

# Is the English School a Form of Protoconstructivism?

Written by Filippo Costa Buranelli

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## Is the English School a Form of Protoconstructivism?

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Comparing, contrasting and overlapping different theories has been common procedure within the field of International Relations, either to narrow the gap and reduce the degree of atomisation within academia, or to create and perpetuate methodological islands and theoretical safe-havens. Since constructivism surged in the late 1980s as a school of International Relations theory, several authors have linked it with other IR theories to exploit its methodological novelty and identify its potential pitfalls. [1] The English School (henceforth ES) seems to be the most profitable term of comparison (Dunne 1995b; Finnemore 2001, Buzan 2004), not only for a closer theoretical collaboration (Reus-Smit 2002), but for identifying protoconstructivist elements within it, thereby finding a constructivist agenda in the works of Wight (1966), Bull (1977) and, especially, Manning (1962).

This paper assesses the potential constructivist elements within the theoretical tradition of the ES, giving a possible answer to whether it should be considered as a form of protoconstructivism or as a separate and autonomous theoretical tradition. I will maintain that although the two theories present several and well-defined similarities, they are too inter- and intra-diversified to allow for seeing the ES as a form of protoconstructivism.

The structure of the argument is the following: firstly, this paper analyses those theoretical similarities between the two approaches which can depict the ES as protoconstructivist; secondly, it introduces criticisms and doubts, deconstructing the ES and constructivism as single theoretical frameworks and consequently identifying several strands of each theory, making claims of equality between the two more distorted and fallacious; thirdly, it focuses on those methodological, ontological, epistemological and historical arguments that prevent speaking of the ES as a form of protoconstructivism; in particular, it will illustrate how it is difficult to find strong methodological self-reflections on common constructivist argument in the ES authors and how the alleged protoconstructivist character of the ES derives from its stereotypisation as “international society theory” (Reus-Smit 2002). Finally, this paper rejects the idea of the ES as a form of protoconstructivism, considering it as a unique field of IR theory while allowing for those similarities that make it possible to exploit a fruitful theoretical cooperation among them.

### Oh father, where were you?

After the constructivist turn in International Relations (Checkel 1998), several theorists started looking for similarities between this new approach and previous theories that could be worthy fore-bearers of “historical presence” in the discipline: for its interpretive approach, the ES seemed the best term of comparison (Finnemore 2001). Above all, two elements in ES theory allow one to find protoconstructivist elements: the concept that International Society (henceforth IS) is a social practice and its emphasis on the role of rules, procedures and practices that follow by states and from which follows states’ behaviour.

Hedley Bull’s definition of IS offered the ground on which later constructivists and ES theorists found the most striking similarities between themselves: “a society of states exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions” (1977:13, *italic added*). The emphasis on these common and shared consciousness aiming at a more co-existential attitude beyond a Hobbesian state of nature resembles Wendt’s Lockean characterization of anarchy (1999), one in which the identity of actors, through a process of altercasting and symbolic interaction, evolves from conflicting to

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cooperative.

Timothy Dunne recognizes that “Wendt shares with [...] Bull the fundamental argument that [...] anarchy is not a barrier to the development of highly cooperative forms of behaviour. In addition, they are all engaged in an exploration of a non-rationalist theory” of IR (Dunne 1995b: 372). [2] To him, Bull’s conception of IS is strongly holist and subjectivist in its approach, thus pre-dating in a way the arguments made by Onuf (1989) and Wendt (1992, 1995) about the social construction of reality. In particular, the solidarist side of the IS recalls what constructivists conceive of interstate relations, i.e. a society of states in which sovereignty is not meant as given but as socially constructed and therefore “contractualized” (Buzan 2004), aimed at deepening the forms of cooperation between the actors through the mutual understanding and sharing of common purposes, such as the pursuit of human rights and economic integration.

