focus on common categorical identities, and characterize the formation of NATO as a case of *institutionalizing identification*. For all of their differences, these three schools share a commitment to “necessity individualism,” a commitment that prevents existing accounts from adequately incorporating agency and demands that they engage in reading history backwards, thus eliminating historical contingency.

In fact, these drawbacks are closely linked: approaches that cannot capture historical contingency cannot capture agency either. In the pursuit of covering-law-like generalizations, necessity individualist accounts reduce actors to throughputs for various environmental stimuli, and deny the possibility that actors might have responded differently in the very same situation. Agency, as concerned with “events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently,” is therefore eliminated from such accounts.⁴ In addition, necessity individualist accounts tend to overstate the inevitability of the present, and thus reify social arrangements that might be better treated as continually in the process of being made and remade. Hence the formation of NATO appears to have been inevitable, which may or may not be the case; the point is that necessity individualist accounts give us no way to make such a determination.

I believe that a *relational* approach avoids these weaknesses, in part by shifting the question from a nomological account of individual decisions to a configurational account of social processes. In order to appreciate why a relational approach concentrating on the strategic deployment of rhetorical commonplaces is an improvement on existing accounts, we must first examine how necessity individualism produces the problems inherent in existing accounts in the first place.

A. INDIVIDUALISM

Realist, liberal, and constructivist accounts of the formation of NATO—despite protestations to the contrary—are all individualist accounts, inasmuch as they locate their principal causal mechanisms at the level of individual decisions. “Individual” in this case does not mean biologically independent human being, but simply means the component elements of which a concrete social setting is composed. Here I am adopting Wendt’s definition: “Individualism holds that social scientific explanations should be reducible to the properties or interactions of independently existing individuals,” whether those individuals be particular

dynamics of hegemony in advanced capitalism or the (im)possible logic of identity play out in concrete cases.

⁴Giddens 1984, p. 9.

human beings, domestic social groups, or states.⁵ Individualist accounts revolve around the decisions made by particular units in a social setting, but they are not necessarily “unit-level” in that they are quite capable of taking interaction between individuals into account; individualism is not “autism.”⁶ The crucial factor in classifying an approach as individualist is whether the relevant causal mechanisms producing outcomes are located at the level of individual decisions, or at the broader, aggregate level of the structure of the system.

Seen in this light, existing accounts of NATO are individualist accounts. Liberal treatments of the Alliance are the most obviously individualist, as they import the unquestionably individualist analytical apparatus of neoclassical institutional economics to use in making their arguments, and seek to provide a grounding for decisions in terms of the motivations of individual actors: the desire to signal restraint, the desire to exploit gains from joint production, and in general the desire to minimize costs and maximize returns. NATO, which liberals understand as a case of binding, is explained in terms of individual *decisions to bind*; had those decisions not been taken, the outcomes would have been vastly different. Liberal accounts stress issues such as the fear of abandonment by one’s allies⁷ and the ways in which institutional arrangements permit a dominant state to signal restraint in the exercise of its power and thus reassure allies that they will neither be taken advantage of nor abandoned.⁸ In all cases, it is these individual-level factors that produce social outcomes.

But while liberal accounts are the most obviously individualist, they are not alone in their individualism; realist and constructivist accounts of the formation of NATO, while frequently making reference to non-individualist factors in their theoretical discussions, become just as individualist when developing their actual empirical accounts. There *are* realist and constructivist accounts of *other* empirical questions which are not individualist,⁹ but the accounts of the formation of NATO which have thus far been offered are all individualist—even though they sometime make reference to other, non-individualist intervening causal mechanisms in the course of their arguments. What makes these accounts individualist is that they tie outcomes, *in the last instance*, back to individual decisions.

Consider realist accounts of NATO formation. Realists argue that the Alliance is a case of balancing behavior, and was to be expected after the defeat of

⁵Wendt 1999, p. 26.

⁶Ibid., pp. 147–9.

⁷Lake 1999, pp. 166–7.

⁸Ikenberry 2001, pp. 50–2.

⁹Although there are not many. I suspect that this has something to do with the persistent conflation of individual-level causal mechanisms and the preservation of agency; these are two separate issues, and (as I argue in the following section) the former does not necessarily lead to the latter. Thanks to Daniel Nexon and Stacie Goddard for helpful discussions of these issues.

Germany in 1945. NATO's formation is regarded as a rather unexceptional case of the timeless logic of the balance of power: the wartime alliance between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain was doomed to break up with the elimination of Nazi Germany, the common security threat. "Realists see alliances primarily as responses to threats: the greater the threat, the greater the likelihood of alliance formation and, implicitly, the more cohesive the alliance."¹⁰ Hence, the elimination of the threat posed by Nazi Germany meant that there was nothing holding the wartime coalition together. As the two strongest powers remaining, the United States and the Soviet Union were subsequently impelled by the imperatives of anarchy to begin balancing against one another, competing for allies and influence in the new bipolar world. Bipolarity led to two blocs as each of the "superpowers" tried to balance against the other. NATO is simply the institutional manifestation of bloc formation.

This sounds very much like an argument about the determination of action by the social system. But the realist balancing argument, when pressed, turns out to be an individualist argument. This can be seen in the kind of evidence adduced by realists trying to explain the formation of NATO: transcripts of diplomatic exchanges, memoirs, records of policy planning meetings. Process evidence of this sort—*contra* the arguments advanced by some realists—cannot demonstrate that the causal mechanisms in question are any kind of system-level process, even if it shows that "how a state defines and redefines its interests . . . is a function of its relative power and placement in the international system" by adducing evidence that decision-makers were concerned with such issues.¹¹ The fact that many people are concerned with some issue does not, after all, demonstrate that *the issue* is the source of their subsequent actions, only that their *concern with the issue* may be relevant: waiting for Godot may be causally relevant to explaining some action, regardless of whether or not Godot exists.¹² Regardless, realist accounts regularly rely on such evidence, indicating that their argument is, at base, an individualist one: what matters to an explanation is how actors made decisions, and why they made the decisions that they did.

Constructivist accounts of the formation of NATO are also individualist in practice, even though this stands in *direct* contradiction to many of their theoretical premises. Constructivism as an approach begins with an acknowledgement of the agent-structure problem: the fact that in any given concrete situation, the agency which actors exercise is shaped by social structures, but that at the same time social structures have no independent existence apart from human social activity.¹³ Constructivist analyses are supposed to locate action within its social context, showing how that context

¹⁰Schweller and Priess 1997, p. 19.

¹¹Schweller and Wohlforth 2000, p. 75. Even this demonstration may be problematic; see below.

¹²Shotter 1993a, pp. 81–3.

¹³Wendt 1987; Dessler 1989.

gives rise to the action at the same time as the action reproduces or transforms the context. The problem with this position is that it is virtually impossible to demonstrate both of these things at the same time. Many constructivists opt for some form of analytical “bracketing,” concentrating first on either actors exercising agency or on structures, and then reversing the analytical lens and focusing on the opposite.¹⁴ But the practical result is that constructivist accounts become accounts of how individual actors can affect the social environment through their individual decisions and actions.

