As Oran Young rightfully expresses, the Arctic has been subject to increased attention, from the rest of the world as well as from the Arctic States themselves. At the core of this renewed interest: climate change.[1] The Arctic is warming twice as fast as anywhere else on Earth, leading to an unprecedented and extremely rapid thaw.[2] Therefore, States, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organisations and individuals have all been looking at the Arctic with a new eye, some seeing in climate change the development of new economic and military opportunities while others are getting more and more concerned by the devastating effects climate change brings to the environment and the people living in the Arctic. I would put myself in the latter group. In fact, although I have no familial or historical connection to the Arctic, the fragility of its ecosystems has struck me in recent years. Indeed, the severity of climate change is already seeable in the Arctic: permafrost thaws, sea-ice retreats, key species are critically diminishing while huge mining and gas projects are being developed in extremely remote regions, traditionally only inhabited by indigenous peoples.

Moreover, while these recent developments have been increasingly looked upon on the international scene, the Arctic States have tried to counter this international interest by asserting their control of the region.[3] The Arctic is thus torn between conflicting directions: economic (and military?) development versus conservation of the environment; international cooperation versus Arctic-only cooperation; Arctic cooperation versus individual State development…[4] To me, these conflicting interests, opinions and trends – although they can be interpreted through various theories – resonate with the constructivist approach. In fact, as will be developed hereunder, the constructivist theories fit well with my perception of the Arctic. This essay will thus try to show how the constructivist approach can explain the conflicting trends the Arctic observes nowadays, especially regarding climate change. Firstly, the focus will be put on the author of this essay, who will be used as a case study for the relationship between individuals and the Arctic. This will lead to a more general consideration of the constructivist approach as applied to States in a second part, and to other non-State actors in a final part.

Climate change as the catalyst behind a personal interest in the Arctic

As was stated in the introduction, the present author has no objective relation to the Arctic. Born and raised in France, I have never lived in the Arctic before my adulthood, and have

never been above the Arctic circle. I never learned about the Arctic in class, the books I read and the movies I watched were nowhere near the Arctic; the Arctic did not have any particular meaning. Thus, it does not appear rational at first to imagine that I am studying in order to spend most of my life in, and for, the polar regions. Indeed, why an individual who has absolutely no link to the Arctic would like to 'devote' his life to the region? A particular factor must be put in the analysis: climate change. In fact, climate change can be seen as a disruptor in individual lives, as well as in international relations, as it disturbs the common rationale. Without climate change, I would probably never have gotten interested in the Arctic in the first place, and certainly would not have decided to study thoroughly the matter. Climate change first struck me when I was doing Erasmus exchange studies at the University of Iceland. In the very fragile nature of Iceland (and of the Arctic in general), any human impact has huge consequences and its effects are seen everywhere: off-road driving leaves its marks for 70 years at least, whales are stranding on the Icelandic shores in astounding numbers, the Ök glacier has vanished entirely last year… Both revolted and deeply concerned by these changes, I have decided to study in the Arctic, for the Arctic, as the region is on the frontline regarding climate change, and strong actions need to be taken in order to protect the region and its inhabitants.[5].

Constructivism fits perfectly with this brief assessment: climate change has a particular meaning for me, and it is this meaning – "constructed from a complex and specific mix of history, ideas, norms, and belief"[6] – that has shaped, and will continue to shape, my behaviour towards the Arctic. Indeed, it is not the fact itself (i.e. that the climate is changing) but the social meaning it has to me as an individual (i.e. that climate change will have dire consequences if not mitigated, for humans and for whole ecosystems, and that the Arctic is on the frontline) that truly matters in order to understand this "irrational" behaviour.[7] It is this meaning that here explains why I would involve myself in the Arctic without having any apparent connection to it in the first place. Therefore, constructivism can help us understand the implications of different actors to the Arctic, especially in the context of climate change. By analysing what the Arctic (and more specifically climate change in the Arctic) means to individuals, constructivism helps us understand illogical behaviours. This is only at the individual level, but it seems very feasible to extend this analysis to other levels, as will be developed in the following part.

