

The Myth of ‘the Myth of Irish neutrality’: Deconstructing Concepts of Irish Neutrality using International Relations Theories*

Karen M. Devine

Department of Political Science, Trinity College Dublin

ABSTRACT

A number of academics, journalists and political elites claim that Irish neutrality is a ‘myth’, and many also characterise public support for Irish neutrality as ‘confused’ and ‘nonrational’. This ‘unneutral’ discourse in the academic literature and mainstream Irish media is based on an academic thesis, that of an *Unneutral Ireland*. The *Unneutral* thesis constructs a particular concept of neutrality in order to draw its conclusion that Ireland is ‘unneutral’. Using a poststructuralist approach—a rarity in the discipline of International Relations (IR)—this paper deconstructs concepts of Irish neutrality using a framework of IR theories. The results show that the concept of neutrality put forward in the *Unneutral Ireland* thesis and the dominant discourses on Irish neutrality are based on a hegemonic IR theory, the theory of neorealism, rather than on seemingly ‘objective’ scientific research methods. The paper concludes that non-realist theories and approaches may provide a better understanding of Irish neutrality and of the dynamics of public support for Irish neutrality.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the on-going political struggle over the meaning and status of Irish neutrality that is articulated in the Irish media through newspaper articles and interviews, and in the academic literature in Political Science and International Relations (IR). There has been a noticeable theme in this literature and in the media over the years, in support of the claim that Irish neutrality has never existed—that Irish neutrality is a ‘myth’. This prominent discourse is based on an academic thesis that claims, on the basis of scientific, objective research, to have proven that Ireland is ‘unneutral’. Using the poststructuralist method of deconstruction, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that these ‘truths’ about Irish neutrality are not ‘objective’, scientific facts, as has been claimed. Rather, the ‘unneutral’ thesis is based on a number of ideological assumptions from the hegemonic IR theoretical worldview known as neorealism. Breaking this realist monopoly of ‘truth’ on the meaning and status of Irish neutrality has the effect of raising the alternative, subjugated theses supporting Irish neutrality onto a more legitimate plane. A theoretically effervescent debate on Irish neutrality also paves the way for a better understanding of public attitudes to Irish neutrality and provides space for the consideration of alternative formulations of Ireland’s neutrality policy.

Research guided by the theoretical approach known as ‘poststructuralism’ is rarely undertaken in political science or IR¹ and is normally met with hostility—as Der Derian puts it, ‘not so long ago mental flak jackets were *de rigueur* if one so much as uttered the “P-word” among IR scholars’.² So why should academics bother engaging with poststructuralist deconstruction and why should it be practised on concepts of Irish neutrality? Given most readers’ lack of familiarity with the approach, the current paper will briefly describe the premises of poststructuralism (with the issues of ontology and epistemology noted, but not heavily discussed) before outlining the nuts and bolts of the deconstruction process. Book-ending these explanations, the paper will outline the academic and political puzzle that provided the impetus and justification for the paper, and also will provide details of the qualitative and quantitative hegemony of the ‘unneutral’ discourse on Irish neutrality. The paper will then proceed to strategically summarise the IR theoretical framework of understanding, namely the assumptions of neorealism and social constructivism, and to implement the deconstruction by linking these IR theoretical assumptions to the truth claims made about Irish neutrality in the texts. Consequences for elite discourses in the academic literature and print media, research approaches employed in academic studies of Irish neutrality, the formulation of Irish foreign policy and the status of Irish neutrality and public opinion flowing from the deconstruction inform the conclusion.

THE DISCOURSE ON IRISH NEUTRALITY AND PUBLIC OPINION

The impetus to write this paper stemmed from a prior research question concerning the ‘rationality’ of public opinion on Irish neutrality. The definition of a ‘rational’ public means that members of the public choose a foreign policy suited to their needs and in accordance with their values.³ Research into public voting behaviour in Irish referendums on European Union treaties—Maastricht and Amsterdam in the 1990s, and the Nice Treaty in June 2001 and October 2002—has shown that a proportion of Irish citizens have repeatedly voted to reject the treaties due to a perception that they represented threats to Irish neutrality.⁴ Opinion polls conducted in the 1980s and 1990s have shown that nearly two-thirds of the Irish population want to retain Irish neutrality.⁵ According to the White Paper on foreign policy, ‘the majority of the Irish people have always cherished Ireland’s military neutrality and recognise the positive values that inspire it’.⁶ And so it appears that a significant proportion of the Irish population supports Irish neutrality, and elites and academics seem prepared to acknowledge this phenomenon, despite a seeming lack of understanding of the dynamics of public support for Irish neutrality.⁷

¹ Molly Cochran, *Normative theory in international relations* (Cambridge, 1999), 121–22.

² James Der Derian, ‘Post-Theory: the eternal return of ethics in international relations’, in Michael W. Doyle and G. John Ikenberry (eds), *New thinking in international relations theory* (Boulder, 1997), 54–76: 57. (Hereafter cited as ‘Post-Theory’.)

³ Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The rational public* (Chicago, 1992), 35.

⁴ Richard Sinnott, *Attitudes and behaviour of the Irish electorate in the referendum on the Treaty of Nice* (Dublin, 2001).

⁵ Michael Marsh, *Irish public opinion on neutrality and the European Union* (Dublin, 1992), 6. (Hereafter cited as *Irish public opinion*.)

⁶ Government of Ireland, *White Paper on foreign policy* (Dublin, 1996), 118.

⁷ No survey designed to understand public attitudes to Irish neutrality has ever been conducted. More specifically, in the context of voters rejecting EU treaties due to perceived threats to neutrality, ‘there have been no surveys which have systematically explored the various options for a new security and defence policy, or the ways in which neutrality might be consistent with such options’, see Marsh, *Irish public opinion*, 25.

In terms of formulating a research question to evaluate the ‘rationality’ of the dynamics of public opinion on Irish neutrality, the combination of these two hypotheses—(a) that Irish neutrality is a myth and (b) that a significant proportion of the voting public supports Irish neutrality—raises the spectre of attempting to justify research into the phenomenon of strong public commitment to a concept that doesn’t exist. This has several implications, including (1) public opinion is ‘nonrational’ according to academic standards, or (2) the academic discourse claiming that Ireland’s neutrality is a myth does not reflect ‘rational’ public opinion. Certainly, most of the academic and elite comments on public support for Irish neutrality appear to favour the first implication, variously describing it as ‘emotional’,⁸ ‘sentimental’,⁹ ‘contradictory’¹⁰—effectively nonrational.¹¹ However, consideration of the second implication raises the question of whether adherence to the ‘unneutral’ discourse prompts a scathing view of public opinion on Irish neutrality—some evidence points to this possibility, e.g. one of the elites promoting the ‘unneutral’ thesis also characterises public opinion supporting Irish neutrality as ‘confused’.¹² Alternatively, the two implications could be reconciled through a supposition that each is based on a different IR theoretical worldview and a correspondingly different concept of neutrality. It was the desire to test this supposition that led to the task of deconstructing the *Unneutral* thesis that claims Irish neutrality is a ‘myth’.

