

The English School, Constructivism and Brexit: Theoretical Investigations

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A huge amount of uncertainty currently faces Britain, Europe and the world as a result of the decision of the British people in a national referendum on 23 June 2016 to leave the European Union (EU). So called 'Brexit' is now the dominant issue in British politics and the way it is handled, along with the settlement that is reached, will have far-reaching implications for British political, social, economic, cultural and international life for many years to come. Given Britain's size and significance in the European project, the manner of its exit from the EU and the agreement that will finalise it will also have profound implications for Europe as a whole.

A huge amount of comment and speculation on the issue pours out of the media on a daily basis. Public interest and debate is wide, even deep, and many academics have contributed to this in a variety of ways. The object of this article is to contribute to the debate by taking a longer and more systemic view of the process of detachment of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU. It proposes to do this by applying the concepts and insights of two schools of thought in International Relations (IR): the English School (ES) and Constructivism. The former offers the only distinct approach to IR which is home grown in the UK. While many of its leading proponents are not English, nor British, it represents in many respects a culturally and intellectually British outlook on how to understand and interpret the international political scene. The latter, while broader and more abstract, offers a distinct approach to IR that has become the dominant approach in continental Europe. Its origins may be mixed geographically but there can be no doubt that from Paris to Budapest and from Lund to Florence the main centres of IR learning are heavily constructivist in orientation.

The object of this article is not speculative. Nor does it try to use theory, meaning in this case the theoretical tools and insights of the ES and constructivism, to predict what is likely to happen in Brexit negotiations and what Europe will look like in the aftermath. Rather it asks: what can these two well established bodies of theory tell

us about the process of state separation from deep multilateral arrangements, and the likely international consequences of such separation? Its object is to understand not predict, and general understanding not particular. It does not seek to take sides in what is a highly-charged series of political contestations; but rather to stand back from the fray and take a more dispassionate view of where things could, or seem to be, going and with what consequences for the international system.

The English School: Overview

The ES is a body of theory about international relations with its tap root in the Department of International Relations at LSE and significant side roots at the universities of Cambridge, Oxford, Aberystwyth and increasingly elsewhere. Its evolution is comprised of four overlapping phases. The first phase was concerned with the formal structure of the international system. During this phase seminal contributors to the school such as Manning, Bull, Butterfield, Wight, and James sought to establish the main components of the system, the principal ways they related, and the character and quality of the system thereby produced. It was during this phase that the core concept of the school, international society, was established, and its chief practical concern, the bases of international order, given wide-ranging attention (e.g. James 1973; Bull 1977). The latter concern should come as no surprise given the phase was roughly coterminous with the Cold War. East-West relations took priority for scholarly investigations over North-South relations. The great powers were considered by far the most important actors in the system with small states and non-state actors receiving little if any attention. Indeed the school's emphasis on the primacy of the state, the role of the great powers, and the balance of power, led some to conclude that the ES was not a distinctive school of thought but a variant of political realism. Structure prevailed over process, continuity over change, and order over justice—with some reading an unconscious normative bias into this hierarchy of concern.

The second phase concerned the expansion of international society, that is, the worldwide geographical expansion of the initially European club of states. The impetus for this series of studies was concern about the implications of this expansion for international order. The importance of the cultural basis of international order—political, diplomatic, but also social and intellectual—had been established during the first phase of scholarship. It was therefore logical to ask, particularly in the wake of the rapid unravelling of the Western colonial empires in Asia and Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, and the consequent admittance of formerly subject territories into the club of states, what were the implications of the stretching of the cultural basis of society for international order (Bull and Watson 1984)? From the early concern about international order, ES attention shifted to the nature of the process. Keene (2002), for example, developed what might be called a proto-postcolonial account of the centrality of colonial expansion to European political self-identity, the

European club of states from the outset resting on notions of exclusivity and superiority. Buzan (2010) identified Vanguardist and Syncretist accounts of the expansion story, mirroring the earlier debate among economic historians between metropolitan and peripheral theories of nineteenth century imperialism (Robinson and Gallagher 1961; Fieldhouse 1984; Etherington 1984; Cain and Hopkins 1993).

Overlapping this phase, from the 1980s the ES developed a concern about human rights and the purposes of international society. Nardin's (1983) distinction between purposive and practical associations was influential, but the debate increasingly became framed in terms of Bull's (1966) distinction between pluralist and solidarist conceptions of international society. A central question became the extent to which growth in concern for human rights was propelling the society of states in a solidarist direction, with some arguing for a critical international society approach in which the normative potential of international society would, with the help of the scholar, become progressively unlocked (Wheeler 1996; Linklater and Suganami 2006), while others clung to a more conservative nominally detached approach, wary of aspirations going beyond the limited capacity of the club of states for altruistic or even long-term self-interested behaviour (Jackson 2000). In time more sophisticated solidarist accounts have been developed, distinguishing for example between cosmopolitan and state-centric solidarisms (Buzan 2013). In the same vein more ethically positive conceptions of pluralism have been developed (Hurrell 2007; Williams 2015), shifting the focus away from reluctant acceptance of the limited normative horizons of international society in the face of cultural, ethical and political heterogeneity, towards acknowledgment of the vital role the rules and norms of international society play in preserving valuable diversity.

The final phase of ES development concerns the institutional bases of international society. With roots deep in the writings of classic ES scholars Wight and Bull, contemporary ES scholars are conducting wide-ranging theoretical and empirical work on the nature, identity, function and significance of the primary or fundamental institutions of international society, including their role as markers of change (Holsti 2004). New taxonomies of primary institutions have been developed (Buzan 2004), their role in binding together regional international societies has been explored (Schouenborg 2012), and their co-constitutive relationship with international organizations such as the EU and UN is currently being investigated (Navari 2018). Detailed work on individual institutions has been done (Sharp and Wiseman 2008; Clark 2011). In addition, and structural functionalist method has been employed to understand their evolution over time (Buzan and Schouenborg 2018). While questions remain about the ability to empirically ground primary institutions and arrive at a settled list (Wilson 2012), there can be no doubt that this is proving to be a highly productive phase in the ES's development.

To portray the school in this way is not to say that valuable work has not been done outside or on the fringes of these main developments in areas such as peacekeeping (James 1969), nationalism (Mayall 1990), and revolutions (Armstrong 1993). It

should also be stated that running across these phases has been a wide and deep interest in the history of ideas in international relations, a subject close to ES pioneer Wight's heart, and to which ES scholars have been major contributors.

But for our purposes this brief summary of the four main phases of its evolution gives readers unfamiliar with the ES a rough guide to what it is about, where it has come from, and the kind of questions it has wrestled with.

The English School and Brexit

On the surface the ES is an unpromising approach for analysing the issue of Brexit. It has had little to say over the years about regional integration. Its interest in European integration has largely been confined to the issue of sovereignty, in particular whether the creation of a new kind multinational entity such as the EU undermines the staple ES conception of sovereignty as constitutional independence (James 1986; Jackson 2000). This is largely due to the level of analysis of most ES studies. While individual country studies are not unknown (e.g. James 1996), and attention to regional international societies is now a small but significant sub-field (e.g. Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez 2009), the school prides itself in being in the business of general IR theory, concerned primarily with system-level questions. While the formation of the EEC in the 1950s and its evolution into the hybrid polity of polities of today has profound regional significance, its significance for the international system as a whole has been deemed minor. Firstly, it is granted that the EU is no mere intergovernmental or inter-state organization, but a new kind of polity, with a wide but by no means comprehensive array of common policies, an elaborate but by no means all pervasive institutional structure, and (for most members) a common currency. But this is precisely what makes the EU *sui generis*. Its forms are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere. A new kind of polity that will sweep aside the traditional nation-state is not in the making. Secondly, even in the unlikely event that the federalists win the day and this new kind of polity evolves into a European super-state, the systemic consequence is merely the reduction in the number of members of international society. Either way, therefore, the steady expansion (and now the probable slight contraction) of the EU has limited consequences for international society.

