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# Seizing Constructivist Ground? Practice and Relational Theories

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An INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY ONLINE symposium

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# INTRODUCTION

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*International Studies Quarterly* (ISQ) has a tradition of being home to big debates about, and major contributions to, international-relations theory. There's simply no way to do justice to the list of important articles [important](#) (Tickner 1997) [articles](#) (Williams 2003), [forums](#) (ISQ 2014), and even [special issues](#) (ISQ 1990). In recent years, ISQ published a call for [global international relations](#) (Acharya 2014), a major piece on [practice theory](#) (Bueger and Gadinger 2015)—the subject of a [symposium](#) (ISQ 2015), and an [influential call to move beyond paradigms in international-relations theory and scholarship](#) (Lake 2011).

I mention these last three pieces because they bear directly on the subject of this symposium, David McCourt's "[Practice Theory and Relationalism as the New Constructivism](#)" (2016). McCourt's piece enjoys the distinction of being ISQ's first "theory note." We introduced theory notes to help forward ISQ's tradition as a place for important debates about international-relations theory. But, beyond the vague notion that there should exist the equivalent—or, more accurately, the inverse—of a "research note," we really had very little idea what the category entailed. Indeed, none of the [available](#) (Butcher and Griffiths 2017)—or forthcoming—theory notes share much more than their status as spare, disciplined, and salient interventions on ongoing theoretical controversies.

So I find it a bit embarrassing that our first theory note not only deals with my own work, but offers some sharp criticisms of it. Still, McCourt's article generated much attention when it first appeared on "advance access," and we thought it would make a good subject for a symposium. While many in the field have moved beyond the "isms," McCourt argues for explicit attention to the continued existence, and evolution, of the constructivist research program. As his title suggests, he considers two related traditions—practice and relational theory—as carrying the torch on central constructivist wagers.

The contributions to this symposium reflect the controversial nature of some of McCourt's arguments. [Ted Hopf](#) is not impressed, and takes issue with a number of explicit and implicit arguments he finds in the theory note. [Stacie Goddard](#) offers "three, most friendly, quarrels" with McCourt. [Alex Montgomery](#) also offers a more favorable reading, and emphasizes the promise of social-network analysis in "tak[ing] the fight to individualists by challenging" their key assumptions. [Oliver Kessler](#) worries that McCourt's argument narrows the range of constructivist theorizing, particularly at the expense of the linguistic turn.

[Christian Bueger](#) considers, among other things, McCourt's location of practice theory as third-generation constructivist too constraining. [Cecelia Lynch](#) notes that, rather than correcting old problems, relational and practice theories—and practice theories in particular—risk replicating them. [Ty Solomon](#) also expresses skepticism, and notes that both these approaches carry with them important blind spots. [Swati Srivastava](#) sees a missed opportunity to address the social dimensions of research programs. Finally, [McCourt](#) responds.

# THERE ARE NO PANACEAS IN SOCIAL THEORY

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Ted Hopf

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McCourt writes that the "true value" of constructivism is that it keeps "IR scholarship sensitive to the social and cultural contexts in which international politics takes place." He indicates that the same value is offered by practice theory and relationalism. But constructivism, especially in the U.S., has "narrowed" over time, leaving us with three inadequacies: a structuralist bias, a focus on language over practice, and a "preference for causal over constitutive claims." Moreover, practice theory and relationalism can get constructivism beyond these sins.

First, McCourt offers no evidence that constructivism has "become less exciting with time," or that "scholars have moved away from constructivism over time," or that it needs "reinvigoration." In fact, as the international [TRIPS survey](#) (Maliniak et al. 2014) has recently shown, constructivism has become and remains part of the IR research and teaching Holy Trinity, along with realisms and liberalisms. In fact, I would argue that instead of narrowing, constructivism has spawned a lively and growing interest in not just narrowly constructivist IR, but social theory and IR in general, even in the United States. Indeed both practice and relational theories have been advanced by, and found an audience among, U.S. scholars. Moreover, identity, norms, and culture strike me as pretty capacious categories for research, allowing for coverage of much territory, including McCourt's preferred approaches.

Indeed, as far back as 2002, [Iver Neumann](#) reminded constructivist IR scholars that Foucault's conceptualization of discursive formations both "sayings and doings," steering us away from an over-reliance on exclusively textual evidence (Neumann 2002). To be fair, it should be pointed out that Foucault paid a great deal of attention to words, language, and texts. Culture is not so constraining a concept if one remembers it includes the cultural practices to which the practice turn points.

Second, I am not pretty certain that we cannot ever resolve key questions around structure and agency, ideas and materiality, and causality and constitution. Constructivists rightly raised these as *problems* that demanded sustained and agonistic attention. We should prefer this permanent state of theoretical anxiety to what will always end up as strained and unconvincing resolutions. Field theory, network analysis and Actor-Network Theory do not do an obviously better job. We should not expect them to be antidotes to fundamental social-theoretic problems, but rather as additional tools with which to think through these issues.

Third, I was surprised by McCourt's observation that there is a preference for causal over constitutive stories in constructivist IR. As one of the most consistent supporters for the use of neo-positivist methods combined with an interpretivist epistemology among constructivist scholars, I can report that my position is a rather lonely one. In an [H-Diplo roundtable review](#) (2014) of my book, [Reconstructing the Cold War](#) (2012), Patrick Thaddeus Jackson lamented that he could not assign the book to his students because of my

methodological approach. I am afraid I am only going to further disappoint Jackson, as I am now embarked on creating a large-N intersubjective national identity database for all great powers from 1810 to the present, so that quantitative scholars can use national identity as a variable in their models.

Which scholars have identified subjects only as subjects after they are in a social relationship with another subject? To be sure, most of us argue that meaningful subjectivities do not emerge until such interaction, but it is not as if many of us wait for that subjectivity to appear before we specify units of analysis or actors or agents of interest, whether they be states, movements, or individuals. In making the case for relationalism, McCourt cites [Norbert Elias](#) to the effect that "individuals live first in interdependence with others." This seems to me as no different than basic constructivist insights "old school" constructivists derived from [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#)?

Fourth, I do not see how practice theory and relationalism are going to resolve this issue. McCourt tells us that "processes and relations [are] analytical primitives" for relationalism. But aren't relations always between two entities? It is one thing to claim that processes matter; it is another to dispense with entities altogether. Of course we should not exclusively concentrate on agents or structures, practical or discursive knowledge, reflex or reflection, representational or non-representational knowledge, knowing how or knowing that, etc.

I find it ironic that McCourt advances field theory as a way past constructivism's structuralist bias, since one of the fundamental theorists of field theory, Pierre Bourdieu, as cited by McCourt, has been roundly criticized for being a structuralist.<sup>1</sup> [Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory](#) (ANT) is singled out for restoring material agency, if we can call it that. Is that an unalloyed improvement? One of ANT's more notorious actants are the bridges over the Long Island Expressway from New York City to Long Island. They are so low as to prevent buses from passing under them. Clearly they have an effect upon who can easily travel to Long Island's beaches, favoring those with cars. But are we to attribute agency to these low spans of concrete for keeping poor people (of color) from easily traveling to these beaches, or should we adduce agency to Robert Moses, who designed them that way deliberately? Again, we should not exclude either consideration, but surely concentrating on material agency has more pernicious ethical consequences than concentrating on Moses.

The bottom line is that constructivism was never a panacea for many of social theory's eternal dilemmas, though it offered significant advantages over the liberal and realist alternatives. And it is still broad enough to easily accommodate practices, processes and relations, although these latter are only going to add to the conversation, not settle the argument.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, DiMaggio 1979; Brubaker 1985; Sewell, Jr. 1992; Farnell 2000; Eagleton 1992; Honneth 1986; Schiach 1993.

# HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT? THE NOT-SO-SECRET CONSTRUCTIVISM OF RELATIONALISM

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Constructivism, [David McCourt](#) (2016) tells us, has been hiding in plain sight. On the face of it, constructivism, like all of the “isms,” is a paradigm in decline, increasingly overshadowed by “non-paradigmatic” approaches to international politics ([Malianik et al. 2014](#)). McCourt, however, argues that constructivism is not only “not quite dead, yet,” it is flourishing, albeit under deep cover, disguised as “practice-relational” theory. McCourt has had it with all of this subterfuge. He wants those of us who work within the practice-relational turn to stand up and call ourselves constructivists. Doing so, he argues, is critical both to substantive scholarship and the politics of the discipline. I have three, mostly friendly, quarrels with McCourt’s argument: his treatment of the mechanisms of fractal distinction as largely disciplinary; his argument that constructivism’s rise and fall is cyclical; and with his argument that practice-relational scholars call themselves constructivists.

*Fractal distinction versus dialogical engagement.* My first quarrel concerns the cause of what McCourt calls constructivism’s “fractal distinction.” At the broadest level, “constructivism” is defined as any approach that, following Ian Hacking, X need *not* have existed, or need *not* be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is *not* determined by the nature of things; it is *not* inevitable” ([Hacking 1999, 6](#)). As McCourt notes, constructivism entails no specific ontological, epistemological, or methodological commitment. At the beginning of the constructivist turn, a wide array of scholarship was classified as ‘constructivist’: the ‘Giddensian’ structurationist work of [Alexander Wendt](#) (1999); the ‘discursive rules’ emphasis of [Nicholas Onuf](#) (2012[1989]) and [Friedrich Kratochwil](#) (1989); the ‘sociological institutionalism’ inspired work of scholars like [Martha Finnemore](#) (1996); the feminist theorizing of [Cynthia Enloe](#) (2000) and [Ann Tickner](#) (1992); the “critical theory” of [Richard Ashley](#) (1984) and [David Campbell](#) (1992).

Over time, however, McCourt argues that constructivism underwent an unfortunate fractal distinction, narrowing its focus to a specific ontology, namely the analysis of ideas and norms, and a positivist epistemology. McCourt argues that this “fractal distinction...cannot, however, be explained with reference to disagreements over epistemology or methodology alone” (477). He suggests, instead, that disciplinary politics drove much of the narrowing of constructivism. International relations, he argues, was interested in “rewarding ontological discovery and penalizing seemingly unnecessary philosophical speculation about the meaning of science and the nature of legitimate knowledge” (ibid). The ‘mainstream’ constructivism that emerged was the version most palatable to a field committed to generalizable theorizing and “scientific” empirical research.

To my mind McCourt underplays the importance of intellectual debates in driving the rise of “mainstream” constructivism. As [Nexon and I have argued elsewhere](#) (2005), Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (1979)—the focus of much of the paradigm debates of the 1990s—imported structural-functionalist systems theory into international relations, using a

'Parsonian' approach to explain the persistence of anarchic systems. Much of what McCourt calls "narrow constructivism" mirrors sociological theorists' own attempts to rescue systems theory from structural-functionalist thought. Like [Giddens](#) (1986), Wendt attempted to build a systems theory that recognized structures as both material and ideational, and structures and agents as co-constitutive. Wendt's and others' approaches dominated international relations debates not simply because the discipline preferred generalizable theory and punished other approaches. Rather, this form of constructivism resonated strongly with a field still intellectually committed to a systemic approach to order and change in world politics. Indeed, it seems no coincidence that the trajectory of constructivist theorizing mirrors similar fragmentation in sociological theory over the analysis of social order and change.

*Cyclical or dialogical?* A second quarrel, related to the above, concerns McCourt's argument that constructivism has cyclical tendencies. Drawing from the sociologist [Andrew Abbot](#) (2001), McCourt proposes that social constructivist theorizing has a predictable trajectory. In international relations as well as sociology, constructivism emerges with all sorts of new things to say. Threats are "problematized," objects "deconstructed," but eventually constructivists get mired down in the business of "normal" science. The theories become less interesting. Their empirical work is less exciting. Everyone gets bored and moves on until the next time.

Certainly McCourt's theory seems persuasive, and consistent with an explosion of constructivist publications in the 1990s, a decline of these publications in the 2000s, and a reemergence of the approach in the guise of a practice-relational turn. But this narrative obscures the fact that much of the practice-relational turn emerged simultaneously with so-called narrow constructivism (see e.g., [Jackson and Nexon 1999](#)). This timing is important because it suggests that constructivism is less cyclical and more dialogical: constructivism is not going through particular periods of rise and fall; it is a dialogical school of thought, which produces its own 'newer forms' through reflection, criticism, and debate. As McCourt argues, the practice-relational turn is not absent from 'mainstream' constructivist works: Wendt, Finnemore, [Bukovansky](#) (2002), and Onuf all emphasize the importance of practice in their work, and these works that inspired many a 'constructivist-leaning' graduate student. In sociology, the relational-network approaches of [Abbot, Padgett and Ansell](#) (1993), Mische and White, and Tilly, were already proliferating; long before constructivism undertook a 'narrowing', international relations scholars were thinking of how to import these theories into their own work.

If my analysis is correct, then McCourt is far too pessimistic about the trajectory of constructivism. In the conclusion of the article, McCourt cautions that we must recognize the cyclical tendencies of constructivism (483). If, however, the narrative of the field here is correct, constructivism did not 'narrow' but rather pushed scholars to reflect on the limits of existing theoretical approaches, and to seek out new (if not entirely original) means of addressing order and change.

*Naming names.* Finally, let me address McCourt's demand that scholars working within practice-relational theory call ourselves what we are: constructivists. McCourt chides us for not taking up the mantle of constructivist theorizing. Constructivism may not have a uniform ontological, epistemological, methodological identity, but it is a social position within the field: constructivists are those scholars who engage "with the mainstream by striving for generalizable, cumulative, scientific knowledge, yet which also grapples with the problems of practice, of intersubjective meanings and interpretation" (482).

I think most practice-relational theorists would happily admit they are constructivists, in this broad sense of the term. But by calling for practice-relational theorists to embrace the label of constructivism, McCourt seems to ignore significant rhetorical politics. That constructivism would become identified with the study of rules and norms may have been contingent, but this is the definition that stuck: it is a social fact. Because of this, using the term ‘constructivist’, for many, invokes and redraws the same boundaries that marked the paradigm debates (I’d note that where were some attempts, indeed, to explain that ‘constructivism’ was an inclusive approach, but these attempts—realist-constructivism? constructivist-realism?—didn’t seem to spark a conversation between paradigms) (see e.g., [Barkin 2010](#); [Jackson and Nexon 2004](#)).

Moreover many of us believe we have a substantive stake in redrawing the boundaries of the paradigm debates. We want to argue that ‘strategic’ action need not be ‘rational’; that to theorize agency is not necessarily to focus on individuals; and to argue that ideational and ‘rhetorical’ politics are, in fact, power politics (see e.g., [Goddard and Krebs 2014](#)). If avoiding or at least downplaying the label ‘constructivist’ helps these approaches resonate more broadly across the field, then many of us are comfortable with that position.

To end on a personal note, I count myself lucky to have gone to graduate school in a period as theoretically vibrant as the constructivist turn. Whatever those of us who work in the practice-relational turn call ourselves, we were ultimately inspired and challenged by this paradigmatic movement, as well as by schools of thought outside of the scope of McCourt’s article. If the practice-relational turn is seen as equally productive, it is due in large part to this constructivist work.