THE PREMISES AND METHODS OF POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

Poststructuralism

Despite noting the disposition of mainstream IR to dismiss poststructuralism by polemic, or to ignore it through arrogance, Der Derian suggests that even the ‘epistemologically challenged’ might recognise the recent and rapid changes in ‘international, intertextual, interhuman relations’ in the world producing new discourses and ‘realities’ that demand poststructuralist readings.¹³ Much of the aforementioned hostility towards poststructuralism stems from the fact that poststructuralist research entails operating under different ontological and epistemological assumptions to the dominant approach in IR of philosophical realism.¹⁴ However, there are indications that poststructuralism will become

⁸ Patrick Keatinge, ‘Odd man out? Irish neutrality and European security’, *International Affairs* 48 (1972), 438–49: 439, 440. See also Patrick Keatinge, *A place among the nations: issues of Irish foreign policy* (Dublin, 1978), 73, and his *The formulation of Irish foreign policy* (Dublin, 1973), 174.

⁹ Gerry McMahon ‘Given her historical reticence will Ireland ever play a full part in European security?’, British–Irish security lecture series (Aberdeen, 1999).

¹⁰ Richard Sinnott, ‘Poll shows a symbolic support for neutrality’, *Irish Times*, 5 October 1996.

¹¹ Philip Everts, ‘Public opinion after the Cold War: a paradigm shift’, in Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Pierangelo Isernia (eds), *Decisionmaking in a glass house: mass media, public opinion and American and European foreign policy in the 21st century* (New York, 2000), 177–94: 178–9.

¹² Garret FitzGerald, ‘Neutrality concept retains potency yet is ambiguous’, *Irish Times*, 19 October.

¹³ Der Derian, ‘Post-Theory’, 55–6.

¹⁴ Ontology is the philosophical theory of being or existence. Ontological positions can be identified in relation to a central question: ‘does the world exist independently of agents’ perception or experience of it (objectively), or does it only exist in virtue of these factors (subjectively)?’ See Joseph Jupille, ‘Knowing Europe: metatheory and methodology in European Union studies’, in Michelle Cini and Angela Bourne (eds), *Palgrave advances in European Union studies* (New York, 2005), 209–32: 210. Epistemology is the philosophical theory of knowing or knowledge (Jupille, ‘Knowing Europe’, 211), often defined as ‘the study of how we claim to know something’. See Steve Smith, ‘Reflectivist and

more acceptable in the future as the need to address ontological and epistemological issues in academic research becomes more widely understood, with a parallel move away from positivism towards recognising the need to focus on metatheory in discourses. As Cochran argues,

all theory in International Relations (IR) is normative theory. By this I mean that even those engaged in positivist approaches, who aim to study world politics in a manner that resembles as closely as possible the methods of natural science, cannot avoid normative assumptions in the selection of what data is important, in interpreting that data, and in articulating why such research is significant. There was a time when such a statement would have been highly controversial. For some approaches within IR it is still controversial today. However, powerful criticisms of the positivist bias towards explanation, objectivity and the fact/value separation, have been unleashed in IR that take the radical edge off of this opening statement.¹⁵

Put simply, poststructuralists and positivists have different conceptions of knowledge, ask different research questions and differ over what should be studied and how it should be studied. The former believe that the positivist notion of objectivity that depends on an assumption that there is a world out there—existing independently of theory—to be discovered and accessed is not plausible. Instead, poststructuralists argue that our theories define what we see as the external world; therefore each theory will define what counts as the facts,¹⁶ and each worldview will present some forms of action as ‘natural’, and others as unthinkable.¹⁷ The poststructuralist premise resonates with this paper’s focus on the political struggle over the concept of Irish neutrality and the hypothesis that assumptions within IR theory drive the elite claims made about the ‘reality’ of Irish neutrality. The poststructuralist aim is to investigate ‘the interrelationship of power and representational practices that elevate one truth over another, that legitimate and subject one identity against another, that make, in short, one discourse matter more than the next’.¹⁸ This aim encourages consideration of a link between the theoretical dominance of neorealism (and its positivist, essentialist ontology and foundational epistemology)¹⁹ in the discipline of IR, and the dominance of the neorealist-inspired *Unneutral Ireland* thesis over the social constructivist thesis supporting the practice of Irish neutrality. These poststructuralist premises and aims are realised through the method of deconstruction.

Deconstruction

For many deconstructionists, deconstruction is not a ‘method’ because ‘deconstruction has to do with what cannot be formalized or anticipated’.²⁰ Indeed, ‘the question “what is deconstruction?” is itself evidence of a serious naivety, for deconstruction *is*, above all perhaps, a questioning of the “*is*”, a concern with what remains to be thought, with what

constructivist approaches to international theory’, in John Baylis and Steve Smith (eds), *The globalisation of world politics* (Oxford, 2001), 224–49: 227.

¹⁵ Der Derian, ‘Post-Theory’, 55–6.

¹⁶ Smith, ‘Reflectivist and constructivist approaches’, 227.

¹⁷ Louise Phillips and Marianne W. Jorgensen, *Discourse analysis as theory and method* (London, 2002), 6.

¹⁸ Der Derian, ‘Post-Theory’, 59.

¹⁹ Mark Neufeld, ‘Interpretation and the “Science” of international relations’, *Millennium* 17 (3) (1988), 39–61: 51. See also Smith, ‘Reflectivist and constructivist approaches’, 225.