Similarly the ES is an unpromising starting point for thinking about Brexit because it has largely ignored economics. While exceptions to the rule are worth noting (e.g. Goodwin and Linklater 1975; Goodwin and Mayall 1980; Mayall 1990; Economides and Wilson 2001) it is true that the economic dimension of international relations has been marginal to the school's efforts, with phenomena such as interdependence and globalisation not until recently (e.g. Buzan 2004; Buzan and Lawson 2015) given the attention they deserve. The economic consequences of Brexit, however, have dominated the debate both internally in the UK and externally in the wider EU—

especially since the fateful vote on 23 June 2016. The decoupling of the UK from an elaborate network of economic and financial rules and institutions, and the arrangements will be put in their place, is the central subject of both public debate and official negotiation. It is worth emphasising that the UK has not only become subject to these rules and institutions over the last 44 years but it has had a major hand in shaping them, particularly the Single European Market. The ES's neglect of international political economy, let alone European political economy, means that on the surface it has little to bring to this particular and highly important debate.

This being said, however, there are three areas of ES scholarly concern that might help us to put into perspective and better understand the events that are unfolding before us, and provide some guidance as to their implications. These areas are: the pluralist-solidarist debate; the relationship between primary institutions; and the role and status of great powers.

Pluralist-Solidarist Debate

Hedley Bull's classic view was that international society was a pluralist association of nations. From time to time certain members harboured solidarist aspirations, most notably at the end of the two world wars when attempts were made to put the world on a much more organised footing, enshrining common principles and goals, and creating new, universal organisations dedicated to their achievement. These attempts, however, were at best superficially successful. Firstly, states and perhaps especially great powers 'are notoriously self-seeking in their policies, and rightly suspected when they purport to act on behalf of the international community as a whole' (Bull 1984, 14). The language of common interest and international morality more often than not was a disguise for imperial ambition. Secondly, in a culturally, ethically, economically and politically diverse world states rarely agree for long on common moral purposes. A period of calamitous disorder is often followed by a period of great power unity, but it seldom lasts. The common rules of international society are essentially rules of co-existence. Their purpose is to ensure that different and sometimes widely disparate political communities can live together relatively peaceably. The move from this pluralist model of peaceful coexistence to the solidarist model of common moral goals and purposes is one fraught with danger, and in Bull's view one best not made lest the delicate fabric of international society is torn asunder. The United Nations (UN) and the network of rules and institutions it has spawned is therefore not to be seen as a substantial let alone revolutionary development in international society. Rather it represents a change in the appearance of international politics, the substance remaining essentially unchanged.

Debate about the world historical significance of the UN continues (Kennedy 2007; Mazower 2012), and the sceptical view propounded by Bull continues to be voiced, even at times of renewed optimism about its transformational potential (e.g. Righter

1994). Not in doubt, however, are the extraordinary solidarist strides taken by the EEC/EC/EU. This too is a heterogeneous body in many respects, but in the 60 years since its foundation it has developed common policies in agriculture, fisheries, trade regional development, environmental protection, nuclear energy, and to a lesser degree foreign affairs and security. 19 of its members share a common currency. The Single European Market is the largest single economic area in terms of value of goods and services traded in the world. It makes policy through a number of formal institutions, with democratic control exercised through a directly elected parliament, and its laws enforced by single EU-wide court. Since 1993 its citizens have enjoyed a common European citizenship. In 2012 it was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

There is no consensus among scholars on the precise political ontology of the EU, with intergovernmentalists, consociationalists, functionalists and federalists offering sharply contrasting interpretations. Yet for ES scholars there is no doubt it is solidarist international association, indeed the most solidarist association of nations yet achieved in international society. More precisely it is hybrid of state-centric solidarism and cosmopolitan solidarism (Buzan 2013), with the former capturing the intergovernmental components of the EU and the latter the trans- and supra-national components. Viewed from this perspective, Brexit can be seen as a reaction to the failure of elites, particularly in the more Euro-sceptical countries, to apply a brake to the increasing cosmopolitan solidarism of the European project. It has been a staple British view that a wider Europe is better than a deeper Europe. Indeed, part of the logic of a wider Europe is to make a deeper Europe impossible. To the consternation of many UK observers, however, Europe since Maastricht has been become wider and deeper, with profound implications for both national and parliamentary democracy. Of course the UK successfully negotiated 'opt-outs' from the Social Chapter on workers' rights (of Maastricht Treaty, 1993-97), the single currency, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (of Lisbon Treaty 2009). It has also successfully negotiated selective 'opt-ins' to the Schengen Area of passport-free travel, and the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (of the Treaty of Amsterdam, 1999). It has therefore applied its own brake to accelerating cosmopolitan solidarism. But its failure to get the brake more generally applied created the impression, among an electorate daily fed a diet of Euro-hostility by the popular press, that 'Europe' was set inexorably on a disagreeable course. It also created the problem that when it came to arguing the case for the EU in the referendum those heading the Remain campaign were themselves, with regard to several of the most important lines of EU policy and institutional development, Euro-sceptics—most notably the Prime Minister, David Cameron, who before assuming office had helped found the Euro-sceptic Movement for European Reform, and had pledged to pull Britain out of the Social Chapter. The consequence of this was that many in the Remain camp found themselves arguing not for the increasingly cosmopolitan solidarist EU that did exist, but for a state-centric solidarist EU they would prefer to exist. They found it hard to be passionate about the actually-existing EU, only a much-reformed EU the creation of which according to any sober assessment was remote.

Looked at from the perspective of the EU27, however, while costly and destabilising in the short run Brexit may have long run advantages. Britain has never been fully committed to the EU project, so the argument runs, it has always been half in and half out. While it is not good to lose one of its oldest, largest, wealthiest, and most prominent members, the prospects for a less compromised cosmopolitan solidarist development of the community are advanced. Britain is not the only member, however, with reservations about this line of development, with Ireland, Poland, Denmark among others all having negotiated significant opt-outs and opt-ins of their own. In this regard the EU's motto, *In Varietate Concordia* or *United in Diversity*, becomes unusually pertinent: how much diversity can unity withstand? Are the ever more complicated compromises between unity and diversity a sign of strength or weakness?

Primary Institutions

Definitions of primary international institutions abound (Wilson 2012) but they can be thought of as 'set[s] of habits and practices shaped towards the realization of common goals' (Bull 1977, 74) or 'durable and recognized patterns of shared practices rooted in values held commonly by the members of interstate societies, and embodying a mix of norms, rules and principles' (Buzan 2004: 181). The EEC/EC/EU can be seen as an evolving organization that has had a considerable impact on the primary institutions of international society—and not only within Europe but beyond, through its diplomatic influence, its policy of pre-accession conditionality, and by the force of its example. In terms of Buzan's (2004) scheme it might be contended that the master institutions of sovereignty, territoriality and nationalism have been negatively impacted, and those of the market and equality of people positively impacted. Similarly, with regard to derivative institutions, multilateral diplomacy has been strengthened and bilateral diplomacy, if not proportionately, weakened; trade and financial liberalization have been strengthened, and boundaries (that is to say the social, economic and political significance of boundaries) weakened. In terms of Holsti's (2004) scheme the foundational institutions of sovereignty and territoriality have been weakened and law strengthened; with regard to his procedural institutions war and colonialism have been weakened and trade and the market strengthened.