Constructivist accounts of the formation of NATO revolve around the central idea of a “security community,” defined as “a transnational region comprised of sovereign states whose people maintain dependable expectations of peaceful change.”¹⁵ A security community is held together by shared identities, not merely by shared interests; the states which belong to the community—and at least some segment of the people who populate them—come to positively identify with one another, regarding one another as members of some collective endeavor rather than separate societies interacting in anarchy.¹⁶ NATO is thus a function of shared norms and beliefs, which may have been activated by perceptions of a Soviet threat, but which are involved in determining the interpretation of that threat and thus what is taken to be the proper response to it.

Constructivists argue at a *theoretical* level that identities, norms, and ideas “are not only personal or psychological, but are social, defined by the actor’s interaction with and relationship to others.”¹⁷ But in their *practical* and *empirical* work, “identity takes a chiefly subjective form . . . crucial events occur somewhere in consciousness.”¹⁸ Ultimately, NATO is formed in a constructivist account because certain individual actors—be they states or individual human beings—*decided* that forming an alliance was a good thing to do, based on some set of shared subjective beliefs. This is no different from realist and liberal accounts in focusing attention on individual decisions and processes, and in seeking to account for outcomes in terms of what individual actors think, decide, or believe.

B. NECESSITY

Individualism alone does not account for the problems characteristic of dominant accounts of the formation of NATO. Rather, it is the combination of individualism with a commitment to explanations couched in terms of necessity that is to blame. By “necessity” here I mean the traditional positivist and

¹⁴Wendt 1987, pp. 364–5.

¹⁵Adler and Barnett 1999, p. 30.

¹⁶Risse-Kappen 1996, pp. 374–8.

¹⁷Adler and Barnett 1999, p. 47.

¹⁸Tilly 1999, p. 400.

neopositivist¹⁹ claim that explanation should aim “at showing that the event in question was not ‘a matter of chance’, but was to be expected in view of certain antecedent or simultaneous conditions,” and seek to identify *systematic* (rather than nonsystematic, or random) connections between factors that hold true across cases.²⁰ The ultimate goal is the articulation of general covering-laws, which relate variable attributes to one another in the abstract.²¹

Causality in such accounts is a matter of *categorical membership*, in that events are caused by certain general features of their constitution, rather than by anything unique to the particular event in question.²² To the extent that the general conditions specified in the theory are present in any concrete situation, so that the situation belongs to some general category of similar situations, the outcome—similarly understood as a general, rather than case-specific, condition—can be reasonably expected. Thus, realists argue that anarchy leads to balancing behavior, and bipolarity leads to a two-bloc alignment of great powers; to the extent that the postwar world fits these general criteria, the outcome is to be expected. Similarly, liberals argue that the need for hegemons to signal restraint and the desire to exploit gains from the joint production of security lead to institutionalized security orders, and constructivists argue that common identification among a group of states leads to cooperation, even in the security field. In each case, a general law—bereft of proper names—connects antecedents and outcomes, with the implication that in the *absence* of the antecedents, the outcome would not have occurred.

In and of itself, there is nothing exceptional about this stance, and I do not wish to criticize the search for covering laws on philosophical grounds. Instead, I wish to call attention to the explanatory problem that arises when analysts try to combine a search for general laws with an insistence that the relevant causal processes take place at the level of the individual. This means that individual decisions have to be subsumed under general principles; otherwise, the analyst sacrifices necessity and generality in favor of a record of disconnected decisions. Solving this problem has led analysts to articulate general procedures used by actors in making decisions, and general accounts of the kinds of factors which those actors take into account when making their decisions; they argue that

¹⁹By “neopositivist” I mean the approach to social explanation that combines a positivist emphasis on covering laws with a procedure of falsification and hypothesis-testing, and regards this as the single self-evident method of scientific inference. The recent methodological manual by King, Keohane and Verba (King et al. 1994) exemplifies the approach.

²⁰Hempel 1965, p. 235; King, et al., 1994, pp. 55–63, 76–82.

²¹Hempel 1965, pp. 231–2. I would argue that covering-law explanations are *always* the ultimate goal of positivist and neopositivist strategies of inquiry. Carl Hempel, for example, admitted that historical reconstruction could serve some valuable purposes, but only as an “explanation sketch . . . a more or less vague indication of the laws and initial conditions considered as relevant” which “needs ‘filling out’ in order to turn into a full-fledged explanation” (Hempel 1965: 238). Hence, for a positivist, historical process-tracing is an inferior stage in the development of an explanation, rather than a wholly different approach.

²²Abbott 1988.

similarly positioned actors using similar decision-making procedures would have arrived at the same conclusions and undertaken the same set of actions. This, in turn, has two consequences: a downplaying of ambiguity in any discussion of the conditions facing actors (and hence a tendency towards teleological reconstructions of history), and an elimination of agency—understood as the capacity to have acted otherwise—from the account. Ironically, necessity individualist accounts are left with essential *agents* who lack the ability to make meaningful choices; these essential agents become mere throughputs for environmental factors, ending up as the very cultural and structural dupes that the turn to individualism was supposed to avoid.

C. TELEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION

Teleological reconstruction is engendered by necessity individualism because such accounts are seeking general connections between factors, and hence must operate with general and abstract definitions of those factors in order to ascertain whether they are present in any particular empirical situation. Realist theorists know *in advance* what “threats” look like, just as liberals know what “joint gains” look like and constructivists know what an “ideational consensus” looks like; they then apply these abstract definitions to the mass of historical material concerning the early postwar period in order to see whether their preferred decision-making input is in fact present or not. The problem is that the early postwar period, like virtually any other historical period, contains sufficient evidence to support *all* of these claims, and probably others besides. So each approach concentrates on the evidence which supports its own position, of necessity downplaying the extent to which “threats,” “gains,” and “consensus,” as well as the perception of these factors by individuals, were all still in the process of formation during the early postwar period. Analysts sometimes use their preferred variable to problematize the formation of others, as constructivists do by arguing that a normative consensus affected the formulation of “the Soviet threat,” but they treat their own preferred variable as somewhat self-evident.

Beginning at the *end* of the story, in which NATO is already formed and threats, gains, and normative consensus seem to exist, analysts read the stability of the later historical period back into the earlier one. Many even refer to the early postwar period as “the early Cold War,” a term which *implies* the future bipolar struggle; this leads them to underestimate the diversity of options which existed at the time, the variety of proposals and plans which were advanced, and the historical contingency of what we only later came to know as the Cold War.²³ Realist accounts are particularly vulnerable to this charge,

²³Eisenberg 1996, pp. 6–7.

inasmuch as they seize on evidence of a concern with relative power and then regard this as evidence of the correctness of the realist account; liberal and constructivist accounts do likewise with their preferred causal factors. In realist accounts, key officials espousing policies other than those involving a concern with relative power are simply dismissed as misguided or mistaken, while those advocating a more realist point of view are seen as visionaries, or just unusually clear-headed.²⁴ Thus, realist accounts treat “the Soviet threat” as self-evident, downplaying the controversies and debates surrounding this notion and ignoring the possibility that a different resolution to these controversies might have pointed in a very different policy direction. What is missing from realist accounts is any real sense of the contingency of the historical outcome, which makes the formation of NATO seem quite overdetermined.