²⁰ Nicholas Royle, ‘What is Deconstruction?’, in Nicholas Royle (ed.), *Deconstructions: a user’s guide* (Basingstoke, 2000), 1–13: 6.

cannot be thought within the present'.²¹ That said, one of the key ideas associated with deconstruction is a strategy concerned with conceptual oppositions, e.g. myth/reality, male/female, same/other, rational/nonrational, and more particularly with the acknowledgement that these oppositions always entail a 'violent hierarchy': the first term is, in a specific context that must itself be demonstrated, privileged over its supposed opposite;²² 'the second term in each pair is considered the negative, corrupt, undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it'.²³ The first move in deconstructing the opposition is to overthrow the hierarchy. In the next phase, this reversal must be displaced, with the winning term put 'under erasure': 'Derrida's method consists of showing how the privileged term is held in place by the force of a dominant metaphor and not, as it might seem, by any conclusive logic'.²⁴

How does the deconstruction in this paper proceed? It starts with a conceptual binary: comprised of the dominant *Unneutral Ireland* thesis that claims that Irish neutrality is a 'myth' and the subjugated *Irish neutrality* thesis that embodies the opposing claim that Irish neutrality exists.²⁵ The 'violent hierarchy' is made explicit in the texts under deconstruction: the *Unneutral* thesis constructs a 'genuine', 'established' concept of neutrality (the key to *Unneutral Ireland's* assertions about the mythical status of Irish neutrality) that is superior to *Irish neutrality's* concept of 'active' neutrality—'the notion of "active neutrality" involves a contradiction in terms and a disregard for the established meaning of the concept'.²⁶ This micro-level, qualitative hierarchy in the texts is mirrored at the macro-level of the international relations discipline because within that discipline, the neorealist paradigm is qualitatively and quantitatively privileged over nonrealist approaches.²⁷ Such overwhelming bias in the IR discipline may partly explain why the *Unneutral* thesis has escaped criticism and is readily cited, whilst the *Irish neutrality* thesis is largely ignored.

Perspectivism

This paper replaces Derrida's 'dominant metaphor' as the force behind the privileged term in the conceptual binary with the force of a 'dominant IR theoretical worldview'—neo-realism. This perspectivist approach²⁸ should not prove to be too controversial because it resonates with premises employed in political philosophy, e.g. Hyland argues, 'questions can be raised about the acceptability of a norm or principle by demonstrating that on analysis the principle is only meaningful against a background of theoretical assumptions that are themselves questionable and open to debate'.²⁹ The corollary of this perspectivist deconstruction is that neither discourse can claim the sole, logical 'truth' about Irish neutrality—in the sense that each thesis on Irish neutrality is theory-dependent, each is equally 'true' and equally contingent. Pre-empting accusations of relativism, this paper takes the position (discussed later) that the social constructivist account of Irish neutrality is more relevant and appropriate for the purposes of understanding the dynamics of public opinion on Irish neutrality compared to the neo-realist 'unneutral' discourse.

THE DOMINANCE OF THE *UNNEUTRAL* DISCOURSE

Having cited the qualitative hierarchy of the *Unneutral* thesis's concept of neutrality, attention now turns to the quantitative hegemony of the 'unneutral' discourse in the academic literature and print media. The following titles and sub-titles of academic journal and newspaper articles (emphasis added) illustrate the elite-led discourse that Ireland's neutrality is not 'real', but a 'myth':

²¹ Royle, 'What is Deconstruction?', 7.

‘Neutrality and the Irish Republic: *myth* or *reality*?’—Trevor C. Salmon, *The Round Table* 290 (1984), 205–15.

‘A *myth* of “traditional neutrality” developed from the Irish decision to be a non-belligerent in the Second World War’—Garret FitzGerald, *Irish Times*, 21 October 1997.

‘Casting off the *imaginary* cloak of neutrality’—Stephen Collins, *Sunday Tribune*, 23 March 2003.

‘Our *sham* neutrality has finally been exposed’—Stephen Collins, *Sunday Tribune*, 30 March 2003.

‘Wartime neutrality theoretical rather than *real*’—Garret FitzGerald, *Irish Times*, 29 January 2005.

The *Unneutral Ireland* thesis set out to test ‘whether the Irish *interpretation* and *understanding* of these concepts [neutrality/nonalignment] are *legitimate*’³⁰ and concluded that ‘Ireland certainly is, and has been “*unneutral*”’.³¹ The thesis has been cited throughout several decades of academic literature that supports both the analytical approach—the construction of a concept of ‘classic(al)’ neutrality to serve as the yardstick to evaluate Irish neutrality³²—and the conclusion that Irish neutrality is a myth. For example, in the 1995 edition of this journal, referring to *Unneutral Ireland*, MacGinty claims ‘Trevor Salmon has convincingly outlined how, since independence, Ireland has failed to fulfil the criterion for a credible neutrality policy’.³³ Kearsley quotes the *Unneutral* thesis arguing, “‘the Irish’...deviate from the traditional characteristics of neutrality so much so that...even the appellations “messy”, “qualified”, and “limited” neutrality are inappropriate’.³⁴

In an article entitled ‘The origins, development and present status of Irish “neutrality”’, with a noteworthy use of inverted commas around the word ‘neutrality’, FitzGerald refers to the ‘seminal work *Unneutral Ireland*’³⁵ and uses key arguments underpinning the *Unneutral* thesis to contend that ‘it is at least questionable whether Ireland can properly be described as having been “neutral”, because the scale of assistance given secretly to Britain was scarcely compatible with the concept of neutrality under International Law’.³⁶ Having demonstrated direct support for the methodology and analytical approach underpinning the ‘unneutral’ thesis, FitzGerald concludes,

it will be *evident* from what I have said that Irish neutrality does not conform to the *classic* definitions of neutrality. Nor is the Irish situation similar to that of other European neutral states such as Switzerland, Austria and Sweden, which, in their different ways, have had much more *clear-cut* concepts of neutrality than Ireland has demonstrated since the state was founded.³⁷

In the most recent academic work referencing *Unneutral Ireland*, Doherty opines, ‘during World War Two Ireland’s neutrality was extremely benevolent towards the allies to the extent that it is doubtful whether Ireland should be described as neutral or simply non-belligerent’.³⁸ Thus, there is considerable support for the *Unneutral* thesis in the academic literature and the print media—even though this appears to go against the grain of public opinion on neutrality—that constitutes a relative but significant hegemony over the *Irish neutrality* thesis. Interestingly, a neo-realist bias, similarly unreflective of public opinion, is said to be present in the mainstream media discourses on neutrality in other neutral states, e.g. Ståhlberg notes that in Finland ‘the independent press plays a restrictive role [in terms of representing public opinion], because its argumentation is related to the “realist” position with regard to neutrality’.³⁹

NEOREALISM AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM: SOME PARADIGM FEATURES

Acknowledging the vigorous debate over the definition and content of the distinct IR theoretical traditions,⁴⁰ the following synopsis of key features of neo-realism and social constructivism serves as an indicative checklist to help identify the assumptions distinguishing the competing theses on Irish neutrality. Certain propositions in a paradigm are more important than others, either because the adherents to the paradigm claim that these propositions have greater theoretical explanatory power or because they are what distinguish the paradigm from rival paradigms.⁴¹ Neo-realism and social constructivism are conceived of as existing in relation to each other,⁴² and some would argue in binary opposition to each other.⁴³ These academic dynamics feature in the texts under deconstruction in the current paper and guide the discussion of the characteristics in each of the following summaries.