To present the picture in this way is of course to present it in very general terms. Holsti provides us with the means of arriving at a more detailed picture through his six-fold categorization of institutional change. According to Holsti (2004) institutional change can be seen in terms of: novelty/replacement; addition/subtraction; increased/decreased complexity; transformation; reversion; and obsolescence. In modern international society, for example, trade is a novel institution, and colonialism has become obsolete. The traditional institutions of sovereignty, international law, and diplomacy remain highly institutionalised but with much added complexity. War

exhibits the most complex development, suffering de-institutionalisation and reversion to pre-Westphalian Hobbesianism in many parts of the world, increased regulation (on the eighteenth century pattern) in others, and among OECD countries, obsolescence.

In these terms the EU has added complexity to the institution of sovereignty. This has been achieved, for example, by enshrining EU law as superior to domestic law, making EU directives binding, establishing qualified majority voting in a number of policy areas, and through its 1993 Copenhagen criteria for membership (and the 2003 Nice agreement to monitor compliance among existing members). Diplomacy has also been rendered more complex through the many channels and forms it now takes within the EU. The same could be said for the market and the equality of peoples as a consequence of the many rules that now regulate economic activity within the Single Market, and the growing body of rules protecting the rights and well-being of workers, minorities, children and refugees. Nationalism by way of contrast has been rendered obsolescent. This is not to say that member states do not from time to time put their own interest above the community; but it is to say that for the first time in the history of the modern state system a group established nation-states has agreed to always take into account the interest of the wider community before acting in any given area, and to avoid actions that could be deemed 'non-communautaire'. Finally, war has been transformed in the relations between EU member states, from a practice frequently employed to settle differences, acquire territory, and increase power, to a measure employed exclusively against external actors and threats, and only in the most exceptional circumstances in defence of fundamental community values. It has become obsolete within but highly institutionalized without the walls of the union.

The fact of one member, albeit a prominent one, leaving the group does not necessarily imply any reduction in the number of primary institutions at work in Europe, nor any loss of complexity, nor any brake on transformation. There can be no question however that Brexit represents the most explicit reassertion of sovereignty within the EU to date, and the most significant challenge to the obsolescence of nationalism. With regard to equality of peoples, diplomacy, the market and war there is no reason to expect any significant institutional change. Brexit does entail, however, some reversion to sovereignty and nationalism as guiding and legitimizing principles. It is to this extent a challenge to inter- and supra-nationalism. The wider systemic consequences will be contingent on the extent to which separation from the EU will be attractive to other states, which in turn will be dependent on the success Britain makes of it. Perhaps the EU was too confident that the days of sovereignty were numbered; too complacent in the face of a recrudescence of nationalist sentiment? Perhaps sovereignty and nationalism still have some life left in them even for politically, socially and economically advanced countries?

Great Power Status

One issue conspicuous by its absence in the EU referendum debate is Britain's continued great power status. Many people in Britain, including among what is uncritically called the political class, still possess a great power mindset. But is this a case of mind in defiance of matter? Does the objective basis of Britain's great power status still exist? This is a question rarely asked. Part of the reason resides in Britain's 'glorious' past, its tremendous nineteenth-century industrial, technological and commercial might, the position of the Bank of England for a century as the world's central bank, its empire on which the sun never set, its indomitable navy, its self-image of 'standing alone' against the Nazi threat. But another reason lies in the title. 'Great' Britain carries with it the assumption of great power status without having to ask awkward questions about attributes and whether the UK still possesses them. Parliament's vote July 2016 to replace the submarines carrying Britain's 'independent' nuclear deterrent, at the huge cost of £31bn, can be seen in this context. Does Trident, as the programme is called, give Britain much extra security? Arguably it does not. The threats to British security are many and varied but direct nuclear attack from an enemy nuclear power or 'blackmail' by some such is a long way down the list. France, however, has nuclear weapons, as do all permanent members of the UN Security Council. Abandoning them, unilaterally, would reduce Britain's status in the world, bad enough vis-à-vis rising powers such as India and China, intolerable with regard to established and more local rivals such as France. This is a widely held perception, extending across Right and deep into Left opinion, as the overwhelming vote in Parliament to replace the fleet testifies. The tautological nature of the argument escapes all but a few. Great Britain has to have nuclear weapons because she is great and she is great because she has nuclear weapons.

The objective attributes of power are a central concern of the realist tradition. It would be wrong to assume, however, that for all realists these attributes are exclusively material. For some (e.g. Mearsheimer 2000) this is certainly true, at least in theory. But for others (e.g. Morgenthau 1948) in both theory and practice power is much more subtle and complex. Along with population size, industrial output, strength of armed forces in terms of men and materiel, level of technological advancement, must be added non-material factors such as the energy and ingenuity of the population, authority and skill of leadership, public morale, even the quality of country's civilization. To this equation the ES adds social conferment. Great power status is precisely that, a status. It is something socially conferred. This does not mean that objective and material qualities are not relevant. Indeed they are tremendously important. But great power status goes beyond the possession of certain objective or material attributes, leaving the door open in ES thinking for a power to have more or less of them and still retain the status. This is a possibility of no small importance for a country like the UK, declining in some ways but rising or at

least flat-lining in others. It is one to which its leaders, if not its general population, have been sensitive.

Britain's nuclear capability is one of several elements that make up her claim to great power status. Closely related is the strength and effectiveness of her conventional armed forces. But this strength has been significantly reduced in recent decades with phase after phase of budget cuts. Absent Trident, for example, the Royal Navy is a shadow of its former self, possessing currently no operational carrier fleet. Under the latest Strategic and Defence Review the size of the army is set to shrink to its lowest level since 1815. Add to this equation the extensive strategic and operational failures in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the criticism of so many aspects of military planning and implementation in the Chilcot Report (2016), and things start to look grim from a Great Power status point of view. Some have interpreted one of the main recommendations of Chilcot, that in the future 'all aspects of any intervention need to be calculated, debated and challenged with the utmost rigour' as meaning 'never again'. Military operations on the scale of Afghanistan or Iraq now look deeply improbable. While Britain is one of the few NATO members to meet target defence expenditure of 2% GDP, its capacity for unilateral military action overseas is limited. Britain is by no means a conventional great power.

With so many competing demands on the public purse Britain is not alone in facing mounting pressure to cut defence spending. The underlying health of the economy is the major factor in the calculus of Britain's might, as it has been for over a century (Kennedy 1981). The size and strength of the British economy therefore is a key fact in any claim to continued great power status. Brexit here casts a dark and possibly long shadow over the UK. Before the referendum the UK with its relatively flexible labour market, low corporate taxation, and hospitable environment for inward investment, was among the higher performing EU economies—despite being one of the economies hardest hit by the financial crisis and ensuing recession. Since the referendum, however, all the economic indicators except for employment have deteriorated, despite an initial competitive boost courtesy of a weakened exchange rate. It is impossible to predict how long the economic uncertainty triggered by Brexit will last, and what impact this will have on the economic fundamentals of investment, productivity and growth. Much depends on the terms of the separation and the arrangements put in place for Britain's trading and wider economic relationships thereafter. Far from fearing Britain's future place in the world economy many prominent Brexiteers anticipate a bright economic future, free of the constraints and costs of a heavily bureaucratic Europe. This may come to pass but few deny that the road from A to B will be long and difficult. In the meantime the considerable economic and political uncertainty engendered only adds to the pressure on Britain's status from other sources.