# A NEW HOPE? PRACTICE THEORY, RELATIONALISM, AND THE PARADIGM WARS

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[David McCourt's ISQ article](#) (2016) convincingly argues for a New Constructivism in IR through a (re)turn to a focus on practices/processes and relations, widening the scope of the (apparently) Old Constructivism. Yet in his observation that paradigms are really social groups rather than incommensurate research programs, he misses a crucial point. Paradigms are not only social spaces (476) but also *political groups* that contest for power and influence with each other. After the peak of the Paradigm Wars in an [infamous exchange of letters in 1993](#), a kind of cold peace was established, with a supposed [division of labor between realism, liberalism, and constructivism](#) (Katzenstein et al. 1999). This peace has ended up securing the dominance of liberalism and the marginalization of constructivism as the latter struggles against a straitjacket of absurd epistemological requirements. It is time for a New Constructivist rebellion.

Indeed, McCourt's observation that "Knocking down one ism therefore will constitute another, whether labeled an "ism" or not" (482) is particularly applicable in this cold peace with the rise of a supposedly new "ism:" post-paradigmism. In the latest TRIP survey (2014), faculty were asked [what paradigm best describes their approach to IR](#). Surprisingly, Constructivism (22.62%) beat out Liberalism (12%) and Realism (18.33%). By all appearances, constructivism appears to have won, with liberalism taking a distant third. Yet all were beaten out by "I do not use paradigmatic analysis" (26.23%). Are we now in a new post-paradigmatic phase? No, rather liberalism has won the [Gramscian war of position](#) (Cox 1983), dominating the field not only in terms of the main currency of academia (citation counts) but by having its assumptions and approaches so taken for granted that these works are considered to be "non-paradigmatic." Ironically, it is the paradigm that ignores the [third face of power](#) (Lukes 2005) that has proven so adept at employing it.

The rise of liberal institutionalism in the 1980s is instructive as to why calling for a new constructivism is important—indeed, crucial—in our new supposedly post-paradigmatic utopia. This school of international relations (like many successful research programs) in part did well by forming dense citation networks, which created a positive-feedback cycle, further increasing the prominence of these pieces (and their authors); indeed, an early version of the [TRIP Journal Article Database](#) indicated that in 12 prominent journals between 1980 and 2011 only 8.72% of articles are realist, versus 7.80% for constructivist and 23.39% liberal (with 48.17% coded as non-paradigmatic). The belief that realism is or was the dominant paradigm in IR is belied not only by the fraction of articles but citation patterns between the paradigms, which demonstrates not inter-paradigm wars but a hierarchy of "taking seriously" in which constructivism has attempted to engage more seriously with other paradigms than any other group... and, in return, has been taken seriously by no one (see Figure 1).

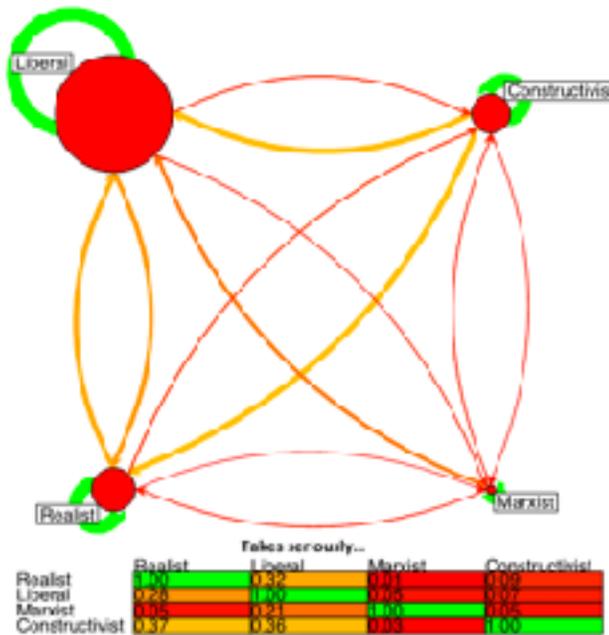


Figure 1: Fraction of TRIP articles coded as one paradigm that “takes seriously” another paradigm

Why does this matter? In part, it is because *there is no such thing as non-paradigmatic analysis*. All analysis makes certain ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions about international relations. Probably by virtue of being dominated by US-based scholars, supposedly non-paradigmatic work reflects, by default, the assumptions and approaches of the actual dominant paradigm in IR: liberalism. The most popular supposedly non-paradigmatic textbook, *World Politics* (Frieden and Lake 2015), essentially betrays its paradigmatic roots in the subtitle: *Interests, Interactions, Institutions*. In a move reminiscent of [attempts to divide and incorporate feminism](#) (Keohane 1989) (but, sadly, without a suitably [eviscerating reply](#) Weber 1994), Liberalism almost strangled the constructivist baby in the cradle in 1993 with the release of *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Goldstein and Keohane 1993),<sup>2</sup> eliding paradigmatic differences and occupying choice intellectual territory in the war of position. These moves serve merely to obfuscate the fundamental assumptions underpinning supposedly non-paradigmatic analysis: individualism (more properly, monadism) and interests.<sup>3</sup>

This, then, is the new hope of McCourt’s New Constructivism. For the dominant paradigm in IR consists of assumptions that individuals (or other units treated atomistically such as states or organizations) with well-defined interests are ontological primitives. This is the danger of methodological individualism (just like [methodological nationalism](#) Adamson 2016): it quickly slips to epistemological and ontological individualism, trapped in an [antiquated, neo-Newtonian worldview](#) (Montgomery 2016). In a way, the narrowing that

<sup>2</sup> Here I differ with McCourt’s claim that it is difficult to distinguish constructivism from liberal approaches by appealing to “collectively held ideas” (477). Quite simply, the latter don’t deal with “ideas” but simply information. Had it been titled more accurately as *Information and Foreign Policy*, I’d have less of an issue with it.

<sup>3</sup> While theoretically this is rationalism rather than liberalism per se and therefore potentially compatible with some realism, modern structural realists are more holist than individualist.

McCourt details is simply constructivism being [seduced by the dark side](#): just like rationalism, outcomes are determined by the psychological state of individuals just prior to taking a particular action: in the case of rational action or “logics of consequences,” consulting one’s preferences; in the case of constructivism in the form of “logics of appropriateness,” assessing one’s identity and the relevant action attached to it. Again, this is due in part to IR (still) being a U.S.-dominated profession; the U.S. cultural obsession with individualism spills over into our methods, epistemes, and ontologies as a generally unquestioned assumption.

As McCourt points out, constructivism’s attempts to engage with other paradigms thus has led to a compromised version of constructionism: by taking on not only a positivist epistemology but agreeing to share rationalism’s individualist ontological assumption, scholars are forced to fight on a playing field that is already tilted heavily towards rationalism; in order for IR scholars to be convinced that norms play a role in international relations, constructivist scholars must go through elaborate arguments that show not only that their explanation is compelling, but that other explanations are wrong, as if somehow rationalist accounts should be taken as a base model that must be refuted before an alternative explanation can be put forward, an [entirely incoherent epistemological position](#) (Macdonald 2003). The bar has been set so high that a royal family has to march in “[splendid mass suicide](#)” (Geertz 1980: 11) in order for scholars to be able to [argue that ideas matter](#) (Kowert and Legro 1996: 466).<sup>4</sup>

The [“neo-neo” consensus](#) (Waever 1996) on individualism and interests has, consequently, crowded out other possible paradigms. This is precisely why the time is ripe for a “New Constructivism”<sup>5</sup> that takes issue with both assumptions. While the practice turn, network analysis, and network-actor theory are in many other ways three very disparate approaches to study, they are unified through [processual-relationalism](#) (Jackson and Nexon 1999) in rejecting individuals in favor of relations and interests in favor of processes/practices. Importantly, it frees constructivism from the iron cage of individualism by shifting focus from the “internal self” that acts according to logics of appropriateness internalized through socialization to a dynamic notion of relational action that originates not in (unobservable) psychological states but in (more observable) relations between actors (actants in NAT). Finally, quantitative [network analysis takes the methodological fight to the individualists by challenging one of their key assumptions](#) (Nicoll et al. 2016), in some cases demonstrating that [entire research](#) (Ward et al. 2007; Cranmer and Desmerais 2011) programs are potentially fatally flawed due to their individualist (or dyadic rather than more broadly relational) underpinnings. This is a crucial difference with previous attempts to import constructionism into IR theory, in that the very weapons that are used to marginalize constructionist scholars can be used to demonstrate the weakness of individualism. By incorporating network analysis, the New Constructivist rebellion has given us a new hope of overcoming the previous boom and bust cycles of constructionism to forge an equitable and lasting paradigmatic peace.