This is *not* simply a case in which existing accounts take as their independent variable a factor that I wish to turn into a dependent variable. Necessity individualist accounts *require* an unambiguous environment in which decisions can be made; otherwise their explanations collapse into redescriptions, unable to systematically connect inputs with outcomes. All three dominant IR approaches seek to specify *what actors want* in concrete situations, in order to explain the decisions that actors make in terms of an interaction between these desires and the strategic environment facing them. But necessity individualist accounts lack any compelling account of how and why the factors which they posit as causally relevant can exercise their causal powers in an environment (such as the immediate postwar period) where the very *existence*, not to mention the *policy implications*, of such factors is highly contested by actors at the time. Taking a step backwards in time and explaining threats, gains, and ideational consensus through the application of similar explanatory logic would merely displace the problem, not solve it.

D. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF AGENCY

In addition, necessity individualist accounts eliminate any significant role for agency in the explanation of social action. They do this inasmuch as “agency” and “necessity” are irreconcilably opposed to one another. Necessity means that consequences flow from antecedents in a more or less deterministic manner, while agency means that the connection between antecedents and outcomes is a more contingent matter. If individual actors are mere apparatuses for the processing of environmental inputs, *they do not exercise agency*; in making the choices that they rationally had to make in a given set of circumstances, they neither exercise effective control over events nor serve as important causal elements for the explanation of those events. Necessity individualism therefore preserves

²⁴Mearsheimer 1994–95, pp. 5–6, 47; Sheetz 1999, p. 4.

individual agents, but it preserves them as *sites* in which factors beyond their control combine in ways beyond their control to produce outcomes beyond their control. Without contingency in the linkages between antecedents and outcomes, and attention to how these links are produced by social process, there is no analytical or conceptual space in which actors could possibly *affect* outcomes—although they can be complicit in the production of those outcomes without the ability not to do so.

Consider the realist account of the formation of NATO: states balanced against the Soviet threat. Implicit in this argument is the notion that this was a reasonable thing to do, given the circumstances, and that any state facing a similar constellation of forces would have done something similar. Where is the agency in this account? Similarly, consider the liberal account: states sought to exploit gains from the joint production of security, and consolidate their positions vis-à-vis one another. The same assumption underlies this explanation; the only way a state could have done anything *other than* participate in the formation of NATO would be to act “irrationally,” an option precluded by the central rationalist assumptions of the liberal approach. A state acting “rationally,” however, exercises no agency, inasmuch as it could not have done anything other than it did. Finally, consider constructivist accounts: states and the individual people composing them acted in accordance with “value-rationality” or a “logic of appropriateness,” consolidating a security community of liberal democracies.²⁵ Agents, in this account, are just as bound by the dictates of factors over which they exercise no control as they are in realist and liberal accounts; the “subjective” character of the determining factors makes little difference to the explanation.

Unless one argues that the participation of individual minds in such processes *by definition* means that agency is involved—and thus abandons those aspects of the concept of agency which catch up the ability of actors to meaningfully intervene in ongoing causal processes and affect their outcomes—there is little agency in any of these accounts. Acting according to the dictates of an internalized standard of value is just as deterministic as acting according to the dictates of some calculus of costs and benefits, or acting on the prompting of the environment. Teleological reconstruction is necessary to sustain an explanation like this, and goes hand in hand with the overall project of eliminating contingency. Armed with a general decision-making procedure and a narrative of the environmental conditions facing actors which does not take ambiguity and contestation seriously, the analyst can construct explanations in which outcomes can be more or less deterministically derived from antecedents—at the cost of eliminating agency and contingency, and downplaying the significance of the contemporary political debates which proximately led to the actions in

²⁵Schimmelfennig 1998–99, pp. 210–11; Finnemore and Sikkink 1999, pp. 897–9.

question. If outcomes were obvious, why was there so much contestation about which of several policy options to pursue? Necessity individualist accounts can provide no answer, further detracting from the plausibility of their empirical narratives.

II. A RELATIONAL ALTERNATIVE

How can the problems generated by necessity individualism be avoided? One way to avoid these problems would be to abandon individualism while retaining a focus on necessity; this would lead in the direction of systems theory and a focus on how the structure of the system produces outcomes. However, systems theories are designed to account for *aggregate* outcomes, not particular events. Much as evolutionary theory cannot explain why any particular organism has the traits which it does, but is instead limited to showing how combinations of traits were selected by environmental pressures, a systems theory of world politics cannot account for the actions characteristic of any particular case, but is instead limited to showing how certain patterns of action subsist over time while others do not. Hence a systems approach would not help us produce better explanations of the formation of NATO, inasmuch as any such systems approach would need to be supplemented by a theory of the “translation mechanism” whereby systemic pressures were incorporated into concrete policy actions.²⁶

Another possibility would be to abandon the search for necessity-based explanations while retaining the focus on individual decisions. This would lead in the direction of symbolic interactionism and other forms of “phenomenological individualism,” in which individual decisions are motivated by inherently inexplicable subjective factors.²⁷ The problem with such a turn, leaving aside for the moment the fact that it presents a highly implausible view of the social world as essentially bereft of constraints on individual action, is that it renders systematic theory virtually impossible. Actions can be analyzed down to the individual decisions that produce them, but those decisions cannot be theorized in any significant manner. Agency is preserved, but explanation is sacrificed.

Talcott Parsons termed this the utilitarian dilemma:

either the active agency of the actor in the choice of ends is an independent factor in action, and the end element must be random; or the objectionable implication of the randomness of ends is denied, but then their [the actors'] independence disappears and they are assimilated to the conditions of the situation, that is to elements analyzable in terms of nonsubjective categories, principally heredity and environment.²⁸

²⁶Waltz 1979, pp. 71–2, 122–3.

²⁷Tilly 1998, pp. 21–4.

²⁸Parsons 1937/1968, p. 64.

The problem that Parsons identified is, I suggest, a problem endemic to all forms of necessity individualism, not merely to utilitarian approaches in particular. Agency can only be preserved in such accounts by abandoning necessity in favor of actions that are random *from the perspective of the theory*, even if they can be deterministically explained from the perspective of another theory (a psychological account of motivation, for example), or by asserting that any action which involves an individual person is somehow “agency” (in complete defiance of the fact that the individuals in question no longer have the theoretical capacity to do anything other than they actually did). Neither of these two options seems satisfactory.