Realism and neo-realism

In his typology, Donnelly delineates structural realists who emphasise international anarchy,⁴⁴ from ‘classical’ or biological realists who emphasise human nature and state motivation.⁴⁵ Structural realists are called ‘neo-realists’ in an effort to emphasise their ‘newness’ and the differences from earlier realists arising from their strong structuralism. Whilst neo-realists are quick to point out that their structural theory of international politics does not concern foreign policy—‘particular, unit-based, internal explanations or forces’⁴⁶—the epistemological, ontological and substantive assumptions of neo-realism evidently inform academic analyses of foreign policy, including those on Irish neutrality. This important connection between theoretical accounts of international politics at one level and foreign policy analysis at another is reflected in one of the central tenets of critical international relations theory cited by Neufeld, in that ‘an interpretive analysis of regulative international institutions cannot be conducted independently of an interpretive analysis of the global order itself, and the latter cannot be effectuated successfully without attention being paid to the ideological component of the reproduction of that order.’⁴⁷

Although there are a number of substantive differences between neo-realism and realism, the two paradigms are collapsed into one ‘(neo)realism’ for the purposes of the deconstruction in the current paper. This is because both are relevant to understanding the most significant claims made in relation to Irish neutrality in the *Unneutral Ireland* thesis and they also share the same ontological and epistemological premises. More specifically, all realisms are *positivist*—‘neorealism is by, of and for positivists’;⁴⁸ and ‘rational choice’ in inspiration⁴⁹—‘realist and neorealist theories are avowedly rationalistic, accepting...a “substantive” conception of rationality’.⁵⁰ Realist and neo-realist writing is *explanatory*:⁵¹ in particular, neo-realists wish to be seen as *scientific*, which is why they look to micro-economic rational choice analysis for methodological guidance, whereas the realists are more concerned with policy prescription.⁵² Both are state-centric, perceiving states as unitary actors,⁵³ and both focus on the concepts of power and structure in order to explain the behaviour of states.

CONCEPTS OF POWER, STRUCTURE AND THE ‘BALANCE OF POWER’

Turning to the more substantive features of realism and neo-realism, each is centrally concerned with power conceived in terms of material factors and military hardware, the

combined capability of a state that can be counted and measured. It is the idea that international politics can be thought of as a system with a precisely defined structure that signals neo-realism's fundamental departure from traditional realism.⁵⁴ Neo-realism's use of the concept of power as a defining characteristic of this structure means that the distribution of power across states and changes in that distribution help to define structures and changes in states.⁵⁵ In this respect, 'great powers' are marked off from other states by the combined capabilities (or power) they have.⁵⁶ For neo-realists, then, the principal determinant of state behaviour is the underlying distribution of material capabilities across states in the international system, a determinant that gives states their animating survival motive, which in turn drives balance-of-power competition.⁵⁷ These concepts of 'materialist/militarist power' and 'balance of power' drive mainstream analyses of neutrality in IR, and both feature in the analysis of Irish neutrality in the *Unneutral* thesis.

A key criticism of the neorealist focus on structure is that it ignores the role of human will and the notion of agency (one of the key considerations of social constructivism) in international politics. As Neufeld surmises, 'in short, positivist-inspired mainstream IR theory can be seen as a major social force contributing to the maintenance of the "ideologically frozen relations of dependence", an effect it accomplishes through the "reification" of the global order, i.e. by presenting that order as a "thing" standing apart from and independently of human will or action'.⁵⁸

THE AGENT-STRUCTURE DEBATE AND ESCHEWAL OF PUBLIC OPINION

Human agency and the possibility of change in international relations is the first element of the so-called 'agent-structure' debate in IR. Due to the dominance of neorealism in the discipline, 'currently IR theory provides much more insight into structure than agency'.⁵⁹ This focus on structure over agency effectively ignores the interrelationship between the two, and perceives developments that take place in domestic civil society, or at the individual level, as having little or no meaning at the international level.⁶⁰ Neorealist structuralism presents hierarchic domestic and anarchic international politics as qualitatively different realms that must be studied with logically incompatible theoretical frameworks.⁶¹ Thus, neorealist accounts of world politics emphasising 'structure' over 'agency' tend to draw deep distinctions between 'international' and 'domestic' politics and, crucially, are also more likely to ignore the role of public opinion in foreign policy.

Realists, including Morgenthau, the founding father of realism, sought to erase the concept of the public from foreign policy analyses in order to construct 'a theory of foreign policy which aims at rationality'.⁶² Whilst Waltz appears to chastise Morgenthau for confusing the problem of explaining foreign policy with the problem of developing a theory of international politics,⁶³ regardless of whether the ambition is to explain 'foreign policy' or 'international politics', the failure of realists and neorealists to consider the public as a variable in either phenomenon is problematic and controversial. Arguably these realist and neo-realist themes embedded in mainstream analyses of foreign policy in IR have contributed to the failure of the *Unneutral Ireland* thesis to consider public opinion in the conception and analysis of Irish neutrality.