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<sup>4</sup>Thanks to Ron Hassner for this anecdote and citations.

<sup>5</sup> Just don’t call it neoconstructivism. As Krasner [acerbically put it](#), “neo this and neo that is usually an indication that a theoretical perspective has not been clearly thought out; if it had been, the ‘neo’ would not be necessary.”

# TWO WRONGS DON'T MAKE A RIGHT: ON CONSTRUCTIVISM, PRACTICES AND THE LINGUISTIC TURN

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There is a general sentiment among constructivists that constructivism finds itself in a sorry state of affairs. The more constructivism became part of IR's mainstream, the more its concepts like agent-structure, norms, and ideas formed and forged debates in International Relations (IR), the more constructivism was sold out up to the point that it became fashionable to evaluate constructivism by positivist criteria of science (see [Jackson 2011](#)). Much of these developments took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s where the overall liberal optimism often enough trumped serious conceptual work. [David McCourt](#) rightfully identifies these developments and does a wonderful job in pointing out that agent-structure, norms and ideas helplessly narrowed down constructivist curiosity.<sup>1</sup> No wonder that like many other 'third generation' constructivists, McCourt searches for alternative avenues and concepts to revive constructivism (on third generation see [Kessler and Steele 2017](#)).

This alternative, for McCourt, can be found in both practice theories and relationalism that together "constitute the New Constructivism in International Relations." ([McCourt 2016:475](#)). According to McCourt, together they help to overcome stale dichotomies like agent-structure, ideas v. matter, and constitution v. causation that today are more part of the problem than part of the solution. There are two interpretations of his argument: on the one hand, it suggests that the 'turn' to practice theory and relationalism is 'part of' constructivism. This implies that constructivists cannot simply bypass these debates and should (!) take this development seriously. Agreed. On the other hand, it suggests that both practice theories and relationalism *are* the *only* future way ahead *for constructivists*. Now here I differ – because as a constructivist, I don't want to turn into a practice theorist and I do want to be forced to work with practice theories. Even though I am sympathetic to the literature, and use it from time to time for some questions, I think a debate is needed to understand what practice theory has to offer vis-à-vis its alternatives. Here, I see several problems that all de-stabilise the assumed tight relationship between practice theories and constructivism:

The first problem is in the very way 'practice theory' (in particular in the Bourdieusian fashion) is introduced. Let us not forget where these 'problematic' dichotomies come from: they form the core of the moderate version of constructivism, which came to dominate the U.S. academy. One looks in vain for them in – at least early – radical constructivist literature. Hence, this often heard argument that we need practice theory to overcome these dichotomies and position 'practice theory and relationalism together' as a solution to the problems of the moderate constructivist's own making. To constantly repeat this critique doesn't make it any better and always revives moderate constructivism *ex negativo*. Yet how

much longer do we need to hear that constructivism is about (liberal) norms? How often do we have to read that ‘agent-structure’ is at the core of constructivism –as if radical constructivism does not exist? When do we ever leave this impoverished understanding of constructivism in both IR and social theory behind?

The second problem is that ‘practice theorists’ get the linguistic turn wrong, which I think is very important for constructivism<sup>2</sup>: practice theorists are convinced that they have ‘overcome’ the linguistic turn by moving from ‘text’ to ‘practice’, from ‘armchair theorising’ to ‘getting out there’. Yet, the linguistic turn was never only about the discovery of ‘text’ or ‘language’ (as if before there was none and suddenly there was). The linguistic turn is the consequence of the failure to establish logical necessity on the basis of an assumed identity between being and thought. The linguistic turn takes seriously that the creation of (logical) necessity requires two *different* observers, i.e. the (logical) necessity to treat ‘you’ not just like another ‘I’. As a consequence, the relations and processes that mediate between ego and alter are ‘prior to’ ‘substances’ or subjects). Without this problem of inter-subjectivity – the radical constructivist’s interest in, first, speech act theory and, later, discourses and communication doesn’t make sense: they provide specific ways for understanding the problem of contingency and necessity, of stability and change, in *social* terms.

At this point, several ruptures appear in the assumed link between constructivism and practice theories: for example, to argue that one could follow practices by looking at bodily movements or that practices are easily observable eclipses an important problem in understanding the social: every social order is stabilized by making many practices impossible, by silencing some alternative ‘interpretations’ or perspectives; and by making certain parts of the social world invisible. These silenced, invisible, excluded dimensions cannot be simply observed but need to be reconstructed. That said, to argue for the ‘tracing’ of practices by following ‘actors’ or ‘communities of practice’, then buys into a different politics than that of radical constructivism: instead of looking at power relations inscribed in ways of world making, practices take place in *already existing institutions* like diplomacy. Instead of understanding how communication and exchanges among perspectives first becomes possible and then becomes naturalized, practice theorists enter an already existing life-world.

From this perspective, I think practice theories are notoriously incapable of capturing the ‘inter’ (subjectivity) as it treats the subject’s body (as the bearer of practices) as conceptually superior.<sup>3</sup> That the issue of how to reconstruct ‘tacit’ knowledge is not a new problem suddenly discovered by practice theorists is eventually a case in point. And as far as I can see, there is no particular necessity to study this from a constructivist perspective. In fact, this inscribed empiricism is not a far cry away from the argument that practices constitute ‘recursive patterns’, and we all know where this leads to.

Last but not least, I fear some of the performative consequences of the practice turn: at the moment, the practice turn is characterised by the same application mode as every other positivist social theory where given concepts are projected onto global phenomena. The application is legitimized solely by the ‘unique’ promise they hold because these concepts belong to one ‘thinker’ who is more or less just en vogue. Then in a couple of years, the next thinker comes around the corner and a new set of concepts is applied – flanked by the occasional ‘summary’ article of what that thinker is really about. While this game is seductive because one knows whom to cite and whom to talk to, it only leads to the same ‘constellation’ of peer-groups, power games and ‘gatekeepers’ and does not get us very far in understanding the very problem that McCourt rightfully identifies: what concept of the social is adequate for understanding global processes?

To this question practice theories may or may not provide a specific answer and a useful avenue to explore further. Yet let us not forget: practices are introduced as a theoretical concept and are discussed as such. The concept of practices itself only makes sense within pre-stabilized conceptual frameworks in which it operates. No practices without fields, actor-networks, discourses or systems. These different conceptual frameworks not only carry different concepts of the social, but they also do not come from nowhere. They emerged at a distinct point in time in specific contexts—and these contexts were within given nation states. To move from there to the sphere ‘beyond’ the nation state, we first need to translate concepts like actor-network, fields, habitus, capital *into* IR—and cannot simply apply them. To suggest we move closer to ‘reality’ by ‘going down’ to the everyday, the mundane where ‘practice’ becomes a shortcut for ethnographic methods—is simply self-betrayal.

That said, practice theories may or may not be an alternative to other approaches and concepts such as communication, speech act, discourses, translation, performativity, concepts etc. But from here, it is a far cry to argue that practice and relationalism together constitute *the* new constructivism.