Instead of these two options, I propose a *relational* approach that abandons both individualism and necessity in favor of a focus on the contingent combination of patterns of social transaction to produce outcomes. Unlike individualist approaches which locate their causal mechanisms at the level of individual decisions, but also unlike systems approaches which locate their causal mechanisms at the level of social totalities, relational approaches focus on the network of social ties and transactions existing in some social setting.²⁹ Instead of concentrating on analytically isolated social structures, relational approaches concentrate on the patterns of social practice which *give rise* to such relative stabilities: instead of isolating a structure and explaining how that structure shapes social action, relationalists concentrate on how patterns of practical activity give rise to such broad and enduring orders.³⁰ Relational approaches join with systems approaches, however, in rejecting individualism, locating their causal mechanisms in the *intersubjective* realm surrounding and penetrating actors. Relationalists argue that action should be understood in terms of the social context that provides the resources out of which action can be produced; they argue that properties of the *context*, rather than properties of the *individual*, should be the analytical focus.

In a way, relationalists extend the constructivist insight that structure is nothing but relative stability in patterns of social action, hence endogenous to process, and argue that *individual actors too* are nothing but relative stabilities in patterns of social action, hence endogenous to process. Individual actors, in a relational approach, are the product of particular kinds of processes: those that create and maintain *boundaries*. Actors are produced out of the continual flow of social process by a successful concatenation of boundary-drawing practices; these practices establish the actor’s boundaries, separating it out from the general flow of events and allowing it to persist over time. A state, for example, is thought to be a kind of ongoing *project*, whereby boundaries are drawn *within* far-reaching social networks so as to produce an “inside” and an “outside.”³¹

²⁹Emirbayer 1997.

³⁰Tilly 1998, pp. 13–14.

³¹Jackson and Nexon 1999, pp. 307–9, 314–16.

The boundaries in question are not merely physical or geographical, but social and meaningful; boundaries are *limitations on acceptable actions*, signifying the extent of an actor's authority to carry out those actions. The boundaries of an actor have to be "rationalized," or systematically clarified and justified, in order for an actor to persist over time.³² In this way, *culture* is central to a relational approach; culture consists of "shared understandings and their representations," but these should be thought of as *intersubjective* elements, and not merely the summation of the contents of individual heads.³³ Cultural representations serve as resources for action, providing "schemas" in terms of which information can be interpreted and courses of action carried out; boundary-drawing involves the "transposition" of those schemas from one domain to another, and the active use of cultural resources to rationalize the limits of acceptable action.³⁴

Instances of boundary-drawing are therefore best understood as efforts at *legitimation*, attempts to render a particular social boundary acceptable by linking it to widely shared cultural and discursive resources through a variety of specific social practices.³⁵ Efforts at legitimation are always *public contests* over appropriate courses of action, and analysts must take care to respect this contested character of legitimation by examining all sides of any argument about acceptable courses of action. To treat "legitimacy" as a "normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed"³⁶ is to step away from contestation and back into necessity individualism, requiring the analyst to define "legitimate action" *in advance* rather than concentrating on the real social processes whereby notions of legitimacy are *constructed in practice*. Relational analysis focuses on the latter, seeking to explain how particular constellations of practice succeed in their contests with alternatives.

What is important here are the processes and their concatenation, *not* the subjective motivations of any particular people involved; legitimation can arise quite by accident, as long as processes come together in an efficacious manner. Consider a public appeal, such as that given by Secretary of State George Marshall in congressional testimony during the hearings on the European Recovery Program. Marshall argued that economic aid to Europe was required to prevent "economic distress so intense, social discontents so violent, political confusion so widespread, and hopes of the future so shattered that *the historic base of Western civilization, of which we are by belief and inheritance an integral part*, will take on a new form in the image of the tyranny that we fought to destroy in Germany."³⁷ Did Marshall *believe* what he was saying about

³²Abbott 1996, pp. 870–2.

³³Laffey and Weldes 1997, pp. 209–11; Tilly 1998, p. 20.

³⁴Sewell 1992; Hall 1997.

³⁵Jackson 2001, pp. 46–55.

³⁶Hurd 1999, p. 381.

³⁷DOSB 18 January 1948, p. 71, emphasis added.

the existence of a civilizational community encompassing Western Europe and the United States? Perhaps. Is this question *relevant* to explaining any effect that Marshall's appeal may have had? I cannot see how it would be. What matters is that Marshall *said what he said*, regardless of *why* he said it; the statement, participating in a particular constellation of boundary-drawing practices, has whatever effect it is going to have as part of those practices, completely apart from the question of Marshall's personal beliefs and motivations.³⁸

Some might argue that social practices understood in this manner are not *causal*, but *constitutive*: they give meaning to a set of behaviors, rather than producing those behaviors themselves. In a constitutive relationship, "X is what it is in virtue of its relation to Y. X presupposes Y, and as such there is no temporal disjunction; their relationship is necessary rather than contingent." The master-slave relationship is a commonly used example of such a relationship: "masters and slaves . . . are constituted by the social structure known as slavery. Masters do not 'cause' slaves because without slaves they cannot *be* masters in the first place."³⁹ While this is true, there is a sense in which the *master-slave relationship* itself can (and should) be considered "causal," inasmuch as it is a cultural resource on which the parties can draw in making sense out of their particular interconnection and justifying it. The claim to have the right to buy, sell, and otherwise control the destiny of another human being is itself efficacious in producing the outcome (control over that other human being); it is a key part of the causal mechanism which produces the outcome.

Making such a claim is only possible in a social situation in which "the master-slave relationship" is a part of the general cultural milieu, as it would not be understood and accepted as legitimate otherwise. So it is less the cultural resource *itself*, and more the *use* of the resource as part of a legitimation claim, which is causally relevant.⁴⁰ In addition, the kind of causality at work here is *sufficient* causality, not *necessary* causality; one can, after all, exercise control over another human being in a variety of ways and inhabit a variety of different social relationships (such as that between employer and employed, or parent and child) while doing so. There is nothing *necessary* about the master-slave relationship for the production of such control, although in a social setting in which the master-slave relationship was a widely shared cultural commonplace, a successful appeal to that relationship would be sufficient to legitimate the activity and produce the outcome. With these caveats, we may consider the social practices involved in legitimation claims to be causal.

³⁸This is similar to John Searle's account of "performative utterances" (Searle 1995).

³⁹Wendt 1998, p. 25.

⁴⁰This is a different claim than Davidson's (1963) argument that "reasons are causes," inasmuch as Davidson's claim rests on the subjective internalization of reasons to provide motivations for action, and I am focusing on the way in which a public claim participates in the shaping of a universe of discourse.

Others might argue that a relational approach leaves no room for individual agency, inasmuch as the relevant causal processes take place in the intersubjective space “between” individuals. This criticism has merit only if one believes that *agency* requires *essential agents*—that actors can only exercise agency if they somehow pre-exist the social contexts in which they find themselves, and thus rest on a pre-social “core” to which they can retreat and from which they can act autonomously. A relational approach questions this understanding of agency, however, preferring to regard agency as a *social* capacity of actors, the specific shape and character of which has to do with the constellation of social practices which give rise to the actor in the first place: the types of action which the actor can legitimately perform, the sorts of decisions which it is empowered to make, and so forth. If an analyst were to regard these constellations of practice as *inevitable*—as cohering because of some kind of inherent “fit” with one another—relationalism would collapse into structuralism, reasoning from inherent characteristics of the pre-formed social environment to individual action.

