

Price, Richard M., The Chemical Weapons Taboo (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997)

Question: Why is there a taboo against using chemical weapons but not for other conventional armaments?  
Interesting question, because it has the normative weight of nuclear weapons but the physical capabilities of conventional weapons

Previous theories fail to explain the non-usage norm:

- Realism suggests that norms would only be robust for weapons that are useless anyway; chemical weapons, however, could have been useful in certain situations (attacking enemy hiding in caves)
- Essentialism suggests that there is something intrinsically evil about CWs, but a lot of other weapons (e.g. firearms) were castigated at one point or another; why has the CW taboo alone persisted?

Methodology: uses the genealogical method, i.e. moral interpretations are historically contingent and are subject to change as a function of chance occurrences

- focuses on discourse, which are theoretical statements about social practices. Discourse 1) constructs categories that define appropriate behavior, and 2) serves to politicize certain phenomena over others
- norms initially develop to complement the institutional interests of major actors (instrumental), but memories of these needs gradually fade and only the proscriptive intent of the norm is remembered (substantive); norms thus become independently causal and constitutive
- looks at particular historical events that sparked discursive debates on the dimensions of the taboo

Overview:

- background: growing perception that war was illegitimate and could be limited through international law- civilized states should be able to regulate conduct
- CWs were seen as a potentially negative externality of modernization, whose prohibition could serve as a test case for how states deal with technological modernity
  - CWs were seen as a threat because of the potential danger to civilians, should gas attacks spillover from fields of war (prevalent just-war principle separated combatants from non-combatants)
  - this increased fears of retaliation against one's own civilians should a state decide to use CWs first
- years of thinking of CWs as a retaliatory weapon retarded their development in military strategies and established a politicized barrier that required extreme justification for usage
- people hadn't had the opportunity to get used to CWs, and this strangeness kept alive the fear usually reserved only for new weapons
  - lack of civilian exposure kept alive anachronistic fears of its potency
  - myth of defenselessness: even with the development of gas masks, people kept on assuming that one couldn't fight off CWs
- as the inhumanity and illegitimacy of CW usage became prevalent, gas weapons came to be seen as a weapon of mass destruction (similar to nuclear weapons) that could never be used

A bit of history...

1. Hague Peace Conferences (1899, 1907)
  - asphyxiating shells criticized because its effects could spillover into civilians, which was against the prevailing just-war doctrine
  - at the same time, views emerged that warfare was immoral and *uncivilized*: prompted calls to exercise self-discipline and civilized enlightenment by prohibiting the usage of potentially destructive weapons
  - states agreed on non-usage because these weapons had not yet been developed; nobody knew whether they were feasible or effective in wars
2. WW1
  - CWs were used in stances where actors they could away with it on technicalities (Germany used non-lethal gas clouds, not lethal projectile shells), even if it violated the spirit of the agreement
  - CWs, however, were never specifically targeted at civilians: 1) fear of CW reprisal against one's own citizens, and 2) perceived undefendability- physical barriers couldn't stop gas
3. Interwar Period

- despite the development and proliferation of gas masks, lack of civilian exposure to CWs allowed wild fears to take hold; although most soldiers argued after WWI that chemical attacks were less lethal and debilitating than were high explosives, the political discourse focused on revulsion against CWs independent of comparisons to other armaments- “non-events undergirded the construction of an interpretation that proved more powerful than the events themselves” (pp.81)
- Washington Naval Conference, Geneva Protocol: codified non-use into international law
  - previous institutionalization of non-use norms in the Hague + moral concerns (civilian spillover) and abstract fears (undefendability and potency) prompted restraint on usage, even though CWs were seen as useful
- 4. WWII: anti-CW taboo politicized CW usage and pushed normative thresholds of its usage
  - Italian usage against Ethiopia justified on grounds that CWs were used against non-civilized people (remember that CWs were first opposed because their usage implied non-civility)
  - during WWII, states avoided CWs (but not other weapons) because of :
    - retaliatory fears stemming from anachronistic beliefs of CW potency
    - higher normative threshold: Geneva discourse against usage raised ante for attempted usage, i.e. norms acted as informal constraints raising costs of violation
    - unpreparedness for chemical warfare: higher normative threshold and fear of retaliation raise costs of usage and prompted political leaders to allocate resources to other weapons
- 5. post WWII: Iran-Iraq War and Gulf War
  - Iran-Iraq: Iraq used chemical weapons only when losing badly (higher threshold of usage), after extensive threats of usage (credible commitment? Iran didn't believe it would be used), and when the int'l community showed indifference to those threats (fear of retaliation minimized)
    - Iraq defended CW usage by referring to them as weapons of last resort: CWs were seen as having similar normative weight as weapons of mass destruction
  - Gulf-War: where CW was previously seen as weapons that could potentially be used, its effectiveness in Gulf War derived more from the political value of manipulating the threat of usage: accumulated practice of non-use bred norms that they should never be employed
    - perceived as the “poor man’s bomb”: although not really as effective, moral opprobrium against usage led to it being categorized as a weapon of mass destruction, whereby its illegitimacy and inhumanitarian aspects were (and still are) reinforced

#### Criticism:

- many good points, especially those highlighting how CWs weren't used even though they could have been tactically useful in certain situations; similarly, interesting how chemical weapons are stigmatized even though their effectiveness isn't all that great in most situations
- if you believe in what leaders write in their memoirs, then it also seems pretty likely that these norms were constitutive (leaders believed in the illegitimacy of CW usage), not only regulatory (leaders were simply responding to domestic and international opposition to usage to avoid downturns in approval ratings)
- problem: most of this book is political history limited to the CW case- there is no systematic attempt to codify institutional constraints in a generalizable way or explain how some norms are embedded while others aren't; it's best to look at this book as a critical examination of a particular phenomenon that can't be explained by realist logic