Britain's decline from *primus inter pares* among the great powers to her its current ambiguous position has been steady and relentless. The rather neglected ES scholar F. S. Northedge entitled his study of British foreign policy in the inter-war

years *The Troubled Giant* (1966). and his successor volume taking the story up to Britain's entry into the EEC in 1973 *Descent from Power* (1974). For many, including the Prime Minister who took Britain into the EEC, Edward Heath, and leading figures in other political parties such as Roy Jenkins and David Owen, joining the Community was a means of reducing the trouble and arresting the descent. The period 1982-2008 may come to be seen as one in which, whether because of the EEC/EC/EU or in spite of it, these goals were generally achieved. But in terms of Britain's current and projected conventional armed strength, and the current and projected strength of her economy, it is hard to see the international community continuing to confer great power status in Britain long into the future. Normal service in the department of relative decline has been resumed.

Yet along with her soon-to-be-renewed nuclear forces the UK still takes its seat among the P5 on the UN Security Council. Does Brexit strengthen or weaken the UK's claim to this seat? There can be no doubt that Britain has been able to resist the periodic calls for revision of her position due to it being a leading member of a closely knit association of nations which collectively represents a population of over 500m, with a GDP higher (according to some measures) than the US. Put Britain outside of this association, however, and her claim begins to look shaky. A lot will depend on the skill of Britain's post-Brexit diplomacy, her skill at building new friendships and alliances and strengthening some old ones, notably with the US. But it is important to note that alongside her military resources Britain's diplomatic resources have been run down in recent decades. This has been partly for the usual economic reasons, but also because of the concentration of more and more diplomatic activity at the European level. Forging a new path in the world, including the UN, will require a major investment in the UK's diplomatic resources—but at a time when the public finances are under severe and sustained pressure.

This issue of the UK's permanent seat on the Security Council, as with her great power status generally, did not arise once in the EU referendum campaign. This can only be explained by complacency and ignorance—complacency over the continuation of Britain's status allied with, indeed sustained by, ignorance of the effort that she daily spends in the UN system defending and protecting it. It is for example a major reason why Britain has stepped up her effort to meet the UN-defined foreign aid target of 0.7% gross national income. Britain is now the second largest international aid donor after the US, much of this aid being channelled through the UN. She may not have the guns to sustain her claim to a permanent Security Council seat but she has the generosity. She may not be a great power in the old sense, but she is a great responsible (Bull 1977, 288; Bull 1980; Brown 2004). Such is the narrative Britain has been skilfully spinning. Outside of the EU it can still be spun, but the threads will need to be that much stronger to bear the weight of Britain's case in the future.

Constructivism: Overview

Constructivism is not a theory, but an ontology: 'a set of assumptions about the world and human motivation and agency' (Slaughter 2011). Its counterpart is therefore not other theories of international relations but rationalism (Keohane, 1988). It offers an alternative in – not to – such theories as realism, liberalism or institutionalism. For constructivists, what should be studied is not simply the levels of trade, domestic policies, institutional structures or troop numbers, but the social meaning – or, as Dunne (1995) terms it, the 'social construct' – of each of the facts inherent in each of them and others. Social meaning is created – or constructed – from a mix of history, ideas, norms, identities and beliefs that should be studied if we are to explain the behaviour of states such as that captured under the broad-ranging term 'Brexit'. As such, the facts of international relations – and therefore of Brexit – do not reflect 'an objective, material reality but an intersubjective, or social reality' (Barkin, 2003: 326). As a result, it is identities and ideas that are the focus for constructivist studies. Both are, as Wendt (1992) argued, produced and reproduced through the discursive practices of actors. Decision makers and other people 'act towards objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them' (Wendt, 1992: 391?). As Croft (2000: 4) argues, this offers the benefit of shifting 'from a materialist explanation of state policy, to an examination of the ideational context of policy formation.' As we shall see below, this is of particular help when trying understand an act like Brexit that has been driven by a series of ideas and interpretations of the UK's material power, international structures and the policies pursued by the EU.

Constructivism and constructivists have faced a range of criticisms, and are themselves divided over how to approach a field which has grown to such an extent that it has increasingly been applied to anything in international relations related to ideas and identities (Guzzini, 2000: 174). Checkel (2006: 2-3) divides constructivists into: conventional constructivism, mainly focused on the role of norms and identity in shaping international political outcomes; interpretative constructivism, which looks at the role of language in mediating and constructing social reality; and finally Critical/Radical constructivism which maintains the focus on linguistics but adds a normative dimension in looking at the implications of what the researchers own implications are from their findings. Barkin (2003: 326) offers a dichotomy of neoclassical and postmodernist approaches, divided by 'the extent to which there is an empirically identifiable reality to be identified and studied'. Barkin himself attempts to move constructivism on from a certain idealism and utopianism (especially the failure to distinguish between 'ideas' and 'idealism') for which it has been criticised. His approach of realist constructivism (or constructivist realism) is intended to counter the argument that constructivism runs in direct opposition to realism because many of the norms – for example, European integration and cooperation – are accepted largely uncritically as good ones to be pursued, welcomed and supported. Positive views are also often expressed of those actors in civil society, government,

the business community and so forth involved in spreading (such as through socialisation) such norms. Finally, constructivist studies have also been criticised for failing to contribute much by way of empirical understandings of international relations. As we see below, European integration in particular has been a field in which sustained criticisms for the shortcomings of constructivist approaches have emerged.

Constructivism and European Integration

Constructivism has been applied to European politics and integration both as a way of studying the EU and European politics, and as a means to understanding broader trends in international relations such as political order and identity formation (Checkel, 2006). As the centre of global power for most of the past several hundred years, and the location of the two world wars and then the Cold War, European integration and the architecture of institutions and processes that have been constructed to manage relations across the continent have not happened naturally but, as constructivists point out, have been the result of contrivance, careful thoughts and reflections about Europe's balance of power (see Dunne, 1995: 378).

Constructivist approaches have highlighted four aspects of European integration worthy of note. First, the continued importance of domestic politics. Studies of European integration have often looked more at the supranational and intergovernmental nature of integration, putting national domestic politics inside the black box of each member state. Looking inside these black boxes reveals the continued importance of domestic matters such as national identity and the continued applicability of norms such as sovereignty. While constructivist studies have often looked at the international level, it is domestic debates and norms that can be more important determinants of states identities and interests than systemic factors (Wendt, 1992: 423). This begs the question of whether it was ever likely that the EU could form a coherent identity of its own. The Union has grown to 28 states, each containing their own mix of identities, some of which even divide the states themselves. The 'other' against which such national identities are often formed and defined has not necessarily been found outside the Union in the form, for example, Russia or the USA. Instead the 'other' has often been an internal matter of Western and Eastern Europe, new and older members, North versus South, large compared to small states.

The second aspect is the continued importance of the idea of sovereignty and how to understand its continued relevance as an idea and norm. As Dunne argues, constructivist approaches shed light on the importance of sovereignty as 'the constitutive principle of the society of states' (Dunne, 1995: 378). Wendt (1992: 412-13) captures the constructivist relationship between sovereignty and international order:

Sovereignty is an institution, and so it exists only in virtue of certain intersubjective understandings and expectations; there is no sovereignty without an other. These understandings and expectations not only constitute a particular kind of state – the ‘sovereign’ state – but also constitute a particular form of community, since identities are relational ... Sovereignty norms are now so far taken for granted, so natural, that it is easy to overlook the extent to which they are both presupposed by an ongoing artifact of practice.

As Wendt (1992: 415) also goes onto note:

...to the extent that their ongoing socialisation teaches states that their sovereignty depends on recognition by other states, they can afford to rely more on the institutional fabric of international society and less on individual national means—especially military power—to protect their security ...In policy terms, this means that states can be less worried about short-term survival and relative power and can thus shift their resources accordingly. Ironically, it is the great powers, the states with the greatest national means, that may have the hardest time learning this lesson; small powers do not have the luxury of relying on national means and may therefore learn faster that collective recognition is a cornerstone of security.