As will be discussed later, within the discipline of IR, critical theorists and social constructivists are counteracting the (neo)realist desire to extract or ignore the human variable by calling for a more human-centered concept of security; however, there are several other political theories and normative arguments justifying consideration of human agency and public opinion in foreign policy analysis, for example, Marxist theory or participatory democratic theory.⁶⁴ In addition, Brown points out that theorists of decision-

making have undermined the idea that foreign policy is radically different from domestic politics and the neorealist emphasis on the irrelevance of domestic factors is undermined somewhat by the phenomenon of the ‘democratic peace’.⁶⁵ The lesser emphasis of ‘critical’ social constructivists on the international–domestic divide and their consideration of human agency in security and international politics may offer a better explanation of foreign policy, and in particular, the phenomenon of popular adherence to neutrality in the face of European elite hostility.⁶⁶ Thus, *Irish neutrality*’s consideration of human agency and public opinion as key constituents of the concept of Irish neutrality may signify a fundamental theoretical advantage over the (neo)realist *Unneutral* thesis in attempts to understand the dynamics of public opinion on Irish neutrality.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM(S)

Critical theory and poststructuralism arose in reaction to the intellectual hegemony of neorealism,⁶⁷ mainly because the materialism and rationalism of the prevailing theories left little room for the social dimensions of international life—‘thanks to constructivists, the social, historical and normative have returned to the centre stage of debate’.⁶⁸ As mentioned earlier, McSweeney posits social constructivism in binary opposition to realism:

this perspective can be illustrated by particular studies relevant to international security, which employ *a common rejection of key tenants of realism*, a subscription to a broadly sociological approach, and a common emphasis on the reflexive, cognitive element in the determination and explanation of actors’ behaviour.⁶⁹

Although this binary opposition helps strategically in terms of identifying assumptions in the two theses on Irish neutrality, it is important to note that there are significantly different variants of ‘social constructivism’.⁷⁰

Wendtian social constructivism

Some social constructivist approaches, like that of Alex Wendt, affirm realist principles of method and support a structural, state-centric perspective, simply conceptualising structure as a *social* rather than a *material* phenomenon.⁷¹ While neo-realists accept the ‘anarchy problematic’, Wendtian social constructivism sets itself the seemingly critical task of elucidating ways in which the anarchy problematic serves particular kinds of interests, and closes down particular sorts of arguments.⁷² By purporting to study the sociology of structure and anarchy, however, Wendtian social constructivists are, in effect, maintaining the hegemony of these core neorealist concepts as determinants of international politics and foreign policy, and by corollary, the separation of the domestic from the international realm, including the dismissal of the former.⁷³

Identity is central to Wendtian constructivism because the type of anarchy in the system depends not only on the concept of security actors have, but also on how they construe their identity in relation to others.⁷⁴ Identity is the link between environmental structures and interests.⁷⁵ Although identity is at the core of Wendtian social constructivism, it is conceived of only at the level of the state with the result that the domestic process of identity formation is ignored and change in identity is theorised to occur exogenously.⁷⁶ So Wendtian constructivism appears to simply add values, identities and interests as elements of the

structure of international politics— it does not repudiate the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the (neo)realist paradigm. These shortcomings ‘lead us to reach particular conclusions whilst barring us from considering alternative possibilities. Thus, the starting point of Wendt’s constructivism already encompasses within it the scope of possible outcomes of the analysis’.⁷⁷ For example, social constructivists’ (and realists’) preoccupation with the state prevents them from seeing a security role for the sub-state human collectivities at the domestic level.⁷⁸

Finally, in claiming to ‘build a bridge’ between the rationalists/realists and the poststructuralists/reflectivists in IR theory,⁷⁹ and ‘seizing the middle ground’ in international relations,⁸⁰ Wendtian social constructivism proceeds to marginalise other critical approaches. Persram, in particular, objects to this

‘strategic use of social constructivism’, which is part and parcel of the acceptance of constructivism. Representing it as the most significant ‘radical’ approach makes an engagement with (other) critical approaches seem superfluous and thus effectively marginalizes them. This is confirmed by portrayals of the theoretical landscape which sees Realism at one end of the spectrum and constructivism at the other, leaving no room for (other) critical thinking. Either it will be subsumed under the constructivist label or it will be entirely dismissed...Constructivism is significant not only because it is considered central but also because of the possibility of deploying it strategically to exclude more radical perspectives from consideration.⁸¹

A truly radical shake up of the dominant discourses in IR (and those on Irish neutrality) requires a vigorously non-realist social constructivist perspective embodying a more critical, postmodern, epistemological approach. Such an approach must move away from those who maintain that truth claims can be decided by intersubjective discourses, and towards those who do not share that view (many poststructuralists).⁸²

Critical, reflexive social constructivism

Reflexivity is a key concept stratifying Wendtian constructivism and the more critical social constructivists. As Phillips explains:

many social constructionists, including discursive psychologists, view their own studies as discursive constructions that do not provide the only possible representation of the world but, rather, just one version which is part of the discursive struggle within the research field in question. Scientific knowledge is seen as productive. As with all other discourses, scientific discourse produces knowledge, social relations and identities. This understanding of knowledge production stands in contrast to the objectivist view of science to be found in positivism, whereby knowledge is seen as a reflection of reality. As a result of their distinctive understanding of knowledge, social constructionists often emphasise reflexivity—that is, they attempt to apply their theories to their own research practice.⁸³

Reflexivity co-exists with the critical social constructivists’ emphasis on agency in the agent–structure debate in IR. Substantively, the emphasis on agency implies the freedom of an agent to choose to act in a manner contrary to that determined by Waltz’s structural model of politics. A theoretical emphasis on agency informs the reflexive sociology of international politics articulated by McSweeney, which sees the social order as a fluid, unstable reality constituted by humans relating through the medium of habits. Reflexive social constructivists

argue that such a world is held together and made coherent by concepts likewise fluid, unstable and embedded in human practices, in sharp contrast to the understanding of social concepts in the objectivist tradition of political science.⁸⁴ Finally, a reflexive theory of the social order supports the moral and emancipatory impulse of a critical theory of international politics, which aims to expose the contingency of all social arrangements and the human choice and interests that gave rise to them.⁸⁵ Indeed, what justifies the ‘critical’ label of the new school of ‘critical security studies’ that has recently emerged in opposition to the realist school of ‘security studies’ is a concern with human emancipation: ‘critical theorists have attempted to re-establish a privileged position for the human subject in the face of the dehumanisation implicit in structuralism’.⁸⁶

CONCEPTS OF SECURITY

Concepts of security provide a way of linking together many areas of theory and analysis within IR⁸⁷ and they also serve to illustrate the differences between competing paradigms of neorealism and social constructivism and competing concepts of Irish neutrality. Deepening our understandings of security involves ‘investigating the implications and possibilities that result from seeing security as a concept that derives from different understandings of what politics is and can be all about, and specifically, politics on a global scale’.⁸⁸ Traditionally states are the primary referent object in the security debate, not individual human beings.⁸⁹ By excluding people from the discussion of state security (and neutrality) we simplify the model, and escape the task of investigating security in all its complex, value-laden respects as a concept that has meaning only in relation to people and their needs.⁹⁰ McSweeney articulates the call to adopt a deeper, human-centred idea of security in place of the state focus, and a broader concept instead of a narrow, militaristic one.⁹¹ Similarly, Ayoob argues for a concept of security that ‘must go beyond the traditional realist definition of security and overcome its external orientation and military bias’,⁹² ‘to include domestic and non-military dimensions’.⁹³ Because ‘different worldviews and discourses about politics deliver different views and discourses about security’,⁹⁴ and different concepts of security in turn produce different concepts of neutrality, the critical social constructivist would construct a more human-centred concept of neutrality than a Wendtian social constructivist and would prioritise these dimensions in an analysis of Irish neutrality.