Furthermore, the chief institution of IS, the Balance of Power (BoP), can be seen as socially constructed as well, being “not a thing bestowed upon by nature, but is a matter of refined thought, careful contrivance and elaborated artifice” (Butterfield 1966:147). Within the framework of a Bullian IS, the role of ideas, practices’ meanings and inter-subjective understanding of common actions – all commonly understood pillars of constructivism – are identifiable also in diplomacy and statecraft (Dunne 1995b). Watson’s work, in particular, shows how diplomacy was a practice, an evolution of the dialogue between states understood in a constructivist, Wendtian fashion (1991: 108) and Gong’s work on the meaning of the standard of civilization (1984) is seen as epitomising the constitutive role of language in ES theory. This constitutive and “performative” role of language has been related in particular to Manning’s works. Dunne considers him essentially a protoconstructivist (1995b: 376), linking him to Wittgenstein’s game-language logic (Manning 1962: xxiii). In particular, it is exactly Manning’s use of language and game applied to IR that made him a constructivist *avant-la-lettre* in the ES: his work, *The Nature of International Society*, was not only a protoconstructivist opus in the sense that provided a full account of the socialising dynamics of the actors in a given IS, but it went further in giving an account of the results of these dynamics on the actors themselves (Aalberts 2010:260).

Czaputowicz finds constructivist elements in ES theory as well: to him, not only is International Society in the ES an example of the treatment of those “ritualised practices” that alter and define the structure of inter-subjective knowledge among actors in general (à la Wendt), but its members were “examples of constructivism with the reservation that they were published before this current established itself” (2003: 28, italic added). Moreover, from a methodological and meta-theoretical point of view, Navari argues that “ES theorists are interested [...] in intersubjective meaning” (2009:41); Buzan acknowledges that “IS [...] is generally approached with a constructivist epistemology” (2004). As seen so far, it may seem that the ES contains specific roots of later constructivism; however, at a deeper level of analysis, incongruences may be found, especially by looking at who and what has been compared. Providing a more accurate and detailed account of the two theories discussed so far is the purpose of the next section.

## More English Schools, more Constructivisms

The intellectual operation of the authors above seemed the following: that the English School, a coherent theory with a consistent group of scholars well identified in this intellectual tradition focused on the ontology of International Society, has been considered the source of the elements and theoretical tools which constitute the essence of constructivism, a single theory most epitomised by the works of Wendt. However, these two theoretical bodies present a considerable degree of differentiation within themselves, both at the level of intellectual coherence and at the level of theoretical work.

The ES tradition is in fact heterogeneous, dynamic, and multifaceted, thanks also to its unstructured and informal process of self-identification started by the British Committee of IR in the 1950s (Dunne 1998). It is possible to put this intellectual differentiation on a double axis: the external or chronological one, concerned with the evolution of the School as a whole and the internal or analytical one, concerned with the different ontological inquiries, methods and scopes of the different authors involved in it. It is on this second axis where the bold definition of the ES as a single theoretical framework is contested.

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Here, three different strands of the ES are found: a structural one, represented by Wight, Manning and to some extent, Bull, is concerned with the inquiry on the nature and the ontological characteristics of the IS and on the general tripartition of international system, IS and world society; a functional one, represented by Bull, Vincent and, to some extent, Manning is focused on how states maintain and conduct their relations in an IS and how this society is functional to the maintenance of order among nations; finally, an historical one, represented by Butterfield, Watson and Bull, is less concerned with ontological and epistemological issues and keener on the historical analysis of the evolution of different patterns of IS across time (Linklater and Suganami 2006). This degree of internal and external differentiation is overarched by a methodological pluralism, which is consequential to the different ontologies inquired on by the theory: a positivist methodology to deal with the international system, a rationalist one to interpret the IS, a more critical one to analyse world society (Little 2000).

Constructivism, on the other hand, is an essentially contested term: is it a theory? Is it an approach? Is it a methodology? Essentially, constructivism is “a house with many occupants” (Martineau 2011:6). Under the general rubric of constructivism, community building, the role of norms and language games are found. However, the intellectual diverseness of work that is represented as constructivist makes it difficult to critique it at all (Zeffuss 2002). This difficult balance between external coherence and internal differentiation shows how “constructivism has become a general category out of which many researches pick and choose their particular version [...]” (Guzzini 2000:148).