To the contrary, relational approaches preserve contingency in two ways, and thus avoid structural determinism. First, particular constellations of processes are never inevitable, but represent *ongoing accomplishments of practice*.⁴¹ The “fit” of particular legitimating practices with one another has less to do with intrinsic properties of the practices themselves, and more to do with active processes of tying practices together to form relatively coherent wholes.⁴² Second, cultural resources for action are always *ambiguous*, and do not simply present themselves as clearly defined templates for action. Instead, cultural resources provide opportunities, but actualizing those opportunities demands practical, discursive work to “lock down” the meaning of the resource and derive implications from it.⁴³ Agency, then, inheres not in essential agents, but in this double failure of social structures to cohere on their own; opportunities for action are provided, but actors have to seize on them in order to actualize those possibilities.

If it seems like relational explanations are incomplete in that they do not try to account for particular decisions to actualize certain potentials rather than others, this is an *intentional* incompleteness, designed to preserve agency. As I have argued above, explanations of individual decisions that are based on necessity deny the actors in question the ability to have made a different choice. Preserving agency requires changing the question, since efforts to subsume individual decisions under some kind of covering law eliminate agency *by definition*. Instead, relationists concentrate on explaining the successes and failures of particular constellations of social practices, explaining such

⁴¹Doty 1997, pp. 376–9.

⁴²Laffey and Weldes 1997, pp. 202–3; Jackson and Nexon 2001, pp. 12–14.

⁴³Shotter 1993b, pp. 90–6; Neumann 1999, pp. 33–5.

constellations with reference to the connections and transactions between efforts to bound actors and efforts to legitimate action. Even though for *methodological* purposes it is necessary to focus on statements by individual human beings,⁴⁴ this stance should not be conflated with a claim that only individual human beings are the actors in any social situation. Explaining what an individual person does and explaining social action remain two different questions, and “explaining” individual behavior by means of a general law eliminates agency in a way that focusing on the social context of action need not.

A relational explanation of social action—such as the formation of NATO— involves two steps. First, the analyst identifies the social practices involved in some legitimation contest. For the analysis of policy actions such as the formation of NATO, the relevant processes are *rhetorical*, in that they specify the ways in which people use argumentative appeals to legitimate some specific course of action and de-legitimate alternatives. Because social actors “are what they do,” legitimation contests over policy are *always* contests over the proper boundaries of the actor in question: over whether “we” constitute the kind of actor that should be engaged in the activity in question.⁴⁵

Successful legitimation efforts involve the construction of public arguments which render the policy in question acceptable to the audience, and simultaneously configure the discursive space of the public contest in such a way as to render opponents unable to mount an effective opposition to the policy. Participants in a public debate have a number of “rhetorical commonplaces” available to them, on which they can draw in order to produce arguments which are linked to the “common sense” of their audience.⁴⁶ Argumentative strategies at work in legitimation contests involve the combination and deployment of these commonplaces in efforts to outmaneuver opponents and engender the consent of the broader audience. The point of such strategies is not to persuade in the strong sense,⁴⁷ but to advance a series of arguments which accomplish the discursive work required in order to render the policy in question possible, acceptable, and even inescapable.⁴⁸

After identifying a set of rhetorical strategies and the commonplaces on which they draw, a relational explanation of policy proceeds by examining the specific contours of the policy debate as it plays out in specific settings. The focus here is on the *public* statements and arguments advanced by those on either side of the issue, as private statements cannot, by definition, have much impact on the

⁴⁴Weber 1976, pp. 6–7.

⁴⁵Finnemore 1996, p. 4; Ringmar 1996.

⁴⁶Kratochwil 1989, pp. 40–2; Shotter 1993b, pp. 166–7.

⁴⁷Although I doubt very much that any advocate would *mind* if arguments persuaded the audience, and this is possibly what they themselves think that they are doing. The point is that such persuasion is not required in my account; if it happens anyway, so much the better.

⁴⁸Hay and Watson 1999; Weldes 1999.

course of a policy debate.⁴⁹ These public statements are used *not* as indications of the subjective state of mind of the speaker, or even as representative of the subjective states of mind of many speakers, but are simply treated as what they appear to be: interventions into a public realm of argumentation which are directed at altering the shape of that public realm. Particular speeches and appeals use rhetorical strategies in an effort to tie general commonplaces to specific policy actions. The ways in which the strategies work together, combined with the potentials which speakers disclose within specific commonplaces (like “Western civilization”), explain the eventual victory of those advocates arguing in favor of the establishment of NATO, as well as the defeat of those opposed to such a course of action. A relational approach that takes such rhetorical strategies seriously can account for the Alliance in a more theoretically consistent manner than the existing alternatives, avoiding teleological reconstructions of history and preserving real agency. In the following section, I endeavor to show more concretely how it does so.

III. LEGITIMATING NATO: “WESTERN CIVILIZATION” AS RHETORICAL COMMONPLACE

From a relational perspective, the striking thing about the formation of NATO is the similarity of the process to that involved in the formation of a new national community. Both are characterized by the “imagination” of a new notion of community, the dissemination of that notion throughout the relevant populace, and the deployment of the novel commonplace in debates about specific policy options.⁵⁰ The imagination and dissemination of the new commonplace makes possible the deployment of arguments of the form “because we are X, we should do Y,” as well as the use of the commonplace in defusing opposing arguments. Instead of “Indonesia” or “France,” the relevant commonplace for the formation of NATO is “Western civilization,” imagined as a deep cultural and civilizational community encompassing Western Europe and North America. This community supersedes merely national communities, as the separate national communities are “nested” within it and in some senses subordinate to it.⁵¹ Of course, this “nesting” is *implicit*, and needs to be activated through the articulation of specific arguments drawing this implication from the commonplace; on its own, a commonplace—even a “civilizational” one—does nothing.⁵²

⁴⁹Riker 1996, pp. 23–4, 46–8.

⁵⁰Anderson 1991.

⁵¹Ferguson and Mansbach 1996, pp. 47–51.

⁵²This point is what distinguishes a relational argument from the more “substantialist” treatments of civilization found in the work of authors like Samuel Huntington (1996). I am not arguing that civilizations and civilizational ties are *physical things* which affect outcomes regardless of the extent to which people are aware of them; I am arguing that *civilizational rhetoric* is a key part of the causal process which produces (sufficiently causes) outcomes.