As we discuss further below, Brexit and the UK’s difficult relationship with the EU may stem from its struggle to learn the importance of collective recognition.

Third, the role of the EU matters because of the way it shapes politics, ideas and expectations. The EU’s institutions such as the European Commission, Council of Ministers or European Parliament matter because they can shape not simply the incentives of member states but also their preferences and identities (Pollack, 2001: 234). As such European integration is transformative of both the European system and the states themselves. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) noted, spillover in European integration was supposed to not only create new areas of policy but also through changing attitudes and identities create new norms of European politics. But at what point do these ideas become norms or reach a tipping point – or what they term ‘critical mass’? And how does this play out at the two levels of domestic and European? As they point out, ‘Norm shifts are to the ideational theorist what changes in the balance of power are to the realist’ (1998: 894). As we discuss further below, whether Brexit can lead to a tipping point in the norms shaping European politics and institutions depends on whether, as Finnemore and Sikkink argue, one third of states follow the UK and if that third contains states critical to European integration.

Finally, the power of the external image of a state plays an important – but often overlooked – part in how a state (or an organisation such as the EU) constructs itself as a political actor (Lucarelli, 2007: 257). There have been several outside-in studies of the EU itself (Lucarelli, 2007, Chaban et al. 2013; Falkner, 2017). In looking at

‘roles’ – as opposed to identities, which is a concept they argue is better suited to individuals - Lucarelli (2007: 257) argues that,

Roles refer to patterns of expected or appreciate behaviour and are determined by both an actor’s own conceptions about appropriate behaviour and by expectations of other actors. The role-constructing side of the equation is ultimately shaped by an actor’s identity and the other’s expectations. ... the actor’s identity is not monolithic, but pertains to the political identity of its citizens. This means that the role is also defined through interaction and involvement on the domestic social level.

Lucarelli finds a gap between the EU’s self-representation and the views of others; not least with regard to the idea of the EU as a model to emulate. The EU has therefore engaged in policies that reflect what it wants to be rather than what it is seen to be by the rest of the world, creating an expectations-performance gap on both sides. This view is to some extent reflected in the work of Chaban et al. (2013) who focus more on the elites of several regions, an approach taken because it allows a clearer focus on the socialisation process that can shape views of the EU. They find that perceptions of the EU’s leadership and power are highly issue-specific with causes being divided into exogenous (caused by the EU’s own actions) and endogenous (unrelated to the EU’s actions internally or externally).

As noted, constructivist approaches to European integration have been subject to significant criticisms for failing to add to empirical understandings of European integration (Pollack, 2001: 235). One of the foremost critiques has come from Andrew Moravcsik (1999/2001?) who has repeatedly argued that most constructivists have shown a ‘characteristic unwillingness ... to place their claims at any real risk of empirical disconfirmation’. In part this is because constructivists have been focused on ontology rather than theory. As a result they have failed to develop any ‘distinctive testable hypotheses’ and when hypotheses are put forward they employ methods which are not capable of ‘distinguishing the predicted outcome from those predicted by alternative (rationalist) hypotheses’ (Pollack, 2001: 235). As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 905-6) also note, norms research can fail to provide substantial hypotheses about which norms will be influential and under what conditions. Studies that look into socialisation or norm-diffusion are possible, as Moravcsik himself concedes and encourages. Simply saying ‘ideas matter’ is to state the obvious. Instead, to draw on Moravcsik (2001: 230): ‘The distinctive empirical question raised by constructivism is not “does variation in ideas impose a binding constraint on state behaviour?” It is instead: when does variation in ideas created through autonomous dynamics of socialisation impose a binding constraint on state behaviour?’ One study that does attempt to do so is Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) who show how norms, such as those connected to legitimacy, can reach a critical mass to move forward European integration. However, such studies can still fall short of providing a distinctive testable theory. Furthermore, what studies have been undertaken tend to have revealed that ‘EU-level socialisation plays a relatively small

role in the determination of elite attitudes in comparison with national-level socialisation and other factors, or that EU socialisation interacts with other factors in complex ways' (Pollack, 2001: 236).

Constructivism and Brexit

Brexit is not a single event or process but a series of time-limited and open-ended multi-level processes touching on and shaped by a wide range of interests, ideas, institutions, and individuals. The formal Brexit 'negotiations' (or 'debates', these need not be formally structured negotiations between two or more parties) themselves can be broken down into three sets: within the UK; between the UK and the EU; and within the remaining EU (Oliver, 2017). A fourth set can, when needed, also be drawn out that highlight the international level such as Brexit within the transatlantic relationship. As set out in the table below, taken together these produce approximately fourteen sets of negotiations on which agreements – or a decision, position or narrative – needs to be reached. For example, in the UK-EU negotiations there will need to be agreements over a British exit, a transition arrangement, a new relationship, arrangements to cover the security and defence relations that include NATO, and negotiations within the remaining EU member states over what they want – and will agree to – in each of these. The multifaceted nature of Brexit means it defies any single theoretical approach. As such constructivist approaches are but one way to study Brexit, albeit one that opens up some key aspects of it (Oliver, 2017).

Brexit negotiations (taken from Oliver, 2017)

British negotiations:		
Negotiations	Participants	Issues
(i) Brexit narrative	UK political parties, media, and academia.	What the vote by the UK populace meant. 'Brexit means Brexit means...?'
(ii) Government, Parliament and the Judiciary	Ministers, MPs, Lords, and Supreme Court.	Who defines the Brexit process and aims.
(iii) Party politics	Conservatives, Labour, UKIP, Liberal Democrats, SNP, DUP.	Positioning the parties to manage Brexit and fit with their ideological outlooks.
(iv) A united Kingdom?	UK Government, Scottish Government and Parliament, Northern Ireland Government and Assembly, Welsh Assembly and Government, and London and local	What is the identity of the UK: Role of the devolved administrations in Brexit, the place of London and England in the negotiations, and the stress of leaving the EU on the UK's existing quasi-federal structure.

	government in England.	
(v) UK and the world	UK bilateral relations with the non-EU world, especially in the context of new trade deals.	Britain's place in the world – UK relations with the United States, emerging powers such as China and India, and full membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).
UK-EU negotiations		
Negotiations	Participants	Issues
(i) UK-EU: Article 50 and an exit deal	European Parliament, European Commission, UK, and the EU 27 Governments.	The Divorce: Exit agreement for the UK, budget contributions, and the status of UK and EU citizens.
(ii) Brexit transition	UK, EU 27 heads of Government, European Parliament, and the European Commission.	The Moving Out: Possible transition arrangements for the UK out of the EU.
(iii) New relationship	UK, political systems of EU 27, European Parliament, and the European Commission.	The new relationship – Agreement between the UK and EU over a new relationship, including a potential free trade deal, and what ideas underpin this.
(iv) Brexit and the 27 other member EU states	EU 27 Governments and their domestic political structures, European Parliament, and the European Commission.	Facing a Britishless EU: Remaining EU member states need to reach agreement over what to offer the UK and over what timeframe, potentially with countries ratifying any agreement individually.
(v) Foreign, security and defence cooperation.	UK, and EU27 (especially France and Germany).	How to continue cooperation on international matters.
EU negotiations		
Negotiations	Participants	Issues
(i) Rebalancing the union.	EU 27, European Parliament, Commission, and the ECJ.	The future of the EU: The new balance of power within the post-Brexit EU, the Eurozone's place in the EU, and European integration, disintegration or muddling through.
(ii) EU in a multipolar Europe.	EU, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Turkey, Ukraine, non-EU Balkan countries, and the UK.	EU in Europe: ideas about the future of the EU's relations with non-EU European countries, EU-EEA/European Free Trade Association relations, and European geopolitics.
(iii) EU in a multipolar world.	EU, UK, USA, Russia, China, UN, and NATO.	EU in the world: ideas about the EU's place in an emerging multipolar world.