Climate change, the Arctic and States

The short analysis developed above shows that constructivism can help us explain individual relations to the Arctic. Indeed, with the example of the present author, it has been shown that he got involved in the Arctic because of the meaning climate change has for him, and of the frontline role the Arctic plays in this phenomena. It is possible to apply the same analysis to the Arctic States and to observe from a constructivist perspective the way they act regarding climate change and international relations more generally.

Indeed, climate change in the Arctic is a fact that has different meanings for States, leading to various approaches in international relations. Constructivism shows that it is not climate change itself that matters but the meaning it has: the way it is seen, treated, analysed and dealt with by the States. In a very synthesised approach, three different meanings can be identified: climate change can mean the development of new problems, the development of new opportunities or nothing. To explain simply: some individuals (like myself), and similarly, some States (especially since, as Slaughter describes, the social context is essential in constructivism)[8] see climate change as a threat. For them, climate change means the appearance of many new issues, that must be dealt with because they represent a threat for the ecosystems, for indigenous peoples, for the economy in the long term… This fits mostly (but not wholly) with the Nordic countries, which have taken more ambitious measures regarding climate change, in an effort to cooperate on the matter.[9]

On another hand, some see in climate change the development of new opportunities: the retreat of sea-ice, the increased accessibility of the region and the warming climate mean new economic possibilities. This primarily fits Russia,[10] but all countries have to some extent understood climate change as an opportunity.

Finally, some refuse to acknowledge climate change as a fact and thus act as if it meant nothing. This is particularly interesting because denial, far from being neutral, is a strong attitude that is difficult to take on. Therefore, when the United States refused to have a joint declaration in Rovaniemi because of climate change,[11] it was far from being neutral and on the contrary sparked some tensions on the international scene.

These different behaviours are the result of different meanings climate change has for the Arctic States. They are all schematic versions of a far more complex reality, but they show the different tendencies States follow. One State can follow one particular tendency but can

also follow multiple ones. As was stated in the introduction, the Arctic is torn between different trends that result from these conflicting meanings. These meanings and behaviours are nothing but constant, they evolve depending on the social context, the media coverage, the policy agenda…[12] It would be necessary to look more thoroughly into the social context of each country to better understand these meanings and their consequences on the States' policies, but the constructivist approach shows that the meaning climate change has partly shaped the Arctic States' behaviours and relations. For instance, the creation of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy and the Arctic Council are the results of specific historical and social contexts: around the end of the Cold War, the Arctic was seen as a peaceful yet fragile territory that needed to be protected by the circumpolar community. Today, this context has changed and the American behaviour at the last Arctic Council Ministerial is very representative of that shift.

It is also interesting to note that for the non-Arctic States and for the international scene in general, climate change has meant the opportunity to get more involved in the Arctic.[13] For instance, France's Arctic Strategy insists very clearly on the need for international cooperation regarding this unprecedented global challenge.[14] This is linked, in my opinion, to today's social context where climate change emerges as a pressing matter while the Arctic is usually depicted as a pristine, fragile, uninhabited region that must be protected: this allows States to show their commitment (while not acting at home…). However, as constructivism emphasises, it must be noted that the social contexts and norms are not only the result of individuals but also of other actors.[15] In the specific Arctic setting, a few words must be written on indigenous peoples organisations and NGOs.

Social norms, climate change and non-State actors in the Arctic

Indeed, States are not the only relevant actors in this general assessment. Because social meanings and norms influence States' behaviours, other actors such as NGOs and indigenous peoples organisations can play a great role. For example, it is interesting to see how social norms have substantially influenced the actions taken by the international (or European) community regarding climate change in the Arctic. Indeed, the attempts to place the polar bears in Appendix I of the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species and the European ban on the trade of seal products are prime examples of this.[16] As Slaughter puts it, these actions follow a "'logic of appropriateness', where rationality is

heavily mediated by social norms."[17] Here, banning the trade of polar bears and seals was not motivated by rational conservation logics but by social norms, which put polar bears and seals as iconic animals that deserved full protection. Again, constructivism enlightens these 'irrational' actions: social norms and pressures have led the States to adopt (for the seal ban) or try to adopt (for the polar bear) measure that neither follow rationality nor their interests. As constructivism highlights, it is the meaning polar bears and seals have that truly mattered regarding these decisions, not their ecological status.