# LET'S COUNT BEYOND THREE: UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL TERRAIN OF INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE THEORIES

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Did you hear the one about the IR theorist who couldn't count to four?

It seems that three really is the magic number, in terms of IR theories, at least. No matter the theoretical context, there seems to be an urge to restrict our analytical framework to a maximum of three perspectives. Today's trio of choice in the American theory repertoire consists of realism, liberalism and constructivism, and David M. McCourt's article stays true to the established (triangle-shaped) boundaries we seem to have imposed upon ourselves.

In this case, the discipline is being confronted with a new theoretical development, namely practice theory. A new wave of scholars has something intelligible to say on the subject, speaking to core disciplinary concerns. The logic appears to be that, since this new way of thinking has little in common with the rationalism of realism and liberalism, what else could it be but constructivism? That's settled then – let's just call it the 'new constructivism'.

Let's be clear: McCourt's aim of bringing practice theory to the mainstream, thereby helping it into textbooks and core curricula, deserves applause. That said, I do think it's time that the discipline learns how to count past three. There's no doubt that practice theory is historically anchored in constructivism, and there are many linkages, but it has its own conceptual terrain and challenges; recognising this is vital in bringing the promise of the perspective to fruition.

Moreover, practice theory presents us with particular empirical lenses that start out from activities and the wide variety of agents practicing global politics. That means that explicitly tailored methodological strategies are required. Let me address these points more substantially. Since it seems for IR all good things come in threes, I've numbered my thoughts accordingly.

## **Navigating the Conceptual Terrain of International Practice Theory**

When [Schatzki, von Savigny and Knorr Cetina](#) coined the term 'practice turn' in 2002, their edited volume emphasised the substantial work on concepts of practice that had already been undertaken among sociologists of science, scholars of cultural studies, and Wittensteinian philosophers. They didn't argue for a break with existing thinking, but

pointed to a substantial shift that was taking place across social science disciplines. Several authors have since attempted to provide a history of the paradigm; the consensual position is that the current emergence of practice theory should be read as a 'return to practice' ([Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, and Yanow 2009](#)) – a position highlighted by [Iver Neumann](#) when he introduced practice ideas to IR in 2002.

That practice theory is more than old sociological wine in new bottles was demonstrated most clearly by [Andreas Reckwitz \(2002\)](#). He clarified that practice theorists had carved out a unique conceptual space, and demonstrated how that space differs from rationalist and norm-oriented as well as cognitive or discursive perspectives. This Reckwitzian understanding has substantially informed the debate in IR; [Adler and Pouliot \(2011\)](#) described practice theory in such terms and argued that it is comprised of dedicated assumptions and viewpoints. In our ISQ article and subsequent book ([Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 2015](#)) we drew explicitly on Reckwitz's work and argued that practice theories are united by a set of dedicated commitments. In this study, we offered a reasonably wide definition of practice theories but also clarified that not every (constructivist) scholar is a practice theorist, nor should they be. This conceptual space comes with a range of specific aims, including transcending core theoretical binaries, such as those between agency and structure, and the ideational and material. It also entails particular conceptual challenges, such as how to reconcile the routine character of practices with their contingency and potential for change. Practice theorists also operate with a dedicated set of concepts, of which 'practice' is obviously the most important; some of these concepts are genuine to practice theory; others, such as power and change, are certainly not.

One of the drivers of the future debate will be to better define this conceptual terrain. The links between practice theory and other IR theories need to be better understood; this is the core aim of a new collective research project in which we explore and discuss the central concepts of practice theory and their linkages to other types of IR theorising (see <http://practice-theory.net>).

### **Understanding Practice Requires Dedicated Methodologies**

Practice driven investigations start out from the study of activities. It is not abstract units (such as states, or organisations), nor *a priori* assumptions of how units behave, that form the starting point; practice theory vocabulary provides a 'search and find' strategy through which we can learn something about the concrete activities of those engaged in global politics.

There is little doubt that practice theory studies have already delivered. They have started to bring the discipline an awareness of processes that have gone unnoticed for a long time, granting a much richer understanding of what diplomats do, how speeches are written, how international organisations work, how international knowledge is generated or terrorist lists are compiled. Many insightful analyses have been published or are being written at present, and we have plenty to look forward to. It's also refreshing that many of these studies make for entertaining reading, or are simply less yawn-inducing than many conventional IR texts.

Speaking of entertaining reading, empirical studies have underlined the importance of methodological considerations, and in recent years, practice methodologies have made encouraging progress. Examples include explorations of Bourdieu's methodology ([Adler-Nissen 2013](#)), Pouliot's outline of practice-tracing ([Pouliot 2014](#)), my own sketch of praxiography ([Bueger 2014](#)), or considerations of how the ethnographic spectrum of

methods can be used for practice-oriented investigations. What these discussions agree on and demonstrate vividly is that practice theory requires dedicated and tailored methodologies that differ from the requirements of discourse theories or constructivism. This is a further example of why McCourt's argument simply falls short of the frontiers of today's research.

### **Let's Agree to Disagree and Embrace a Diverse Discipline**

One of the more convincing sociological explanations for IR's need to hold on to a theoretical spectrum of three is that the field tends to see diversity as a problem rather than as a virtue. The fear of a diverse discipline comprised of different schools, -isms, paradigms, or theories, misreads how intellectual progress unfolds, however. Scientific progress is the outcome of controversies between perspectives that seek to study a similar phenomenon; in short, disagreement drives intellectual innovation. If we conflate practice theory with constructivism, an argument that we could easily extend to other theoretical innovations (discourse theories, new materialisms, you name it), what is there left to disagree on? What intellectual contests remain to allow us to drive our field forward?

Another issue is the question of how radical a shift the introduction of international practice theory represents. Whether it will be read as the continuation of the constructivist story or as a true intellectual innovation is up to future disciplinary historiographers and textbook writers to decide. For now, diluting the boundaries and whitewashing the core of practice theory doesn't push the theoretical and empirical frontier any further.

# WHY “PRACTICE THEORY” SHOULD “GET RELIGION”

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[David McCourt's argument](#) that practice theory and relational theory should be considered part and parcel of the constructivist approach to international relations is welcome and well taken in many respects. But it emanates a strong sense of déjà vu regarding the tendency of IR to fall into labeling traps, which his own argument appears to anticipate, and an unfinished quality regarding the conceptual way out, which it does not. McCourt argues that constructivism took hold in U.S. IR to address important gaps and provide “a space in American IR for engaging in scholarship sensitive to the social, historical, and context-dependent nature of action in international politics” (476), that it became unhelpfully narrowed epistemologically as well as conceptually (as many have argued before: see [Klotz and Lynch 2007](#); [Epstein 2008](#); [Kratochwil 2010](#); [Hall, Kessler, Lynch and Onuf 2010](#); [Onuf 2013](#); and [Gould forthcoming 2017](#), for some examples), but that it also provided the condition of possibility for both practice theory and relationalism to emerge.

Re-integrating practice theory and relational perspectives and labeling it “the new constructivism,” in this argument, would go a long way towards allowing constructivism to fulfill its original, more expansive, agenda. I am agnostic as to whether it is more worthwhile to lift out the concepts of practice and relationalism as explanatory silver bullets for IR, or to tame the ambition of their promoters and re-situate them within a more comprehensive set of constructivist approaches with a “new” label attached. But I also assert that the practice turn has more work to do to avoid a major pitfall in IR: the tendency to revert to new forms of determinism when previous iterations of structuralism begin to show wear and tear. Practice (and relational) frameworks need to take intentionality and ethics more seriously to avoid this pitfall. Analyzing religion “as practice” is a good place to start ([Lynch 2000, 2009](#)).