(iv) EU's daily business	EU as a union of 28 member states until the UK exit becomes formally effective.	Continuity: How to let the UK and the rest of the EU continue normal non-Brexit business until the UK withdraws.
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Analysis of Brexit so far has focused largely on either the causes of the vote to leave (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017) or on detailing (as above) the processes the vote has triggered. There have been various attempts to apply some theoretical analysis. Andrew Moravcsik (2016?) has set out how from a liberal intergovernmentalist perspective Britain will find it difficult to leave the EU, sometimes known as the 'Hotel California' dilemma that you can check out anytime you like but – thanks to economic interdependence, networks and the disparities in size – you can never leave. Adler-Nissen, Galpin and Rosamond (2017) applied some constructivist approaches when they set out how Brexit is changing national and European identities and understandings of the geopolitical realities in Europe. In the following section we build on this approach by setting out how Brexit appears to be shaping the norms and identities of the UK and the EU. We do so with a focus on two areas: the roles played by national identities in Brexit; and what Brexit means for the norms of European integration and geopolitics.

Brexit Britain

Britain has long been something of an outlier in European integration, often pursuing policies that display an unwillingness to fully commit to the project in ways seen elsewhere in Europe. The country's refusal to join the Euro, Schengen, to seek opt-outs and rebates, and develop a domestic debate often hostile – sometimes viscerally so – to European integration and other European nations, has put it at odds with the rest of Europe. There were, however, limits to how far this scepticism went. Stephen George's (1990) classic book on Britain's unwillingness to participate in European integration is entitled 'An Awkward Partner' and not, as it is often misquoted, 'The Awkward Partner'. This is more than semantics (Daddow and Oliver, 2016). The British electorate, on a narrow majority, might have now voted to leave the EU, the most extreme sign of Euroscepticism, but many of the biggest crises to face the Union – the empty chair crisis of the 1960s, the Eurozone crisis and the prospect of Greek or Italian exits, the collapse of the European constitution, the strains on Schengen as a result of Germany's decision to admit 1 million refugees – were the product of developments elsewhere in the Union. Other EU states have also had difficult times adjusting to the EU. Eastern European states, for example, have had to adjust to much stricter requirements than the UK did on joining the EU. As an island, Ireland is also defined by its geographical separation. Other Member States have elected large numbers of Eurosceptics to the European Parliament; a parliament it should be noted that people across the EU have viewed as secondary to their own national parliaments. British government officials have

also been famed for a private, constructive and pragmatic approach that contrasts with the more sceptical public political debate. Nevertheless, British identity has not been Europeanised as much as others. There are clear historical reasons for this, whether they are the history of empire, independence and geographical separation in the face of European wars, the legend of 'standing alone', the common law system, or a strained membership application and accession. But, as noted, given other states have also struggled with such legacies and limits, the key limit for Britain stems from an unwillingness or failure by its political actors to interpret British history, material power and international links in a way that configure the state towards a more settled and accepting part in European integration. It is a common complaint that British politicians have rarely taken the opportunity to say much that is positive about the EU, preferring instead to either avoid the topic or engage in criticising it in order to secure easy political points.

The UK's vote to leave the EU brought this domestic debate and the tensions it produces with the EU to a head because it not only reflected a failure to domestically adjust ideas and expectations to a European outlook, but also because in calling a referendum to settle what he termed 'the European question' David Cameron was attempting to settle a series of questions about British identities, political economy, history, political representation, globalisation, changing demographics and much more (Oliver, 2015). To be or not to be in Europe: was that the referendum question? Arguably no. As noted above, one of the biggest problems facing UK politicians is the difficulty in interpreting not only why the British people voted as they did, but also what they voted for. Did they vote for less immigration? For a 'sovereign' Britain (whatever that means)? A fairer Britain that pays more attention to people outside of London and other metropolitan areas? An 'English' Britain? Did it confirm English Euroscepticism as the source of Britain's long-running problems with engaging in the EU. But how then can this explain that in Britain's 1975 referendum it was the English who voted strongly in favour of remaining in the EEC while the Scots were amongst the least enthusiastic? What then over the past forty years has changed – in their identities or outlooks – to make the Scots the more pro-European and the English the least?¹

Brexit is now shaping UK identities in three ways. It is testing ideas of British unity. Support for Scottish independence might have waned, and pro-Europeanism north of the border might not be as high as some had expected, but the prospect of another Scottish independence referendum remains a distinct possibility if decision makers in London make a mess of the Brexit negotiations. This feeds into wider tensions within the rest of the UK, not least within England, over the place of London – the UK's

¹ Although the extent to which Scottish pro-Europeanism has increased has to be viewed with caution given that the 2016 vote saw 62% of Scots vote to remain, compared to 58% in 1975. That a figure close to that which in 1975 was seen as indicating Euroscepticism is now seen as pointing to pro-Europeanism hints at how strong Euroscepticism is across the rest of the UK.

undiscovered fifth country – and the unique challenges surrounding the future of Northern Ireland (a place which often falls off the mental map of politics in Great Britain). Brexit has added fuel to questions of what it means to be British, English, Scottish, a Londoner or – as to borrow from Theresa May – a citizen of somewhere as opposed to nowhere. Second, Brexit negotiations – not least when the EU opposes the UK's position – is now shaping British identities by reinforcing suspicions of the EU (the EU as the 'other') when the EU rejects British proposals or asserts itself against the UK. At the same time it is adding to anger amongst some Remain voters who feel cheated, adding to a sense of divisions within the UK. Finally, an uncertain identity and confused sense of role has weakened efforts by the UK government to decide where the UK is headed and what it wants in the world. This is most obvious in the UK-EU Brexit negotiations. Theresa May's attempt to secure an enlarged majority in the 2017 General Election was not, as she argued, to strengthen her position vis-à-vis the EU. It was to provide a mandate for her interpretation of what Brexit would entail (although she rarely wanted to discuss this in detail during the campaign). The uncertain outcome of the election means there is still no clear sense of what the British people voted for in the EU referendum, what they want to happen next and therefore what end the UK government should pursue in its negotiations with the EU and others.

Second, this leaves Britain with an unclear and uncertain outlook – what some might term a 'strategic culture' – towards the EU, Europe, and the world. As Wendt (1992: 398-399) warned: 'The absence or failure of roles makes defining situations and interests more difficult, and identity confusion may result.' Brexit has made it more difficult for actors in the UK to give, or socially construct, meaning for their interests, policies and material wealth. The meaning of Britain's trade and economic policies, military forces, diplomatic policies and resources, relations with the USA and other allies, have all been thrown into flux. In part, Brexit is explained by the meaning of these interests, alliances and wealth having been in flux for some time given Britain's relative decline since 1945 and the material and ideational implications of this. Their future will also be shaped by three debates and ideas that have long shaped Britain's strategic outlook. First, the idea held by many UK policy makers that their country is a pragmatic, realist state that has tried (and from a Eurosceptic view, failed) to lead the EU in a liberal, outward looking, Atlanticist, free-trade direction. Second, the idea that Britain is a place apart emotionally, culturally, politically and physically from the rest of Europe, with this being a strength to be cherished (survival in the Second World War) rather than given up or risked. Third, Britain's role as a security provider and offshore balancer, whose place between North America and the rest of Europe is central to the transatlantic relationship (i.e. ensuring a binding mutual commitment between the USA and Europe) and the future of the wider Western alliance.