In conclusion, the purpose of summarising the key paradigm features of neorealism and social constructivism is so that we can imagine what a neo-realist analysis of Irish neutrality would focus on and would prioritise as key variables compared to a critical social constructivist analysis. In summary, a neo-realist approach would conceive of power in terms of military capabilities, would empirically measure these factors and would designate the appropriate role and foreign-policy options of the state. From these assumptions, the neo-realist would then proceed to analyse the state’s foreign policy. More specifically, a neo-realist analysis of neutrality would view the balance-of-power assumption as a critical variable and would ignore the role of sub-state actors and public opinion. To be seen as scientific, a neo-realist would construct an essentialist, legalistic concept of neutrality using positivist methods, gathering empirical evidence designed to support claims of objectivity, and would write with an explanatory tone.

Social constructivists would consider the role of identity, and its malleability as a social form, as significant for IR theory and substantive international relations.⁹⁵ A social constructivist approach would emphasise agency, understand structure in cognitive rather than exclusively material terms, consider identity and interests as important variables and

view the international order as a construction of actors. A more critical social constructivist would offer a reflexive, qualified-foundational analysis of Irish neutrality, incorporate the role of public and sub-state actors into the concept of Irish neutrality and focus on normative political issues in the debate, given the emancipatory goal of critical social constructivist writing.

Table 1 summarises the binary positions occupied by the *Unneutral* thesis and the *Irish neutrality* thesis in relation to meta-issues of ontology, epistemology, methodology and approach, as well as the specific variables related to the IR theoretical assumptions that direct the analysis and conclusions of each thesis.

THE DECONSTRUCTION

Drawing attention to the IR theoretical assumptions where appropriate, this paper will highlight (1) the differences in approaches employed in each of the respective *Unneutral Ireland* and *Irish Neutrality* discourses, i.e. essentialist v anti-essentialist; foundational v ‘qualified foundational’; positivist v reflexivist; objective v normative; and explanatory v emancipatory. These approaches in turn give rise to

Table 1: Deconstruction summary—Thesis, paradigm, approach and variables

<i>Text:</i>	<i>Unneutral Ireland</i>	<i>Ireland and the threat of nuclear war</i>
Author	Trevor C. Salmon	Bill McSweeney
Thesis	Irish neutrality is a ‘myth’	Irish neutrality exists
IR theory paradigm	Neo-realism	Social constructivism
Ontology	Essentialist	Anti-essentialist
Epistemology	Foundational	‘Qualified’ foundational
Methodology/Approach	Positivist/objective/explanatory	Reflexivist/normative/emancipatory
‘Actors’ emphasised	States and decision-makers	State and non-state actors, including publics, pressure groups, NGOs
‘Variables’ emphasised	Material factors and military capabilities, balance of power, protective umbrella, sovereignty, international law	Identities, elite discourses, interests, perceptions, norms
Examples of supportive academic literature	FitzGerald, 1998; Kearsley, 1998; Raymond, 1984; MacGinty, 1995; Doherty, 2002.	
Hierarchical position	Hegemonic/mainstream	Subjugated/alternative
Academic school	Security studies	Critical security studies

(2) the differences in the nature of the concepts of neutrality presented, i.e. a 'true', measurable fact v a possible, flexible process; external v internal dynamics; wartime v peacetime concepts; passive v active concepts. They also give rise to (3) the different levels of importance attached to the variables common to each analysis, i.e. identity and discourses (the latter will not be discussed in this paper due to word-count restraints). The IR paradigm also influences (4) the level of salience attached to variables common to each neutrality concept, i.e. defence capabilities, sovereignty and law. Finally, the paradigm has an effect on (5) the selection of variables that have a significant role in drawing conclusions on the existence and credibility of Irish neutrality that are exclusive to each analysis, i.e. the neo-realist factors of balance-of-power, protective umbrella and the primacy of military power v the social constructivist factors of identity, the role of sub-state agents and public support.

Essentialist versus anti-essentialist

Essentialism 'is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the "whatness" of a given entity'.⁹⁶ In cognitive psychology, essentialism refers to people's everyday tendency to assume, often unconsciously, that objects in nature have hidden essential properties that determine what kind of objects they are. In political science, essentialism encapsulates the idea that essential or natural givens precede the processes of social determination⁹⁷ and in this respect, essentialism relates to the ontological position that the world exists independently of perception. In a classic illustration of an essentialist approach, the *Unneutral* thesis argues, 'it is worthwhile to pursue the *search for the essence of non-alignment*, since, if a concept is to be used, it should have a clearly understood content'.⁹⁸ The *Unneutral* thesis contrives an essentialist concept of neutrality using positivist methods. It states:

what had emerged as the essence of neutrality was abstention, the inviolability of neutral territory, and impartiality. Each of these aspects had associated with it a number of rights and duties⁹⁹...including impartiality, the recognition of neutral status by belligerents, the disavowal of external help, the freedom of decision and action in the political economic and military spheres...¹⁰⁰

These fixed, 'essential' components of the *Unneutral* thesis's concept of neutrality contrast with the fluid concept of 'active' neutrality that 'relates to a wide range of activities and skills'¹⁰¹ described in the *Irish neutrality* thesis. The ontological character of the latter concept means neutrality

is not a fact, but an accomplishment. That is to say, it is more like child-rearing than childbirth, like trade rather than a trade agreement. This may seem obvious to some, but the static, objective idea of neutrality is very pervasive.¹⁰²

Foundational versus 'qualified' foundational

A foundationalist position is one that thinks that all truth claims about some feature of the world can be judged true or false,¹⁰³ a position that is intimately linked with the essentialist ontology described above. Der Derian refers to the continuing domination of a philosophical realism in IR—from its logical positivist to rational choice forms—which holds that the purest, most *parsimonious* statement most accurately, usefully, *authentically* expresses a thought or reflects an event. At the level of common sense, they suggest a natural *preference for conceptual rigor* and clarity.¹⁰⁴