It is interesting how little the “practice turn” has thought about the practice of religion, even though it was a topic of considerable interest to Bourdieu himself. As Craig Calhoun asserts, Bourdieu’s own “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field” has not been widely enough recognized as Bourdieu’s key, seminal text on fields” ([Calhoun 1995: 157, fn14](#)). Bourdieu’s understanding of religion both as field and habitus (rather than a focus on religion as practice), however, is part of the problem. As Michele Dillon argues, Bourdieu’s framework is too “mechanistic,” dividing religious agents into categories of “producers and consumers,” and viewing doctrinal change as a product of socioeconomic processes that alter the interests of religious producers, or elites. Yet, as Dillon demonstrates with regard to U.S. Catholics, the very concept of “interpretive autonomy” is an integral component of its “tradition or habitus” ([Dillon 2001:411](#)), resulting in a much broader scope for changes in practice to occur.

Autonomy here is still, of course, a relative term, and should not be taken to mean unlimited or ahistorical choice. Nevertheless, Dillon is getting at something very important regarding intentionality and ethics. People “practice” their religions, although they do so with varying degrees of commitment and adherence to the rules and forms of power set up

by religious “fields.” Bourdieu acknowledges as much, but then re-collapses agency into reductionist categories of leader versus follower, and elite versus popular adherence (Bourdieu 1991). Practice turn theorists in IR mention intentionality, “truth” and “morality” (e.g. Adler and Pouliot 2011: 15, 18-19, 21), but need to do much more work to develop the empirical manifestations, meanings, and implications of these terms.

Bourdieu relies heavily on [Max Weber’s use of ideal-typical categories](#) to understand and explain religious development and change. But, in “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” he omits any discussion of ethics as anything but a fairly direct product of objectively determined interests within a field. This omission includes the problem of theodicy, which for Weber drives ruptures in both religious meaning and practice. Weber moves closer to addressing intentionality, but there is still the need for a “neo-Weberian” approach to religious practice (Lynch 2009; 2014). Such an approach takes ethics and intentionality seriously by interrogating the interpretive moments that always occur in the instantiation of practices, while still situating them within the political, economic, and social contexts (fields of power) that shape their possibilities for thought and action. In what I agree should be a return to early constructivist use of “practice,” particularly in the work of Friedrich Kratochwil, we get away from the ahistorical choice theoretic assumptions of rationalist liberals by situating them within specific discursive moves as well as linguistic and normative conventions. But we still carve a space for understanding the interpretive gaps that exist between (in Bourdieuan terminology), field, habitus, and practice. In conceptualizing – and researching – how those gaps are filled, we bring back the blood, and the soul (so to speak) of the ethical struggles and contestations of agents.

In emphasizing both background knowledge and skill, as well as who sets the rules for acquiring them and how, Bourdieu has certainly brought something quite important to our understanding of practices and relations of power (see also, however, Onuf’s critique, in [Onuf 2013: 135](#)). But, as social theorists have also shown, Bourdieu’s work too easily ignores critical aspects of agency and meaning, concerning both performativity and the ability to think ethically. Judith Butler criticizes “Bourdieu’s account of performative speech acts because he tends to assume that the subject who utters the performative is positioned on a map of social power in a fairly fixed way”; while James Bohman asserts that Bourdieu robs agents of “reflexivity in the critical sense” by confining it sociological analysts rather than understanding it as “a constitutive property of agency and thus of practical reason” ([Butler 1999: 122](#); [Bohman 1999: 136](#)).

McCourt’s argument, in the end, leaves numerous questions unanswered: what constitutes constructivism, whether the practice and relational turns represent yet another overwrought and underdeveloped attempt to create a blanket concept for everything that goes on in international politics, and whether IR theory can ever be anything but derivative. My argument redirects McCourt’s call to create yet another new label in IR (the “new constructivism”) to what I believe is a more productive line of inquiry: to bring out concrete insights and concepts regarding meaning by merging substantive and theoretical inquiry (also a foundational concern of Bourdieu’s), but to do so in ways that emphasize contextualized ethical struggles that do not reduce ethics to interests. Interrogating religion as practice helps accomplish this goal, because tensions in religious ethics (and the religious/secular divide) represent a significant component of the lifeblood of struggles about what people think matters in the world. If we skip over or merely mention these struggles without more thorough interrogation, then we have reverted to yet another form – even if a more processual one – of determinism, draining the soul from international politics itself.

# UNPACKING CONSTRUCTIVISM THROUGH AFFECT, SPACE, AND TIME

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[David McCourt](#) offers a much-needed synthesis and affirmation of constructivism in IR. He argues that practice and relational approaches offer re-focused attention on issues that have gradually been squeezed out of mainstream IR constructivism. That is, sensitivities to particular social contexts and contingency – that things can always be different – have become somewhat lost in the turns towards “culture,” “identity,” and “norms” understood more narrowly. In this way, practices and relational frameworks not only help to move past unhelpful dichotomies that continue to plague the field (“materials” v. “ideas”), but also widen the social space of constructivism within the field, helping to keep that space open.

I’m sympathetic to McCourt’s aims and agree with his argument. What I wish to do in this brief intervention is not to contest McCourt’s thesis. Rather, I offer a friendly push towards further development to help keep the disciplinary space of constructivism vibrant, against the homogenizing tendencies that McCourt well spotlights.

If practices and relationalism open up constructivism, then other concepts help to similarly open up practices and relationalism. In a recent article, [Brent J. Steele](#) and I propose steps towards a “[micropolitical](#)” approach to IR (Solomon and Steele 2016). There we suggest that developing three linked concepts – affect, space, and time – not only builds upon recent developments in IR on practices, emotions, and the everyday. We also contend that these concepts help to unpack issues surrounding power, identity, and change. Specifically, notions of space and temporality offer novel ways of broadening our understanding of practices. Meanwhile, relationalism can be usefully conceptualized as operating through collective affect.

As McCourt outlines, practice approaches generally claim that “it is not only who we are that drives what we do; it is also what we do that determines who we are” ([Pouliot 2010: 5](#)). Practices are usually thought of as background knowledge that actors habitually draw from in their behaviour. Yet, the spatial aspects of practices have often been downplayed. To be sure, particular spaces frequently appear in practice research, such as the space of a [foreign ministry](#) (Neumann 2012), or a sense of one’s “[place](#)” (Pouliot 2016) within the international hierarchy.

We suggest that a more explicit focus on space helps to draw out the productive or generative power of practices. Shared spaces become politically significant as they come to be meaningful through embodied experience. As spatial theorist [Henri Lefebvre](#) (1992) argues, space is not merely a neutral category or site, but instead serves to produce shared, embodied, and political orientations. Practices help to construct and attach certain meanings to particular places.

The production of place is also tied to the politics of time. Specifically, social constructions of time and space are largely inseparable, and the notion of rhythm – lived, embodied time – helps to unpack some temporal aspects of spatial practices. Rhythm, for Lefebvre, enters

into related issues of repetition and becoming. Rhythm is not only the repetition of the same, but also the emergence of difference within that repetition, as each human performance differs in nuanced ways that gradually unfold new practices and understandings. Similarly, for sociologist Randall Collins, events such as political rallies and public protests are spaces in which rhythms pulse through collectives of bodies. Within these “[interaction rituals](#)” (Collins 2004) participants often have common foci of attention and become caught up in flows of interactions and bring their rhythms and dispositions into a loose synchronization with those around them. Such lived temporal practices link up to more macro-levels of analysis of traditional concern.

For example, an expanded view of practices (with space and time/rhythm in mind) would help to disclose some of the micro-relations that are key for macropolitical events. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street vividly illustrated the power of how interwoven aspects of space and rhythms helped to generate collective power around terms such as “the 1%” and “occupy”. The “normal” spatial practices of New York’s Zuccotti Park (associated with global finance) were (re)constructed as a dissenting “occupation” through symbolic contestations. Moreover, the particular practices through which these contestations were manifested were often explicitly rhythmic. The power of the “[human microphone](#),” (Kim 2011) for example, helped draw together the participants into a loose synchronization which in turn facilitated the collective affective responses surrounding Occupy.