Brexit has added to confusion about Britain's interpretation of its role and identity because it has caused confusion and doubts elsewhere in Europe about their interpretation of the UK's role. Brexit has confirmed the UK's status as an awkward

partner; even if that awkwardness was one behind which other EU Member States often hid their own doubts and awkwardness. Also, while Britain was seen as a two-faced European that did at least mean one face – often hidden from the British public – was seen by European elites as constructive. As Brexit negotiations have become tense that face – as seen from elsewhere – has increasingly been seen as turning away. In addition, as a power that despite being labelled in 2015 as the world's leading soft power (something that drew many Europeans to Britain), the country appears determined to neglect opportunities and squander friends and alliances through a degree of arrogance, nostalgia and an inflated opinion of itself (and to some extent with regard to the relations it imagines it has with the USA) in no small part because of its ongoing struggle to come to terms with its European identity.

Brexit Europe

Brexit has challenged some of the key ideas behind European integration, although it may well end up also bolstering them. By holding a referendum on leaving the EU, Britain broke something of a taboo in EU politics: the idea that a Member State could leave or at least give the idea serious consideration. The very idea of withdrawal was unsettling, representing a reversal and challenge to the idea of European integration as a process that moves forwards not backwards (Oliver, 2014). European integration has been defined by a progressive liberal internationalist [and in ES terms cosmopolitan solidarist] outlook, one which many of those who studied the EU might also have been minded to support. Indeed, it is worth recalling that one criticism of constructivist approaches is that they often entail a focus on ideals that are seen as good (Barkin, 2003: 335). That said, withdrawal is not strictly unprecedented with two overseas territories of member states having left: Greenland in 1985, and Algeria in 1962. The EU had also adopted a procedure for withdrawal as set down in Article 50 of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, although it is telling that the article was resisted when first proposed as part of the European Constitution. Opposition came from those who considered its inclusion an unwelcome acknowledgement that in considering the possibility of disintegration the Union was declaring that it was not destined to continually move forward.

Brexit has also raised questions about what is 'Europe'. As some British Eurosceptics argue, the UK has voted to leave the EU not Europe. David Cameron in his 2013 Bloomberg speech, in which he committed the Conservative Party to an in/out referendum, spoke extensively of Britain's history and place as a European country and not simply as an island that looks to the rest of the world (Sims, 2016). Whether this is an opinion held widely amongst the British people is another matter. And is Britain seen as a European state elsewhere in the EU and Europe? When he rejected Britain's first membership application to the then EEC, President De Gaulle did so because he did not feel Britain was sufficiently committed to the ideals of European integration. His words might have hidden French national interests in

keeping outside a state large enough to question and challenge French leadership of the then EEC, but his reasoning has with hindsight been seen as correct thanks to Britain's reluctant behaviour as a Member State. Today's EU is Europe's predominant organisation for economics, politics and non-traditional security matters (NATO continues to dominate traditional defence matters) and so increasingly the EU and Europe are taken to mean the same thing. Granted, parts of Europe have been outside the EU, but they have become either an increasingly small proportion of the continent or in the cases of Turkey, Russia, Iceland or Ukraine sit on the boundaries of what is and is not widely considered Europe. As an island Britain itself is easily portrayed as not being part of Europe. But the continued membership of the Irish Republic, and the efforts made to manage the Northern Ireland-Irish border issue, mean Europe does not and cannot start and end at Calais. Brexit poses something of a challenge to the idea of the EU as Europe, which has led to proposals such as that by Brugel (2016) for a 'Continental Partnership' to create new institutions that include the UK along with other non-EU European states, in part so as to continue Europe-wide cooperation and integration. Debates about the ideas that shape the architecture of European geopolitics are nothing new, with the post-Cold War era seeing a series of debates about the roles of NATO, the EU, the OSCE and other arrangements such as a new Concert of Europe involving only the largest powers (Croft, 2000).

Whatever new relationship emerges, and how this fits into a wider European political picture, will depend in part on how the Brexit negotiations unfold. For the EU a primary concern in the negotiations has not been a new relationship with the UK or how to build that new relationship into one that fits a wider arrangement covering the whole of Europe. Instead the EU has pursued a course of action in negotiations aimed at protecting its unity and the ideas that underpin the EU Single Market. This has not been easy or without risk, not least that it might lead to failure in the negotiations with the UK that lead to economic and financial damage to the remaining Union. Crucially, Brexit has added to debates about whether or not the EU is going to survive. Such debates are not new. For some time doubts about the EU's future have hung over it. Dinan, Nugent and Patterson's *The EU in Crisis* (2017) offers a reminder that the current crisis emerged in 2007 as a result of the financial crisis that stretched the Euro to breaking point. The crisis now encompasses Brexit, the strains facing Schengen, doubts about relations with Russia, tensions between North and South/East and West/periphery and core, questions about the EU's political economy (as part of wider problems in Western capitalism that are also to be seen in the USA), and ongoing doubts about the Union's legitimacy and lack of demos. Anyone seeking solace in the idea that the EU has survived and prospered from previous crises is, as Dinan makes clear, deluding themselves as to both the severity of the current crisis and buying into a myth that the EU has depended on crises to move forward. The danger of the Union imploding is significant.

Whether Brexit will bring down the EU has been the subject of some debate. Some British Eurosceptics, along with their colleagues elsewhere in the EU such as Marine Le Pen, have expressed hopes that Brexit will lead to the EU's unravelling, with the UK setting off some form of domino effect. This is one of the reasons why EU leaders, sensing such a danger, have made concerted efforts to ensure the EU remains united in Brexit negotiations. But are Eurosceptics hopes and EU fears warranted? What studies have there been into how this might happen, and is it the idea of disintegration that should be feared?

Constructivist approaches highlight several weaknesses in the literature on the EU's unravelling. First, such studies lack any detail about the mechanism by which this might happen. The 'domino theory' of international relations is an easy but lazy device, more often associated with the Vietnam War and the spread of Communism in South East Asia. What would be required for the dominos to fall in the EU? And second, what Europe would then emerge? Here Eurosceptics are largely silent beyond vague ideas of a Europe of sovereign nation states. Pro-Europeans might be more optimistic and argue that European disintegration might actually lead to – or clarify – a multi-speed Europe or a Europe of 'differentiated integration'.

As touched on above, Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) study into the mechanisms that drive forward European integration as a norm to be pursued rather than resisted or reversed offers one way in which we can examine the appeal of ideas behind European disintegration. For Finnemore and Sikkink, it is easy to argue that a functionalist 'spillover' is what has driven forward the norm of integration, but how does this happen? In a way, the EU itself is the product of a domino effect of integration, with the countries of Europe falling like dominos to the ideas of European integration. That still does little to explain what causes this: when does the idea – or norm – of European integration become so powerful that states fall into line and pursue it? And can this be applied in reverse to give a hint as to when things might move backwards in a domino effect that unravels the EU? As Webber (2014) and Hans Vollard (2014) have argued, we should be weary of merely putting integration theory into reverse as a way of trying to understand disintegration.

When might the norms of European integration shift to become ones of disintegration? As noted earlier, Finnemore and Sikkink point out that 'Norm shifts are to the ideational theorist what changes in the balance of power are to the realist' (1998: 894). We need to begin by noting the interlinked two-level game at play in norm diffusion: national and European. Neither European integration or disintegration can be understood without reference to the domestic arena of individual member states. Domestic norms play an important role early on in any process of rolling out a new norm, with international norms becoming more powerful later on. For Brexit – or the idea of leaving the EU - to spread would need 'norm-entrepreneurs' to push forward the idea in other member states. Connections between British Eurosceptics and those elsewhere are long established, although the extent to which such Eurosceptics actually believe in the idea of their state

withdrawal, as opposed to fundamental changes to the nature of the Union, is open to question given even Marine Le Pen softened her stance on French withdrawal as the possibility of actual governing grew closer. The idea of withdrawal would in many states also need to adapt to the structural constraints of membership of the Eurozone. The fact that Britain – a member that has a number of opt-outs and a questionable level of commitment to the Union – has found it difficult to negotiate Brexit, means it might offer little by way of a norm to be pursued by others. Do Britain's current problems therefore mean the damage has been limited? Not necessarily. The new architecture of a UK-EU relationship could institutionalise a multi-speed Europe or one that could manage European disintegration or differentiated disintegration, paving the way for the norm of integration to be challenged more widely at a later date.