Such premises underpin the *Unneutral* claims in relation to Irish neutrality that are expressed in a strong foundationalist tone:

‘the concept of Irish neutrality’ is not saved ‘since (*as has been clearly established and demonstrated*) genuine neutrality is not to be equated with mere non-belligerency, or non-alliance membership... moreover, even if the concept of ‘military neutrality’ were compatible with *neutrality as properly understood (which it is not)*, the equation of ‘military neutrality’ with neutrality *per se* is singularly inappropriate in the Irish case’.¹⁰⁵

A ‘qualified’ foundationalism described by McSweeney represents ‘the implicit epistemology of the emerging trend in sociological theory and research and of much of the work in international relations theory that can be identified as ‘social constructionist’ in its approach’.¹⁰⁶ This is evident in ‘the *sociological* premise’ used in the *Irish neutrality* thesis to analyse neutrality: ‘*if people perceive things as real then they are real in their consequences*’.¹⁰⁷

Positivist versus reflexivist

Theoretical reflexivity includes ‘a willingness to be open about our philosophical and political starting points, and facing the challenge of clarifying “how our commitments and values are consistent with our (meta-)theoretical starting points”’.¹⁰⁸ From the outset, the author of the *Irish neutrality* thesis explains, his academic discipline ‘starts from certain moral assumptions which function to direct the progress of work and the selection of evidence’ and acknowledges his position as a student of ‘the politics of peacemaking’.¹⁰⁹ Whilst the *Irish neutrality* thesis is prefaced with the proviso ‘we have no truths to impart, only a case to advance respectfully’, the tone of the *Unneutral* thesis is the traditional one of ‘several decades of security studies that involved “telling it as it is”—“it” being a realist account of the purported state(s) of the world’.¹¹⁰ With unrelenting positivism, no position is described or admitted to in the *Unneutral* thesis, and nor are any paradigmatic assumptions acknowledged.

Formal, objective, explanatory versus critical, normative, emancipatory

The *Unneutral Ireland* thesis follows the formal, positivist ‘scientific’ method of creating a model of variables and applying it to test the case of Irish neutrality. It proceeds with

a conceptual analysis aimed at *identifying the true nature of neutrality*;¹¹¹ the discussion in this and the preceding chapter *makes it possible to identify the most significant variables* associated with neutrality...in chapter five, these *variables will be applied* specifically to Ireland in the years of its great test, namely the period of the Second World War.¹¹²

From a poststructuralist perspective, the concept of neutrality—like all political concepts—is essentially contested, but this notion is normally obscured in the explanatory tone of neorealist writing, such as in this exemplar from the *Unneutral* thesis:

For *neutrality per se*, as demonstrated earlier, *certain conditions must be met; and by utilizing them one can give content to the concept*. The fact that the concept is *often wrongly applied*, or that the conditions may be difficult to attain in the contemporary world, is not a ground for abandoning it, especially since the term is still widely used, not least by states themselves, and does provide a useful yardstick against which to analyse the policies of such states.¹¹³

In this seemingly ‘objective’ analysis, the *Unneutral* thesis simply takes the neutrality of

other states as a 'given', referring to them as states that 'are commonly identified as neutral or non-aligned in the literature', that are 'universally regarded as such',¹¹⁴ in the formulation of the so-called 'genuine' concept of neutrality.

The analysis of these [neutral] states' [Austria, Sweden and Switzerland] policies and attitudes *leads to an extrapolation* of their *essential* position, which, taken together with the *key characteristics of neutrality* and non-alignment identified in the previous chapter, forms the basis of a *model against which the Irish case is examined* in subsequent chapters.¹¹⁵

It is on the basis of these assumptions, approach and model that the *Unneutral* thesis argues, 'the *application* of the *variables*, suggests that such orthodoxy [that Ireland is neutral] must be questioned. At best, *evidence in support* of it is equivocal'.¹¹⁶ The assumption of the neutrality of the European states is crucial, because applying all of the same criteria on which Irish neutrality is evaluated to the types of neutrality exercised by the European states would result in those European states being deemed 'unneutral' too. Nonetheless, the tone employed in the conclusion imparts an unquestionable 'truth'—that Ireland is 'unneutral': 'the *Irish*, then, have consistently and significantly *failed to measure up* to the principal prerequisites "of" or "for" neutrality...despite the *shibboleth* of neutrality, and the *claims* of the *Irish* themselves, Ireland has never been *truly* neutral'.¹¹⁷

By contrast, the *Irish neutrality* thesis is more concerned with truth claims regarding neutrality in the public debate, referring to the negative 'image of neutrality popularized by all the major military powers'. This thesis argues that their 'tacit, multilateral agreement to downgrade neutrality has undoubtedly succeeded in lowering its status and making it difficult for an aspiring neutral to win public support at home and international recognition abroad for a policy often seen as "indifferent", "self-centred", "opportunist", "short-sighted"'.¹¹⁸ The thesis attests that 'EPC...functions to create a climate which will gradually persuade the other NATO members to drop their fears of US reaction and NATO weakness and to move gradually through stages towards a defence alliance',¹¹⁹ and it demonstrates how certain claims made by elites or the Irish government in relation to Irish neutrality 'can be a *ploy to distort the term*'¹²⁰ and how several of these claims amount to 'a crude tactic to abandon neutrality by *defining it beyond the bounds of possibility*'.¹²¹

Criticising the 'sizeable body of feeling, innuendo and unargued comment in the writings of some politicians, journalists and historians who are clearly unhappy with Ireland's ambiguous position',¹²² the *Irish neutrality* thesis seeks to consider alternatives to those presented in the dominant discourse and asks 'by what reason are we therefore invited to join a military alliance? There are *other possibilities which are not presented* and there is the *moral dimension which is ignored*'.¹²³ Finally, the *Irish neutrality* discourse refers to other neutral states in order to argue for a new normative concept of neutrality;¹²⁴ it prompts neutrals to evaluate the policy of neutrality in terms of its ability to 'serve the cause of peace'.¹²⁵

External versus internal

The notion of external and internal factors relate to the agent–structure debate in IR. The *Unneutral* thesis deliberates on the external constraints on the Irish state that are assumed to determine a state's ability to be neutral: 'there is always the question of how "free" any decision by a *small, weak* state *really is* in an interdependent world, and particularly for a state like Ireland'.¹²⁶ In the best tradition of structural realism the *Unneutral* thesis argues

that ‘Irish non-belligerency was *only really possible* because of *strategic factors outside* the Irish government’s control’.¹²⁷ The *Irish neutrality* thesis, however, attributes agency to the state and rejects the determinacy of structure: ‘neutrality...depends on *a multitude of factors* outside the control of a neutral state—such as geography, resources, belligerent needs and strategies—and *on many within its control* which can be used to *manipulate the external factors*’.¹²⁸