A full account of the formation of NATO should therefore include an exploration of the history of the notion of “Western civilization,” and an explanation of how it came to be present in the postwar period in a form in which it was available to be tapped by advocates of a relatively permanent alliance between the United States, Canada, and several Western European countries. I have endeavored to trace the imagination and dissemination of the notion elsewhere; in what follows I will focus on the deployment of “Western civilization” in the postwar period, through the making of what I shall call *occidental* arguments during negotiations, public hearings, and ceremonial occasions.⁵³ Although this is properly only one-third of the story, it suffices to explain the origin of the Alliance in a manner more theoretically compelling than existing approaches.

It is well established by historians that the initial impetus for the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty was a British initiative to organize the defense of Western Europe and to include the United States in some capacity.⁵⁴ The British approach proceeded via the Treaty of Dunkirk and subsequently via the Brussels Pact that led to the formation of the “Western Union.” Efforts were made throughout to solidify some sort of formal American commitment to these organizations, but this became deeply problematic in that a constitutively *European* organization was simply not broad enough to contain the United States; the principles on which membership was justified were not comprehensive enough to justify formal American participation.⁵⁵ One solution to this problem was an “Atlantic” or occidental one, in which reference was made to a much more expansive community: “Western civilization,” as it had grown up around the Atlantic Ocean. As early as December 1947, Ernst Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, was deploying such language in discussions with George Marshall, then U.S. Secretary of State. A few weeks later Bevin presented Marshall with a more detailed series of reflections on the subject, in which occidental language was featured prominently:

We shall be hard put to it to stem the further encroachment of the Soviet tide. It is not enough to reinforce the physical barriers which still guard our Western civilisation. We must also organize and consolidate the ethical and spiritual forces inherent in this Western civilisation of which we are the chief protagonists. . . . Political and indeed spiritual forces must be mobilised in our defense.

As for the extent of the association that would mobilize these forces, Bevin felt that it should include, at a minimum, “scandinavia, the Low Countries, France, Italy, Greece and possibly Portugal.” However, he added, “As soon as circumstances permit we should, of course, wish also to include Spain and

⁵³The full argument, on which I draw for what follows, may be found in Jackson 2001.

⁵⁴Folly 1980.

⁵⁵Kaplan 1985, pp. 114–15.

Germany without whom no Western system can be complete.”⁵⁶ Importantly, Bevin also used similar language in his initial presentation of the proposal to the British House of Commons. He noted that the Soviet Union had imposed an alliance on the countries of Eastern Europe, and rejected any suggestion that such a thing would happen in the West:

Neither we, the United States nor France is going to approach Western Europe on that basis. It is not in keeping with the spirit of Western civilisation, and if we are to have an organism in the West it must be a spiritual union. While, no doubt, there must be treaties or, at least, understandings, the union must primarily be a fusion derived from the basic freedoms and ethical principles for which we all stand. It must be on terms of equality and it must contain all the elements of freedom for which we all stand.⁵⁷

Why was this strategy effective at getting the United States on board the project of a formal alliance with Western European countries? In order to understand this, we need to take a step back and consider the shape of debates about American foreign policy more generally. Many accounts of U.S. policy in the early postwar period are written in terms of an opposition between an “isolationist” position—presumably advocating a complete withdrawal from the world and a retreat behind a “Fortress America”—and an “internationalist” position, presumably its polar opposite. But this is not a particularly helpful way of reading the situation, as the terms are not even descriptively accurate. “Isolationists,” for example, were perfectly happy advocating a strong U.S. presence in Asia during the late 1940s, while “internationalists” remained quite focused on Europe throughout.⁵⁸ No one of consequence was seriously advocating a *complete* American withdrawal from world affairs in this period; in this sense, not only were there no “isolationists,” but there had *never* been any.

In fact, these positions are in reality complex amalgamations of rhetorical appeals. Many of the commonplaces tapped on behalf of these positions have been around for quite some time in American political discourse, while others are of a more recent vintage. In addition, the linkages *between* some of these commonplaces are quite longstanding, allowing historians to isolate two broad “schools” of thinking about American foreign policy: the “exemplarists” who suggest that “perfecting American institutions and practices at home is a full-time job” and that the greatest task of American foreign policy is to create space to carry out such an exercise on its own terms, and the “vindicationists” who suggest that “America must move beyond example and undertake active measures to vindicate the right.”⁵⁹ These terms better catch up the substance of

⁵⁶FRUS 1948/III: 5.

⁵⁷House of Commons, 22 January 1948, col. 407–8.

⁵⁸Paterson 1988, pp. 79–80; Christensen 1996, pp. 69–73.

⁵⁹Brands 1998, pp. vii–ix.

the policy debates than the others that have been proposed. To ask why one position became dominant in American political life and foreign policy after the Second World War is to ask what kind of changes in the rhetorical resources available to elites resulted in the large-scale adoption of more interventionist, multilateral policies, at least in Western Europe.

Based on my reading of the public record of the debates, I have identified four rhetorical commonplaces prominent in exemplarist arguments that are, in general, opposed to a formal alliance commitment.⁶⁰ These four commonplaces should be thought of less as a comprehensive catalog of every appeal used in these debates, and more of an ideal-typical isolation of some of the important themes. Graphically, they can be represented as follows:

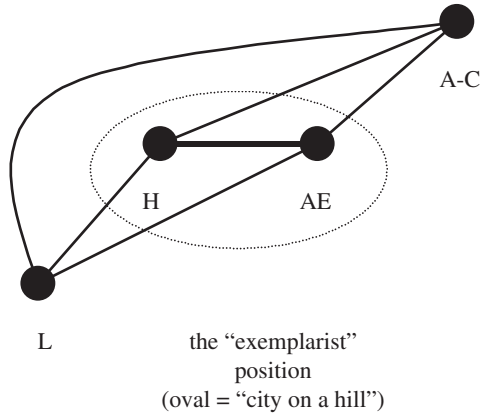


Figure 1. Schematic representation of rhetorical commonplaces in American foreign policy debates

The commonplaces include: the defense of “liberty” (L) as the highest value of American society and something that should not be sacrificed;⁶¹ “anticommunism” (A-C), the opposition to communist doctrine and practice, a longstanding feature of American popular culture;⁶² “heliotropism” (H), which is the notion that the progress of civilization follows the path of the sun, so that societies lying further to the West were more advanced;⁶³ and “American exceptionalism,” which is the notion that the United States constitutes an entity

⁶⁰Jackson 2001, pp. 92–101.

⁶¹Hogan 1998.

⁶²Kovel 1994, pp. 17–22.