The European ban on seal trade is also meaningful regarding the 'norm entrepreneurs' concept in constructivism. Norm entrepreneurs are defined as non-State actors (e.g. non-governmental organisations, indigenous peoples organisations…) that effectively influence States' behaviours.[18] Here, the seal ban shows that some NGOs have successfully acted as norm entrepreneurs, shaping State's opinions on the importance of protecting seals in the Arctic,[19] while it also shows indigenous peoples have failed to have this influence over the States on this matter. Indigenous peoples are on the frontline of climate change, and will be among those who suffer most from it,[20] but their influence on the States is still precarious. On the contrary, European NGOs not directly affected by a seal ban have effectively shaped States' behaviours regarding climate change, mainly through false arguments. Constructivism thus allows us to understand what seems irrational at first sight: social norms matter more than facts. This assessment is relevant regarding the European Parliament but can be false in different contexts. For instance, indigenous peoples clearly have a more prominent voice in the Arctic Council, and can thus act as norm entrepreneurs there.[21] However, what is certain is that States are not the only ones to decide today. Constructivism shows that individuals, NGOs, indigenous peoples organisations or international fora can all have some influence on international relations. In fact, all of these different actors shape States' behaviours, by changing social norms and by adding meaning to mere facts.

Conclusion

Overall, it should appear clearly by now that I find it relevant to analyse the Arctic through a constructivist lens. Indeed, at the individual level, constructivism explains why I personally study the Arctic, even though I have no apparent link to it, and no rational interest to do so. At the State level, what climate change means for the Arctic States leads to different

behaviours, that change with the evolvement of specific social context and norms. A similar phenomenon can be observed at the international level, where climate change and the fast-warming Arctic means the opportunity to get more involved in the region for many different States. Furthermore, constructivism highlights that non-State actors play a great role in international relations because they influence social norms and meanings. Non-governmental organisations have successfully acted as norm entrepreneurs at the European level, and one can hope that indigenous peoples – who have, to a certain extent, reached this level in the Arctic States – will also become norm entrepreneurs at a global level, especially since they are by far the most concerned regarding climate change in the Arctic.

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[1] Oran R. Young, "The Arctic in Play: Governance in a Time of Rapid Change", *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, n°24, 2009, pp. 423-442.

[2] See for example the latest IPCC report for the cryosphere and the polar regions: Michael Meredith et al., "Polar Regions", *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, 2019.

[3] See for example the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration.

[4] As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech in Rovaniemi in 2019 tends to suggest.

[5] Ed Struzik was already pinpointing this issue in 1992. See Ed Struzik, "The End of Arctic", *Equinox*, n°66, November 1992.

[6] Anne-Marie Slaughter, "International Relations, Principal Theories" in R. Wolfrum (Ed.) *Max Planck Encyclopaedia of Public International Law*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 19.

[7] Idem.

[8] Idem.

[9] The latest Finnish and today's Icelandic chairmanships' objectives show this desire.

[10] The attempt to develop the Northern Sea Route is a prime example of this.

[11] Somini Sengupta, “S. Pressure Blocks Declaration on Climate Change at Arctic Talks”, *The New York Times*, 7 May 2019.

[12] Robert Pfaltzgraff, Charles A. McClelland, “Constructivism”, *International Relations*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15 October 2019.

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[14] Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et du Développement International, *The Great Challenge of the Arctic: National Roadmap for the Arctic*, June 2016.

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[16] For a summary of these cases, see Rachael Lorna Johnstone, Mary Durfee, *Arctic Governance in a Changing World*, 2019.

[17] Anne-Marie Slaughter, “International Relations, Principal Theories” in R. Wolfrum (Ed.) *Max Planck Encyclopaedia of Public International Law*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 20.

[18] Idem.

[19] NGOs left a toy seal and a leaflet to every Member of the European Parliament before the vote, stating these cute seals are “doomed to die, unless we end the trade in seal products” – a lobbying effort that proved successful. See La Rédaction, “Les eurodéputés font leurs cartons”, *Le Parisien*, 7 May 2009.

[20] Joan Nymand Larsen et al., “Polar Regions”, *Climate change 2014: impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability, part B: regional aspects: working group II contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 2014, pp. 1567-1612, p. 1583.

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