The origins of constructivism in the social sciences are found in the wider context of the agency-structure debate and in Giddens’ structuration theory (1979), according to which structure and agency are not exclusionary, either/or ontological categories put in temporal and hierarchical order, but interrelated, mutually constitutive and reinforcing ontologies. This fundamental intuition has been introduced and perpetuated in IR through, among others, the works of Onuf (1989), Kratochwil (1989), Wendt (1992, 1995). [3] These authors consider constructivism as “the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world”, i.e. on intersubjective understandings (Adler 1997:322). However, they present differences among themselves.

Wendt, for example, adopts a positivist, rationalist epistemology on a constructivist ontology framed by a structural approach; his thesis concerns the role played by identities inter-subjectivity engaged in maintaining, however, a commitment to a scientific realist epistemology. This via media in the Fourth Debate, originated by the adoption of an idealist philosophy combined with a “rump materialism”, contributed to defining him as a thin constructivist (Dunne 2010) and as “an intelligent methodological structuralist” (Baaz 2009:12).

Conversely, Kratochwil combines an idealist and holist epistemology with an emphasis on the role of language and norms in regulating the social interaction of the actors of a given social group, be it a state or a society of states. Using Wittgenstein’s theory of games, language, and constitutive/regulative norms, his constructivism strongly focuses on the importance of linguistic interaction, on the legal validity of norms in a given situation, and on the internalisation and reproduction of such norms in a social context (1983, 1989).

Onuf’s constructivism is also heavily linked to international law and rules. However, in contrast to Kratochwil, he relies more on speech-acts, deed’s meanings, and ideas. To him, “[r]ules and speech-acts provide the link between “word” and “world” (Zeffuss 2002:22). Therefore, despite the resemblance between Kratochwil and Onuf, the three authors present different ontological and epistemological commitments, thus rendering the label “constructivism” a patchwork of different positions.

In sum, it seems that the strong arguments in favour of a protoconstructivist ES should be made more carefully, with an awareness that the two theories present spark differences within themselves, adding important elements of complexity in dealing with comparisons. The right questions now seem to be: Which ES? Which constructivism? Having looked inside the two theoretical bodies, the next section aims at re-comparing the two, now more multifaceted, theories – out of stereotypisation – rendering the assumptions made in the first section even weaker.

**“Luke, I am not your father”**

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In the light of the previous section, the assertion that the ES is a form of protoconstructivism would mean to deny and reject the vital intra-differentiation of the two theories considered and the multifaceted intellect of their representatives as well. The common stereotypisation of the ES as IS theory illustrated in the first section, in fact, downplays the ontological, epistemological and philosophical richness of the authors dealt with earlier.

First of all, it is important to recall how the IS is not the only ontology treated in ES theory, but part of the wider intersection of international system and world society, never parallel and “never for long confined in their river bed” (Wight 1991:260). One could assert that, despite the protoconstructivist elements identified above, Butterfield and Wight’s structural works show how the ES also had strong realist elements in it: in particular, the elements of power politics of the international system, the recurrence and repetition in Wight’s conception of history and IS, and the perennial character of Butterfield’s BoP logic – quite a departure from the constructivist tenet that relations are modifiable and changeable since are “of our making” and “what states make of it”.

For his structural and functional work identified supra, Bull’s position can be contested, too. While he has been often presented as offering constructivist elements in his theory and has been considered just an expression of the ES as “IS theory” and not as a complex, multifaceted author, he can be represented as a classical realist as well. This is especially true in the light of the importance attributed to the role of statesmen, to the element of coercion and exclusionary logic (i.e. the inside/outside dynamic) in IS, and to the role of war in (re)establishing the highest goal of order (Guzzini 2000).

The deconstruction operated in the previous section also reformulates the question of whom and what should be taken as an example of protoconstructivism. Authors like Aalberts and Dunne, as shown, considered Manning to be the epitome of protoconstructivism and therefore as the golden link between the ES and later constructivism. However, as Wilson (1989) and, more surprisingly, Dunne (1995b) and Aalberts (2010) themselves recognise, Wight and Bull are considered the main thinkers within the ES, while Manning’s inclusion seems to be a vexata quaestio (Buzan 1993).