⁶³Schulte Nordholt 1995, pp. 1–2.

ontologically separate from the rest of the world, particularly from Europe.⁶⁴ The rhetorical core of the exemplarist position is the connection between heliotropism and American exceptionalism, which together underpin the notion of the United States of America as a “city on a hill.”⁶⁵

The opposing vindicationist position is not so much *opposed to* these basic rhetorical commonplaces as it is a *reconfiguration* of their relationship, and can be represented graphically like this:

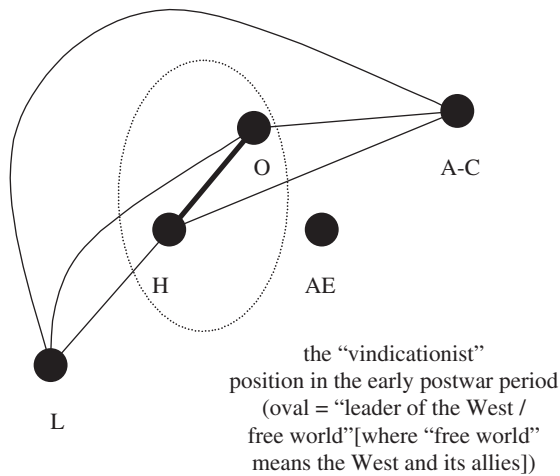


Figure 2.

This reconfiguration is accomplished through a tempering of American exceptionalism, such that the United States is thought to be part of a larger community of states and peoples. This alternative was first referred to simply as “civilization” by such vindicationists as Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge.⁶⁶ “Civilization” rendered cooperation with the Soviet Union possible, at least for the duration of the war; its replacement by the more restricted “Western Civilization” is an important part of the formation of the postwar world. This occidentalist rhetorical commonplace (O) made it possible to firmly link anticommunism with an active involvement in Europe, so as to save Western Civilization from the threat of communism. In vindicationist discourse, America is still exceptional *within* Western Civilization, and Western Civilization is

⁶⁴Boorstin 1960, pp. 19–25.

⁶⁵Baritz 1964.

⁶⁶Roberts 1997, pp. 337–9; Ruggie 1998, pp. 207–8.

exceptional when compared to the rest of the world, but (in effect) the firm connection between the physical borders of the United States and the boundaries of America are severed. This de-legitimizes the positions associated with exemplarist logic, and legitimates a more active American involvement overseas, to defend the civilization of which it is a part.

What is striking about these constellations is the extent to which the postwar vindicationist position depends on the successful deployment of occidentalist language against exemplarist arguments. American advocates of closer institutionalized cooperation between the United States and Western Europe, many of whom were part of the Truman Administration, began to use such language when searching for a new basis on which to place their foreign policy as four-power cooperation began to prove less than easy. In a variety of high-profile policy struggles, Administration officials tapped the rhetorical commonplace of “Western civilization” and built it into their strategy for justifying such major initiatives as the European Recovery Program (ERP, more popularly known as the Marshall Plan).

To cite merely one example, Marshall delivered a speech on 18 November 1947 defending the Administration’s decision to press for an increase in the productivity of the western zones of occupied Germany as part of the overall aid program: reconstructing Europe would necessarily involve “the restoration of Germany. Without a revival of German production there can be no revival of Europe’s economy.”⁶⁷ However, safeguards must be erected in order to prevent Germany from using its renewed strength to threaten the peace of Europe, safeguards which will involve the use of German resources for the good of Europe as a whole. Contrary to Soviet declarations, Marshall argues, this is not a preference for Germany over the rest of Europe, but a plan to restore Europe’s economic viability:

We are aware of the seriousness and extent of the campaign which is being directed against us as one of the bulwarks of Western civilization. We are not blind to any of the forms which this attack assumes. And we do not propose to stand by and watch the disintegration of the international community to which we belong . . . we can afford to discount the alarms and excursions intended to distract us, and to proceed with calm determination along the path which our traditions have defined.⁶⁸

Here we see an occidentalist strategy *par excellence*: the United States and Europe belong to a common cultural community, which the Soviet Union threatens; Germany is a part of this community too, and as such may be reconstructed within the framework of an integrated Europe and a free West; and the traditions of this community give United States

⁶⁷DOSB 30 November 1947, p. 1027.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 1028.

policy its direction. The ERP is thus a program to save Western Civilization, including Germany, from the threat of Communism, and should be implemented on this basis.

It is in this respect that the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia on 25 February 1948 was so useful to the ERP's advocates—here was dramatic evidence that could be used to indicate a threat to the entire West. Absent this commonplace, such an event far from the shores of the United States might have been downplayed or even ignored, in traditional exemplarist fashion; but the Administration's strategy of using occidentalism to exclude American exceptionalism precluded this option. Thus, when Robert Taft, the leader of the Republican opposition to the ERP in the Senate, proposed an amendment reducing the appropriation for the ERP by approximately a billion dollars, the proposal was defeated (with all of the Democrats and half of the Republicans voting to reject the amendment), and Taft announced his support for the program "on the grounds that some aid was necessary in the fight against communism."⁶⁹ Ignoring events in Europe was simply no longer a viable political option, because of the rhetorical nesting of both the United States and Western Europe within Western Civilization.

The discursive work involved in legitimating these policies unintentionally provided the condition of possibility for the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949. The fact that Administration officials were using occidentalist language made the British appeal to similar notions more powerful than might have otherwise been the case. What made it possible for a formal association between the United States and Western Europe to come into being was the rhetorical nesting of these states within Western Civilization. Hence, an alliance *within* Western Civilization seemed to be simply an acknowledgement of connections that already existed, and therefore less of a radical departure than it might have seemed. Bevin's initiative partook of this pattern of justification, as did the appeals voiced by other European leaders. Inasmuch as the new vindicationist constellation depended on occidentalist language, it would have been difficult for American officials to refuse to go along with this further specification of occidentalism into the military realm. They were, in effect, trapped by the implications of their own rhetoric: the social space of their agency had been reconfigured, making opposition to a formal alliance seem rather illegitimate.

Occidental logic was greatly in evidence during the negotiations leading up to the formulation of the Treaty throughout 1948 and 1949. Initial consultations between representatives of the United States, Great Britain, and Canada soon arrived at a proposal for "a collective defense agreement for the North Atlantic Area" that featured prominently the claim that "the main object of the instrument would be to preserve western civilization in the geographical area

⁶⁹Freeland 1972, p. 266; Patterson 1972, p. 388.

covered by the instrument.”⁷⁰ From the outset, the Treaty was constituted as the institutionalization of a Western community, so much so that the Soviet Union was rarely mentioned in the course of the negotiations. Rather, the rhetorical focus remained on the need to defend the values of the West by providing some degree of explicit support for those values—even if the initial commitments embodied in the Treaty were quite modest.⁷¹ From a relational perspective, what is important here is both the availability of such language and its strategic use during the negotiations, rather than any kind of subjective internalization of the claims.

Pitching the Treaty in this manner permitted advocates of such a drastic departure from the traditional American policy of avoiding peacetime alliances to garner the support of people like George Kennan, who had initially been quite opposed to the notion of a formal treaty.⁷² But Kennan altered his recommendation in May 1948, arguing that public statements by Bevin and the Canadian Foreign Minister had altered the rhetorical landscape: “I think we must be very careful not to place ourselves in the position of being the obstacle to further progress toward the political union of the western democracies.”⁷³ Occidental language also helped to garner the support of powerful senators like Arthur Vandenberg, who had already (during the ERP debates) accepted and helped to advance the occidental/vindicationist strategy against its exemplarist rival.

