

A New Hope? Practice Theory, Relationalism, and the Paradigm Wars

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David McCourt's "Practice Theory and Relationalism as the New Constructivism" 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 (p.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](#). 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" (p.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](#), 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](#) 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).

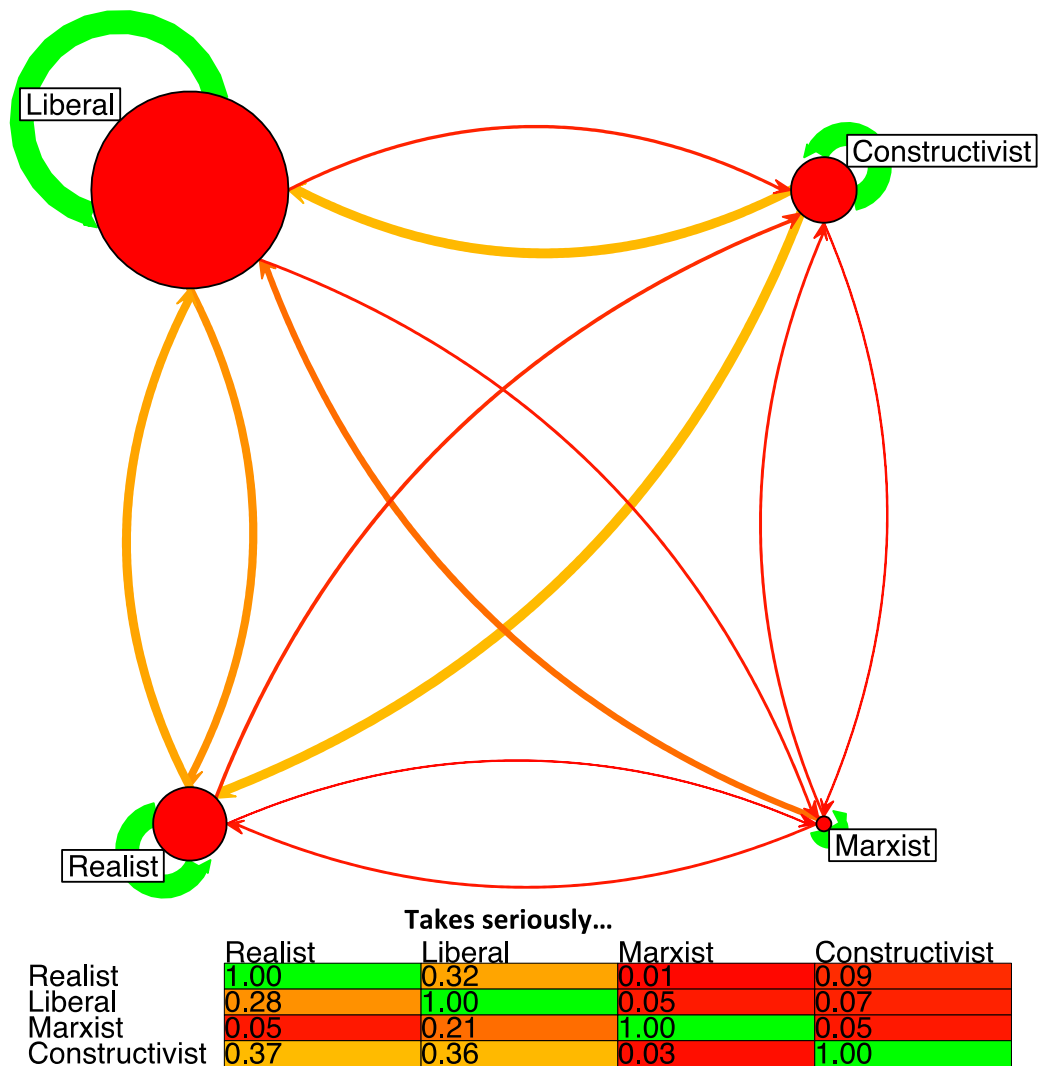


Figure 1: Fraction of TRIP articles coded as one paradigm that "takes seriously" another paradigm.

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](#), essentially betrays its paradigmatic roots in the subtitle: *Interests, Interactions, Institutions*. In a move reminiscent of [attempts to divide and incorporate feminism](#) (but, sadly, without a suitably [viscerating reply](#)), Liberalism almost strangled the constructivist baby in the cradle in 1993 with the release of [Ideas and Foreign Policy](#),¹ eliding paradigmatic differences and occupying choice intellectual

¹ Here I differ with McCourt's claim that it is difficult to distinguish constructivism from liberal approaches by appealing to "collectively held ideas" (p.477). Quite simply, the latter don't deal with

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.²

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](#)): it quickly slips to epistemological and ontological individualism, trapped in an [antiquated, neo-Newtonian worldview](#). In a way, the narrowing that 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 US-dominated profession; the US 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](#). The bar has been set so high that a royal family has to march in "[splendid mass suicide](#)" in order for scholars to be able to [argue that ideas matter](#).³

The "[neo-neo](#)" consensus on individualism and interests has, consequently, crowded out other possible paradigms. This is precisely why the time is ripe for a "New Constructivism"⁴ 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](#) 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 \(iid\)](#), in some cases demonstrating that [entire research](#) programs are

"ideas" but simply information. Had it been titled more accurately as *Information and Foreign Policy*, I'd have less of an issue with it.

² 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.

³ Thanks to Ron Hassner for this anecdote and citations.

⁴ 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."

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.