The issue of affect, in fact, brings us to relationalism. As [Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon](#) (1999) argue, and as McCourt reiterates, relationalism stands in contrast to substantialism, which takes fixed things or entities as an analytical starting point. Instead, relationalism takes processes as the basic units of analysis. It “treats figurations of ties – recurrent sociocultural interaction – between social aggregates of various sorts and their component parts as the building blocks of analysis” (Jackson and Nexon 1999: 291-2).

Yet, while relational frameworks offer some clear advantages over substantialist approaches, they tend to downplay the potential emotional components of relations. From a perspective of IR emotions research, much of social relations, transactions, and configurations are constituted through affect. Emotions are not only properties of individuals, but are also intersubjective and collective, and thereby relational. Indeed, as [Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker argue](#) (2014), investigating the transactional processes through which individual emotions becomes collective and thereby political is one of the key tasks of emotions research. [Ben Anderson’s](#) (2014) work is helpful in thinking about the relations that affects sustain. Affects can be conceptualized as bodily capacities that emerges from encounters with other bodies, or collective conditions that mediate everyday practices. Similarly, [Andrew Ross articulates](#) (2013) how collective “circulations of affect” express creative capacities that stretch beyond individual agents.

Relational frameworks, then, may be usefully re-framed as processes that are often invested with emotion. Events such as the 2011 Arab protests richly illustrate the power of emotions to constitute [relational ties](#) (Protevi 2011) among crowds of protestors, to reshape the meaning of [public spaces](#) (Butler 2015) such as Tahrir square, and via social media to create [visceral regional links](#) (Lynch 2013) among protestors in neighbouring countries. Relations and processes themselves are often phenomena that can be understood as various types of emotional contagion.

In short, I welcome McCourt’s arguments that the innovations of practice theory and relationalism are best understood as the New Constructivism. Taking another step, my

modest aim here is to take up McCourt's [call](#) that constructivists must continue to develop these and other new approaches to keep the space of “constructivism” open and vibrant, knowing full well the disciplinary dynamics that work to dampen claims to theoretical innovation.

# W(H)ITHER CONSTRUCTIVISM

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At a roundtable titled “Whither Constructivism?” at the 2012 ISA-Northeast conference, nearly all the participants mistook the prompt as “Wither Constructivism?” What was supposed to be a conversation on the future directions of constructivist research ended up a post-mortem on the status of constructivism’s demise. Perhaps it was not by accident that the question of whither became one of wither, especially as Nick Onuf, the last participant, lamented that constructivism had died a long time ago. The future of constructivism is wrapped up in the myth of its passing. We are all constructivists now. None of us are constructivists now.

[David McCourt’s engaging theory note](#) addresses both questions of w(h)ither constructivism. Constructivism withered by narrowing to a “limited ontology composed largely of norms, culture, and identities” (475). Meanwhile, constructivism’s whither, or its location, shifted to practice theory and relationalism. McCourt seems persuasive in the answers to w(h)ither constructivism, if limited in his survey of relationalism (for instance, neglecting the new pragmatism). However, McCourt’s essay reads more as a set up than a payoff. I expected the main action would come from the politics of withering constructivism. However, beyond sketching a cyclical version of theory musical chairs, McCourt ultimately does not convey the political drama of demise.

To capture withering constructivism, McCourt (483) relies on [Andrew Abbott’s notion](#) (2001) of “fractal distinction,” where “first come novel theoretical treatises and quirky empirical work, then texts that consolidate the new approach’s position, then works that are solid but unspectacular, followed by a re-emergence in a different guise.” McCourt is right to describe some of constructivism’s fractionalization this way, especially concerning the positivist/post-positivist divide and the lure of a *via media* (476). McCourt is also right to say the new guises of practice-relationalism “aim to recover a more appropriate understanding of the *social* in social explanation by foregrounding process over fixity” (479; emphasis original). However, constructivism did not wither because it lacked the capacity to accommodate multiple understandings of “social” or to speak across divides. McCourt shows this convincingly in the work of early constructivists, which leads to his strongest claim that “[c]onstructivism in U.S. IR then narrowed for reasons to do with the dynamics of paradigmatic turnover in the social sciences, at least in America, and not because constructivist theorizing had run its course” (482). This claim highlights the essay’s contribution and missed opportunity. McCourt contributes to a fuller representation of the possibilities of constructivism, what he refers to as a strong constructivism. However, in overly relying on an apolitical “turnover” framework, McCourt misses the opportunity to connect *why* and *how* rumors of constructivism’s death were greatly exaggerated.

Attaching constructivism’s demise to a model of routine turnovers makes constructivism’s narrowing seem inevitable. Such inevitability glosses over agency and responsibility. In other words, the demise becomes apolitical. McCourt briefly mentions some reasons behind constructivism’s narrowing. One of them is the reviews of constructivism, especially in the late 1990s. However, McCourt overlooks that these reviews were not simply surveys of what divides constructivists (e.g. positivism v. interpretivism) or labeling exercises (e.g. thin v.

thick), but these reviews were privileging particular *kinds* of constructivism. Consider [Adler \(1997: 334\)](#): “A constructivist theory of progress in International Relations, which explains the emergence and consolidation of practices that enhance human interests within and across political communities [...] offers a better, more pragmatic and more even-handed alternative to critical theories that mark their favorite discourses for emancipation.” [Hopf \(1998: 197\)](#) makes a similar proclamation by deeming conventional constructivism “nonpareil” in the “richness of its elaboration of causal/constitutive mechanisms in any given social context and its openness (and not just in the last instance, as in critical theory) to the discovery of other substantive theoretical elements at work.” Constructivism was not simply going through the motions of paradigmatic turnover; it was deliberately cut down to privilege certain perspectives over others.

What McCourt misses, then, is the relationship between the questions of whither and wither constructivism. When IR scholars answer “whither constructivism,” or when they situate where constructivism is in larger IR theory or where scholars are in larger constructivism, they fold in proclamations about a withering constructivism. Which version of constructivism withers depends on cliques. What this represents is less symptomatic of theory recycling than political codes, as proclaimed by [Ian Hacking \(1999: vii\)](#):

Social construction has in many contexts been a truly liberating idea, but that which on first hearing has liberated some has made all too many others smug, comfortable, and trendy in ways that have become merely orthodox. The phrase has become code. If you use it favorably, you deem yourself rather radical. If you trash the phrase, you declare that you are rational, reasonable, and respectable.

In other words, undergirding constructivism’s exaggerated demise and displacement is the politics of membership and classic in-group/out-group dynamics. We invite this politics every time we inquire the status of constructivism. I doubt McCourt would disagree with Hacking’s assessment, and McCourt does sprinkle some allusions to power play in the discipline. However, the essay’s arc would have felt more complete had McCourt embraced the political drama of disciplining theory. As it stands, McCourt offers a compelling first act.

# CONSTRUCTIVISM'S PAST AND (POSSIBLE) FUTURE: A RESPONSE TO RESPONSES

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Thank you to the editors and especially the contributors for this symposium on my *ISQ* theory note ([McCourt 2016](#)). I am deeply appreciative to not one but eight busy scholars for finding the time to comment on my work. I sincerely hope they consider it time well spent.

Allow me to offer some brief reflections: on what I believe still stands and what deserves reassessment after their engagements. Rather than comment individually, I will arrange my thoughts into two areas: constructivism's past and its future. In each case, the respondents can be grouped in interesting ways between the more critical and pessimistic, and the more optimistic (and still critical) about the forces acting on constructivism, and what this means going forward.