Both the Preamble of the Treaty, and the specification of obligations under the Treaty in Article 5, extend the occidental strategy developed during the ERP debates, drawing on the notion of civilizational commonality to justify the Treaty and the commitments which it entailed. The Preamble declared that the Parties to the Treaty “are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law,” thus placing the Treaty in a direct line with the ERP which preceded it. Article 5 built on this logic by proposing an indivisible notion of security:

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them . . . will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individual and in concert with other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.⁷⁴

⁷⁰FRUS 1948/III, pp. 73–4.

⁷¹Coker 1998, pp. 60–1.

⁷²Ireland 1981, p. 83.

⁷³FRUS 1948/III, p. 128.

⁷⁴NATO 1989, pp. 376–7.

The civilizational principles enframing such an indivisible notion of security, thanks in no small part to the campaigns to legitimate the ERP, were so firmly established that even Taft, once again leading the Republican opposition in the Senate, admitted that “the special problems of Europe and its importance to the cause of freedom throughout the world force us to act there more vigorously and make some exceptions to the general rules of policy.” Europe’s importance was due to the fact that “our cultural background springs from Europe, and many of our basic principles of liberty and justice were derived from European nations.”⁷⁵ Taft attempted to propose an alternative institutional form for the transatlantic relationship, but in the end the vindicationist/occidentalists strategy carried the day, and the treaty passed the Senate by a vote of 82–13, Taft voting against.⁷⁶ Effective opposition to a policy justified as the defense of Western Civilization was hard to muster, as the rhetorical landscape had already been effectively shifted.

The Truman Administration spared no opportunity to build on this occidentalists strategy in establishing the Alliance. The festivities surrounding the signing ceremony on 4 April 1949 provide a striking example; the Administration put together what it called “the largest concentration of short-wave radio facilities ever assembled for a single program” in order to broadcast the speeches; in particular, plans were made to broadcast the ceremony over the Voice of America network so that “people of the Eastern European countries, including Soviet Russia,” would be able to listen in.⁷⁷ Almost all of the speakers made reference to NATO as an organization for the defense of the West. To pick only one example, José Caeiro da Matta, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Portugal, claimed that Portugal was signing the Treaty not merely because of concern for its own security, but “much more because of her recognition of the need of giving her cooperation to this great effort . . . to defend the principles and the positions which those peoples that are the depository of the ideals of Western civilization occupy in the world.” He followed with a flourish exemplary of the entire occidentalists position on these issues, unintentionally summarizing the entire justificatory strategy that had produced the Treaty:

It can be said that there is now being repeated around the shores of the Atlantic—and on a much vaster scale—the picture which the ancient peoples knew at the time when the finest conquests of the human mind and the highest exponents of civilization were centered in the small but fertile area of the classical world.⁷⁸

⁷⁵Taft 1951, p. 82.

⁷⁶Taft’s opposition to NATO would come back to haunt him, as it was often held up in the 1952 presidential primary as evidence of Taft’s “isolationism” and thus his unsuitability to be president. The fact that he was running against Dwight Eisenhower, the first Supreme Commander of NATO forces, made the contrast all the more obvious; this may have cost Taft the nomination (Patterson 1972: 560–2).

⁷⁷DOSB 10 April 1949, p. 458.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 479.

IV. CONCLUSION

Obviously, the story does not stop here. As early as the first confidential discussions between British, American, and Canadian officials about a possible North Atlantic Treaty, a decision was made that “when circumstances permit, Germany (or the three Western Zones), Austria (or the three Western Zones) and Spain should be invited to adhere” to any such Treaty, although this objective “*should not be publicly disclosed*,” presumably until some suitable formula for legitimating such a course of action could be found.⁷⁹ That basis would be the self-same occidentalist strategy that had helped to produce the Alliance by rhetorically outflanking American exemplarist logic; NATO’s constitution as the military arm of Western Civilization would provide the rhetorical resources for legitimating West German association with, and eventual accession to, the Alliance.⁸⁰ Occidentalist rhetoric played a key role in helping Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of West Germany, to outflank his domestic opponents and legitimate rearmament under the auspices of NATO, ironically by characterizing his opponents as “isolationists”:

Adenauer: . . . very often there is only the policy of the lesser evil. But since 1945 there has been a policy of the greater evil, a German isolationism.

Interviewer:⁸¹ We know this specific word only in American politics. There it means a propensity—which keeps springing up over and over—to hold oneself apart from every interaction with the world [*Welthändeln*], above all to hold oneself apart from Europe, and to defend only the narrowest interests of one’s own country . . . what would the corresponding policy be in Germany?

Adenauer: Exactly the same, except with one difference . . . We are a weak and exceedingly exposed country. We can accomplish nothing on our own, relying only on our own power. We cannot be a no-man’s-land between East and West; in that case we would have no friends anywhere and in any case a dangerous neighbor to the East. *It does not matter whether one calls this “neutrality” or not.* Every refusal of the Federal Republic to pursue common matters with the West, or with Europe, would already be a German isolationism, a dangerous flight into having nothing to do with the world [*Nichthandeln*].⁸²

Occidental language would continue to be important for the accession of other countries to the Alliance in the years to come, including the association of Austria (although the negotiators in 1948 could have had no idea how long this process would take) and the accession of three former Warsaw Pact countries. Occidentalism remains important to these policy outcomes, playing a role throughout the life of the Alliance similar to the role it played at the Alliance’s formation: a constitutive and legitimating role, underpinning the conditions of possibility for the Alliance in the first place. And it does so by giving rise to a

⁷⁹FRUS 1948/III, p. 75, emphasis in original.

⁸⁰Leffler 1992, pp. 280–4, 345–6; Eisenberg 1996, pp. 471–4.

⁸¹Ernst Friedländer.

⁸²BPA, 5 March 1952.

civilizational actor in world politics: Western Civilization, which then becomes the community of reference for the policies associated with NATO.

A relational approach to the phenomenon of social action permits an analyst to appreciate the role played by rhetorical notions like this, without falling into the seductive trap of necessity individualism. Several sorts of reductionism are thus avoided: the reduction of social action to the motivations of particular human beings, the reduction of agency to calculation, and the reduction of social actors to substantial entities via the downplaying of the importance of active political debate about the *boundaries* of those actors. Concentrating on public debates as the social context for policy action restores agency—understood as the capacity for an actor to have acted otherwise—to the account, through the incorporation of contingency and a commitment to trace the contours of public claims without having pre-determined who the actors are. Although I have focused on one specific instance of policy articulation, the approach that I have outlined is in principle applicable to the analysis of *any* social action, particularly that kind of action that has as an effect the stabilization or transformation of actor boundaries. Thinking about agency as a kind of indeterminate *social space* out of which action arises, and concentrating our analytical attention on the contours of that social space, allows analysts to side-step thorny questions of subjective motivation, and focus on the real causal effects of rhetorical deployments.

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