Further, it has been shown how these authors emphasised his understanding of language and games in a Wittgensteinian way. However, as demonstrated later, this reliance on language and games is typical of Kratochwil and Onuf but not of Wendt, who has still been hailed by many as the best term of comparison. Conversely, those who link Wendt’s three kinds of anarchy (1999) to the three ontologies analysed in by Wight and Bull (Hobbesian/international system, Lockean/IS, Kantian/world society) may be right, but forget that this philosophical analysis of identities and relations is more difficult to find in Kratochwil works on international law and in Onuf’s works on language and speech-acts[4]. If the ES is a form of protoconstructivism, then which members pertain to it? And, in more depth, of which version? Still, it is important to recall how, from a constructivist point of view, a society is defined by the interaction of its units and not by the analytical type of the units: IS in the ES is just a part of the wider society for constructivist authors, regardless of membership criteria and conflictual relations.

A second motive to be sceptical of is the ES’ reliance on historicism and historical theorisation, factors quite absent in the strands of constructivism identified supra. History has always been fundamental in ES theory, and many of its members were not only devoted to historical explanations and narratives, as has been recalled earlier, but were professional historians themselves. This emphasis on history has been defined previously as the “third strand” of the ES and, more generally, historical curiosity characterises some (though not all) leading works of the ES (Suganami 2001). The ES analyses different ontologies in dynamic, evolving, and concrete historical contexts (Wight 1966, Watson 1981, Watson and Bull 1984), differentiating itself from constructivism, which often elaborates its theory relying on identities and language that transcend historical contingencies, micro-agency and possibilities for regression (Sàvãry 2006).

This last point is particularly important: Wendt, the most frequently used term of comparison between the two theories, is the constructivist author who tries to give a historical nuance to his work. However, his conception of history is a Hegelian, progressive, and teleological one, closer to Fukuyama’s rather than to Bull’s or Watson’s pessimistic and Toynbeeian conception. Wendt’s history is a string of events towards a final point; ES’ one is a series of discrete, evolutionary contingencies: it is “basically historical or situational” (Baaz 2009:3).

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If history is missed from constructivism, what can one make of normative reasoning? The ES has always had a strong normative element within it, due to its ties with international law and its roots in the Grotian thought. [5] The ES made a case for normative thought in Bull's defence of the "classical approach" (Bull 1966), and *The Anarchical Society* itself can be read as a defence of order as the supreme value in international politics: "Bull's defence was that IS provided a greater degree of order for its members than its alternatives, and that these alternatives were in many ways of doubtful viability" (Wilson 2009:179). Moreover, the whole debate between pluralists and solidarists can be seen as a normative one, as can Vincent's dilemma on how to reconcile order and justice in IR (Miller and Vincent 1990). This theoretical component is absent in constructivism, where the attention paid to methodological and meta-theoretical issues voids it of normative and ethical arguments. They may be implicit, but they are not clearly stated and do not represent the theory's main concerns (Reus-Smit 2002).

The last operation to differentiate the two theories is to look inside the scholarly community that produced them. Seeing the ES as a form of protoconstructivism would implicate ES theorists as somehow consciously and genuinely interested in those overarching features of constructivism, such as the role of inter-subjective production of meanings, norms, the ideational production of reality and the constitutive role of language in mutual understandings and identities' creation. Were they? Despite their emphasis on IS-actors' agency mutual constitution, on the role of norms in shaping states' behaviour and Manning's attention to the role of language, ES theorists were not interested in deep meta-theoretical reflections (Dunne 2010), in analysing the process of production and internalisation of these norms and language-games, of assessing the mutual reinforcement of agency (states) and structure (IS). The ES had and has an idiographic and nomothetic orientation, a self-image as historical and sociological (Linklater and Suganami 2006).