## **Constructivism's Past**

Stacie Goddard, Alexander Montgomery, and Swati Srivastava, each identify gaps in my account of IR constructivism's trajectory and suggest alternatives. Goddard argues that my story is overly pessimistic. Because I downplay the intellectual debates that underpinned constructivism, I am unwarranted in fearing the space of constructivism might close. She correctly identifies the importance of systems thinking to early constructivism ([1999](#); see [Goddard and Nexon 2005](#)). She also rightly notes that the relational turn was already emerging by the late 1990s and does not therefore fully fit the generational pattern I put down to fractal distinction. The upshot is that constructivism was more productive than I allow for, which is likely to continue.

Goddard's remarks are well taken, but I am only in partial agreement. I agree that fractal distinction does not capture the whole story. While Goddard correctly highlights that different dynamics are in play when the practice and the relational turns are taken separately, I still think this helps my story as much as hers. It is interesting then that the relational scholars like Goddard, Daniel Nexon, and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, who made their careers as what I would term constructivists largely came out of the milieu she identifies—a mix of constructivism and relational sociology à la Charles Tilly, Ann Mische and others, dating to the mid-to-late 1990s—and not out of first generation constructivism alone. The important thing to note is that that milieu was centered on New York University and Columbia, i.e. the type of top-ranked departments that traditionally fill tenure-track positions at other leading departments. Put simply, the rubber hits the road with paradigmatic health and turnover when it comes to hiring in research-focused departments (on which there is unfortunately a lack of data). This issue speaks directly to Ted Hopf's concern that I state rather than prove that constructivism became less exciting over time. The hiring of constructivists into top departments seems, from my perspective, to have slowed by 2000. Contra Hopf, practice theory is not being advocated by such U.S.-based

scholars (Adler and Pouliot work in Canada, and other proponents, like Bueger, are not employed in the U.S.)

Goddard is then for me both right and wrong. Intellectual debates were central to how constructivism came into IR, and the relational turn was different from the practice turn. But we should not be misled into thinking that intellectual debates are separate from power dynamics in the field. The form taken by “intellectual” debates often masks other debates that might have occurred, but were played down or prevented from happening altogether. Tellingly, systems theorists like Talcott Parsons, whom Goddard and Nexon see as important inspirations for Waltz, and through him [Waltz\[deR1\]](#), were themselves part and parcel to the history of the social sciences in the U.S. after 1945. They were also part of the intellectual and institutional forces pushing towards greater rationalism and scientism, rendering a more pragmatic social-constructionist approach (like constructivism, the relational sociology Goddard et. al. imbibed in New York, and later practice theory) more contingent (see [Jewett 2012](#); [Isaac 2012](#)).

The power and politics of constructivism’s trajectory in IR are exactly what Srivastava and Montgomery wanted to see more of. For full disclosure, it is important to note that in addition to *ISQ* an earlier version of the piece went through a round of review at another top ranked “generalist” (read top-ranked U.S.-based) IR journal, and still bares the hallmarks. In each case, the argument was honed to focus on intellectual matters. For that reason, like Adler and Pouliot and the early constructivists, epistemology was downplayed in favor of ontological (what I think Goddard means by “intellectual”) issues. The theory note is not then separate from the disciplining process they rightly highlight. For the “power play in the discipline” that Srivastava desires, much of it is provided by Montgomery, to whom I owe a special acknowledgment: his response explains as well as any I have seen what liberal hegemony did to IR and will likely do to similar movements in the future (although see [Oren 2016](#); [Barder and Levine 2012](#)). He is entirely correct that paradigms are not merely social spaces but political ones too. The acknowledgments by Oliver Kessler and especially Christian Bueger that constructivism was significantly shaped by the field further proves this point, even as others might (and hopefully will) refine it. With Montgomery and contra Bueger, then, the takeaway highlighted by constructivism’s trajectory is not that IR cannot count above three, *but that it has a lot of trouble counting past one*: that is, a liberal worldview. Acknowledging that IR should count to at least two, therefore, is to accept that the space of constructivism is an important place in U.S.-based IR, and that the practice and relational turns are worth supporting (a point I share with Bueger).

## Looking Forwards

To the future of constructivism. As Hopf has probably guessed, I don’t see making constructivists the under-laborers of the hypothesis-testers the way to go. This is not to say the effort of constructing a large-N dataset of nation-state identities is wasted. It might be very useful, but it won’t push forward constructivism understood as a space-in-U.S.-IR-for-historically-and-contextually-rich-work-that-is-theoretically-informed. Again, we should recall Kratochwil and Ruggie’s founding statement of constructivism, which argued that because the regimes debate dealt with something fundamentally intersubjective in nature, it couldn’t be studied solely using neopositivist methods. It had to draw on the interpretive human sciences. The way Hopf interprets my argument as saying that the practice and relational turns “solve” what he rightly refers to as probably unsolvable problems of social theory, makes me concerned I made the point poorly. To be sure, ANI, field theory, and

network analysis do not solve these problems, but they do give us new useful vocabularies for tackling them.

Bueger provides a strong restatement of the position of the practice theorists, based in part on the work of practice theorist Andreas Reckwitz (2002). For him, while “There’s no doubt that practice theory is historically anchored in constructivism...it has its own conceptual terrain and challenges.” Bueger is concerned, therefore, that conflating constructivism and practice theory might impede theoretical development in the latter. Such an outcome would indeed be a shame. But the question arises here as to what Bueger means by the “conceptual terrain” of practice theory. Yes, practice theory brings new theoretical concepts to bear, but are the things in the world they are meant to help us grasp (a different understanding of “conceptual terrain”) actually different to what early constructivists wanted us to account for? Here I would point the reader to Oliver Kessler’s piece, and argue that there is much to be gained by reading practice theory *through* early constructivism, rather than as separate from it, particularly in relation to how we maintain both an interest in language and the “everyday” (see [Neumann 2002](#); [Epstein 2013](#)).

A further concern of Bueger’s is that “If we conflate practice theory with constructivism, an argument that we could easily extend to other theoretical innovations (discourse theories, new materialisms, you name it), what is there left to disagree on? What intellectual contests remain to allow us to drive our field forward?” This allows me to address the responses of Ty Solomon and Cecilia Lynch, who both look forward to what constructivism (conventional, and practice-theoretic) misses out—respectively space, time and affect, and ethics—each of which I believe should, as they persuasively argue, be on the table, whether inside or outside constructivism. Bueger rightly hints that if constructivism is expanded so far it might become meaningless. Can it accommodate ethics or a thoroughgoing materialism? If it does, what is left to agree on?

The issue of where constructivism ends preoccupied me more than any other during the writing of the theory note. Are Marxists constructivists? My inability to draw fine intellectual or philosophical distinctions to answer that question, however, eventually led me to reject the idea of defining constructivism and to address instead the practical issue of what different approaches *do* in the field, and against which other approaches. From that perspective, if constructivism is a philosophically incoherent yet still useful social space in U.S.-based IR, then, yes, U.S. Marxists are *doing* constructivism in an important sense. The degree to which this might be a dissatisfying response to some readers is evidence precisely of how difficult we find it to think practically and relationally, rather than in terms of essences (here essentialized notions of philosophically pure approaches or paradigms.) What does this mean for what drives the field forwards? Contra Bueger, the intellectual contests that drive our field forwards should be disagreements over the best way to identify and explain particular dynamics in international politics, not the attempt to coin new concepts and approaches, a point on which I appear to be in agreement with Kessler and Hopf.

My thanks again to the organizers, participants, and readers, of this symposium. Despite having spent countless hours on the theory note, I remain convinced that such navel gazing exercises should only be entered into circumspectly. But so long as it is not taken too far and does not get in the way of empirical work (broadly defined), the willingness of especially non-U.S. IR to reflect on its history and philosophical underpinnings is a strength of the field. I hope to have made a modest contribution to that never-ending process.

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