When might the EU reach the 'tipping point' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 901) at which a norm of disintegration begins to rapidly spread? Finnemore and Sikkink propose two hypotheses. First, that it rarely occurs before one-third of the total states in the system adopt the norm. Second, that it depends on which states adopt it, especially whether they are 'critical states'. At some point the norm becomes contagious with international, transnational or European influencers becoming more important than domestic ones. This is essentially an active form of socialisation that encourages emulation, praise and ridicule/censure for deviating from the norm. The agents involved are not just states and their elites but civil society, businesses, media and international and regional organisations. We might consider it a process of 'peer pressure' where the motivation is a desire for legitimisation, conformity, esteem and belonging (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 903).

What prospect then of Brexit leading to such a tipping point that sees the EU move away from a norm of integration – or solidarity through the pursuit of 'ever closer union' – towards one of disintegration? As noted, Brexit has to be seen as part of a wider crisis facing the EU. Withdrawal from the EU and withdrawal from the Eurozone, Schengen or opting out of certain policy areas such as defence cooperation, might be connected by each of them disrupting integration. But for the entire project to unravel these withdrawals and opt-outs would need to coalesce around some ideas about what Europe's political, economic, social and security architecture should resemble in future. Such ideas seem far away given British and Eurosceptics elsewhere offer little by way of ideas, something that can only get worse on the UK side given British politics is consumed by managing the fallout for itself from Brexit. So far no other state has shown a willingness to follow the UK. The most critical states, as Webber (2014) argues, would be Germany and, in the broader sense of European order and sense of stability, the USA. As the EU's geographical heart, paymaster, and reluctant hegemon, Germany has long been central to the EU's success. As Webber points out, the EU has faced many crises, but never one 'made in Germany'. What that crisis might be he does not specify, but it would likely entail Germany giving up on the EU, or at least the ideas that have

shaped it so far such as equal treatment to all member states, free movement of goods, peoples, services and capital and a desire to use the institutions to pursue a more integrated Europe politically, economically and socially. With regard to the USA, it is the sense of peace and protection it has afforded Europe – first Western and then large areas of Eastern Europe – that has provided the necessary stability to integrate.

But this still leaves the question unanswered of what would follow if either Germany or the USA were to withdraw their support from the EU. A Europe of sovereign nation states has never existed in the way some Eurosceptics imagine it and to which they hope to see Europe return. Within living memory large areas of Europe have been under external rule (Eastern Europe), been imperial units which extended beyond Europe (Britain, France, Portugal), parts of other countries (the Baltic states, Irish Republic), divided (Germany), neutral (Austria, Finland), totalitarian (Eastern Europe, fascist states including Spain, Greece and Portugal), multinational conglomerations held together by external powers and orders (Yugoslavia), and all with varying levels of democratic credentials, resilience and wealth. As a result of participation in new institutions, social networks and discussion of ideas that have largely been framed around European integration, the states – peoples, decision makers, civil society and businesses – of Europe are no longer those of an earlier period (Wendt, 1992: 418). New ideas and identities have become embedded as a result of a continuous process of socialisation through integration. Reversing this is possible, but so far no alternative model or set of ideas to European politics has emerged to challenge or replace them.

Conclusion

As the largest issue in UK politics, Brexit also has a claim to being a defining issue for the EU. Not a day passes without some new report is published about some aspect of Brexit, gossip emerges about the negotiations or, a new argument erupts in public within the UK, between the UK and the EU, within the remaining EU, or between the rest of the world and both the UK and EU. As we noted, Brexit is not a single event or process but a series of time-limited and open-ended multi-level processes touching on and shaped by a wide range of interests, ideas, institutions, and individuals. A longer-term and more systemic view of developments is needed on all sides. We did so in this paper by applying the concepts and insights of two schools of thought in international relations: the English School and Constructivism. The aim of the paper has not been speculative, although some speculation is inevitable with a topic so much in flux as Brexit. Rather we asked: what can these two well established bodies of theory tell us, if anything, about the process of state separation from deep multilateral arrangements, and the likely international consequences of such separation?

Despite showing little interest in European integration, international political economy or the politics of individual states such as the UK, three areas of concern to the English School can help to better understand Brexit: the pluralist-solidarist debate; the relationship between primary institutions; and the role and status of great powers. Each of these shed light on the nature of the process – not least the political, diplomatic, social and intellectual basis of it - of Britain's place in the European and international order and what Brexit could mean for it. Brexit challenges the solidarist underpinning of the EU, revealing a failure amongst the British political elite especially to either apply a brake to the EU's increasing cosmopolitan solidarism or better manage the British peoples' place in that cosmopolitan solidarism. Britain's departure and assertion of its sovereignty has raised questions about the EU's solidarism in large part because of the EU's effect on the primary institutions of international society, most notably sovereignty and nationalism. Brexit entails some reversion to sovereignty and nationalism as guiding and legitimizing principles. How much Britain's assertion will matter depends on its status, which is socially conferred and does not depend exclusively on material attributes. While the UK is not a minor power, the narrative it has told itself about its status in the world, and others have developed of that status, have relied in part on Britain's part in the wider and much larger EU. Britain faces a significant challenge in sustaining its great power narrative.

Similar insights can be gained from taking a constructivist approach to Brexit. Critics of constructivism often point out that it offers little by way of a clear and testable theoretical approach, instead being an alternative to rationalism. This might appear to limit how it can be applied to Brexit. But that does not mean constructivist approaches cannot open up Brexit for critique in terms of exploring the ideas that have surrounded it. Nor does it mean that the mechanisms by which those ideas are spread cannot be studied or theorised. If, as under the English School, Britain's great power status is socially conferred on it, then social meaning – or 'social construct' as Dunne argues – should be the focus of our studies. As such the facts of Brexit, much like the facts of so much in international relations, reflect an intersubjective or social reality (Barkin, 2003: 326). As we saw, constructivist approaches open up several aspects of the UK and EU's responses to Brexit. They highlight how the norms and debates present at the domestic level can be more important determinants of state identities and interests than systemic factors. As such Brexit reflects how the EU's internal divisions often define themselves against other parts of the EU rather than against some external 'other' such as Russia or the USA. It also reflects the continued place of sovereignty as a constitutive principle in the society of states in Europe, and how Britain's understanding of sovereignty remains that of a great power as opposed to one that views sovereignty as dependent on recognition by others. We were also able to look at the role played by the EU's institutions in

shaping, through such processes as socialisation, the politics, ideas and expectations of European states and European politics as a whole. There seems only a remote possibility of Brexit unravelling the EU by shifting the norm of European integration towards some new set of ideas. Such a development would depend on whether enough states (about a third including key states such as Germany, according to Finnemore and Sikkink (1998)) – their elites, civil societies, business communities, media and so forth – are willing to adopt and pursue such a new norm. Brexit changes Britain's ability to shape such norms as the EU moves towards a federal EU, differentiated integration, a multi-speed Europe or differentiated disintegration. Whether other states are prepared to either view Britain as a great power or follow the Brexit example also reminds us of how important the external image of a state is in its ability to construct itself as a political actor in the world.