The "scientific community" within this "paradigm" (Kuhn 1962) was more concerned with providing a more comprehensive account of IR integrating classical disciplines than trying to anticipate the Fourth Debate and to inquire into meta-theoretical issues. The ES had a "second order activity", in the sense that it was remote from abstract philosophical speculation about theory (Jones 1981). This is visible in the characterisation of IS, and this point is of particular importance since, as has been shown, IS was the prominent link to constructivism: the ES accounts of IS are reductionist and as a result have an individual rather than an inter-subjective theory of action (Martineau 2011). IS in ES, especially in Bull, is merely the sum of its parts in the sense that there is not any account of the agency-structure problem; this is clear when we read that states are sums of human beings (Waever 1999, Der Derian 2003).

As said, IS in the ES is unit-based, and not created by the inter-subjective structuration typical of constructivism (Wight 1978:108; Manning 1962:5). Moreover, identity, or agency, interests and strategies, are field-specific and can be understood only after a prior analysis of the field itself (Bordieu 1990, Martineau 2011), which is exactly what is missing in ES theory. Norms and rules seem to be not the product of shared, inter-subjectively understood interaction, but rather *doxai*, blind and irreflexive practice – *sense pratique* finalised to the quest for order responding to a logic of consequences (Bordieu 1990, Guzzini 2000).

In sum, there is no account of the formation of the norms and procedures which underpins ES' IS nor, more importantly, is there the will to critically engage in the explanation of such formation: causation is not part of the ES theoretical agenda (Finnemore 2001). This case is strengthened if Wight's participant stand-point theory is applied: while Greek city-states were engaged in a primitive form of BoP among themselves, they were of course not conscious of this fact and totally ignored the concept: thus, Wight considered intellectually wrong to apply the category of BoP to them. The same can be said here. ES theorists may have well used protoconstructivist categories, expressions and even theoretical tools in their theorising. However, since there was not a deep, self-conscious engagement with proper constructivist categories, it would be intellectually wrong to make this a "back to the future" operation.

## Proto or Pro?

This essay has tried to show how the ES and constructivism are multifaceted and pluralistic bodies of theories rather than distinct theories per se. The differences found between the two theories but, more importantly *within* the two

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theories prevent us from labelling the ES as a form of protoconstructivism meant as “constructivism ante litteram.” This would be possible if the ES was identified, wrongly, with “IS theory.” However, this would mean to deny the fundamental pluralism, dynamism and heterogeneity, ontological and methodological, of the ES – all features which have constituted both its strengths and weaknesses. It is exactly this polymorphism which has made it possible to find grounds for collaboration between ES, neorealism, regime theory and even critical theory (Buzan 1993, Linklater 2001).

Finally, the absence of a strong meta-theoretical self-reflection and the lack of both the need and the will of such a reflection do not allow one to speak of such a “parental” relationship, despite the undeniable resemblances (Reus-Smit 2002, Dunne 2010). Dunne’s argument “that points of contact between two bodies of thought do not signify their convergence” and that “the ES shares certain arguments with realism, but crucially, it is not reducible to it” (Dunne 1998:5) may be valid for constructivism as well. The verdict is the following: the English School is best seen as, simply, the English School.

However, if “proto” is meant as “underdeveloped” or “unconscious precursor”, the ES can be rightly seen as protoconstructivism in the sense that it addressed important aspects of IR and IR theory which have been addressed by constructivist theorists later, regarding, for example, agency-structure relation, the role and formation of norms, the significance of language and the subtle link between “society” and state-identity.

As argued, it has been the theoretical and methodological self-consciousness of constructivist theorists that made possible a deep, sophisticated and theoretically fungible usage of such concepts. Thus, protoconstructivism would essentially mean pro-constructivism. The potential for fruitful study between the two theories invoked can still be exploited. Mutual nourishment in International Relations, as in nature, is a benefit.

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[1] Constructivism in social sciences appeared earlier; this will be better dealt with below.

[2] ES' "rationalism" (a philosophical tradition linked to Locke and Grotius based on reason and sociability) differs from "rationalism" in IR epistemology (essentially positivist rational-choice theory).

[3] I am consciously neglecting other influential constructivist authors: the choice, however, was to briefly focus on the first, seminal works.

[4] Note also, contra a constructivist view, the essentially ideal-typical nature of anarchies in the ES (Keene 2009)

[5] An exception may be Buzan 2004, more concerned with analytical and taxonomic systematization.

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