Passive versus active

Given the belief in the neo-realist import of structure over agency as the main determinant of neutrality, it is not surprising that the *Unneutral* thesis, having succeeded in identifying the ‘true’ nature of neutrality,¹²⁹ characterises it as inherently negative and ‘passive’. This thesis contends that ‘the *classical view* has been that the ambience, and indeed *definition, of neutrality* cannot be given without invoking the *concept of the negative*’, and that ‘political *passivity* was the *main characteristic*’ of neutrality.¹³⁰ By contrast, the *Irish neutrality* thesis, entertaining the notion of agency in the concept of neutrality, proposes an ‘active’ concept of neutrality that ‘relates to a wide range of activities and skills and requires active public participation’.¹³¹

Wartime versus peacetime

The weight given to the legal aspect of neutrality indicates the degree of flexibility and the nature of the concept of neutrality in each thesis, but also underpins contestations over the wartime and peacetime connotations of the concept. The *Irish neutrality* thesis argues that the static, objective idea of neutrality is ‘indicated particularly by the weight given to the legal definition or the *wartime function* of neutrality’¹³² and rejects the legal constraints on the nature of the concept: ‘international law is a poor guide to the accomplishment of neutrality strategy’.¹³³ Instead, the *Irish neutrality* thesis conceptualises neutrality as a peacetime policy: ‘for it is only an involved, *active, peacetime neutrality* which will contribute to a reduction of the tensions leading to war and to the creation of the conditions at home which may mitigate its effects’.¹³⁴

The *Unneutral* thesis denies this active, peacetime concept on the grounds of international law strictures, claiming ‘there is more *confusion* in the use of the word “neutrality”, which is *not an appropriate description* for a peacetime policy, but is widely used as if it were. Such *problems* are extenuated when one is *seeking to classify* states whose official policy is non-participation in alliances in peacetime, aiming for neutrality in the event of war’.¹³⁵ Articulating a neo-realist, legal positivism, the thesis relies heavily on the legal concept as a benchmark to measure and ultimately reject Irish neutrality, despite the fact that every other European neutral also failed to live up to the legal concept during the Second World War: ‘it is of major significance that, contrary to the cited literature and much Irish opinion, there is a clear distinction to be drawn between the Irish position(s)...and the requirements...of the *classical* theory of neutrality, as understood by *international law and convention*...’¹³⁶

NEO-REALIST FEATURES IN THE *UNNEUTRAL IRELAND* THESIS: MILITARIST
POWER, THE STATE AS UNITARY ACTOR, AND THE CONCEPTS OF ‘BALANCE
OF POWER’ AND ‘PROTECTIVE UMBRELLA’

The *Unneutral Ireland* thesis prioritises distinctly neorealist determinates in its claim that

‘neutrality relates as much, *if not more*, to factors such as location, *strength*, and the *balance of power* as to aspiration and law’.¹³⁷ ‘Realists have a one dimensional view of power as military power: it is reduced to counting the number of troops, tanks, aircraft and naval ships a country possesses in the belief that this translates into the ability to get other actors to do something they might not otherwise do’.¹³⁸ This measurement of power is seen in the devotion of a large part of the *Unneutral* thesis to the provision of defence expenditure figures, inventories of military equipment and Defence Forces personnel numbers.¹³⁹ These data serve as ‘evidence’ of Ireland’s failures with respect to its ‘due diligence’ and ‘disavowal of external help’ criteria of neutrality that are discussed later on. The *Unneutral* thesis also provides sets of military inventories ostensibly measuring the capabilities of other neutral states in order to comparatively evaluate ‘the Irish’ exercise of neutrality.

The realist state-centric assumption posits states as the most important actors in world politics and conceives of states as unitary actors. The notion of the state as a unitary actor is inherent throughout the *Unneutral* thesis, as the primary agent referred to is an entity called ‘the Irish’: e.g. ‘*the Irish*, then, have consistently and significantly failed to measure up to the principal prerequisites “of” or “for” neutrality...despite the shibboleth of neutrality, and the claims of *the Irish* themselves, *Ireland* has never been truly neutral’.¹⁴⁰ There is a complete absence of the notion of sub-state actors or levels of analysis in the thesis.

The *Unneutral* thesis puts forward the argument ‘that a basic condition of neutrality is the existence of a balance of power’,¹⁴¹ from which flows the concept of the ‘implicit “protective umbrella”’.¹⁴² Using ‘statistical evidence’¹⁴³ of Irish defence expenditure¹⁴⁴ the thesis claims, ‘the Irish relied on a *protective umbrella* supplied by the British’¹⁴⁵ and that ‘during the war there was *no consistent Irish disavowal of external help*...there still remained a belief in the *protective umbrella*’.¹⁴⁶ The concept of the protective umbrella is used in the thesis to support the argument that Irish neutrality fails to satisfy the criteria of ‘*disavowal of external help*’,¹⁴⁷ thus rendering Ireland ‘unneutral’.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST FEATURES IN THE *IRISH NEUTRALITY* THESIS:
CRITICAL AND ANTI-REALIST, THE IDENTITY OF THE STATE AND PEOPLE,
AND THE ROLE OF SUB-STATE ACTORS AND PUBLIC SUPPORT

Echoing the aims of critical international relations theory, the *Irish neutrality* thesis identifies the hegemony of neo-realism and seeks to counteract its objectivity, conceived of as ‘sedimented power’:

although realism proper, in the discipline of international politics, *is only one among competing intellectual perspectives*, emphasizing the *balance of power* as the central factor in stability and change, in fact it is *often advanced as a legitimation of existing relations*, as a justification of the existing system, *defining any attempt at reform or change as impossible or misguided*.¹⁴⁸

Irish neutrality’s reflexive approach to Irish neutrality rejects the acceptance of the ‘reality’ of neo-realism and the elite discourse on Irish neutrality and advocates normative change, attributing non-state actors agency in the achievement of this goal. The *Irish neutrality* thesis argues that

a convergence of interest and virtue is a necessary condition for the successful implementation of a *foreign policy conceived as a moral imperative*. Where such convergence does not occur, it is the *duty of mass movements and public opinion to create it and to oppose realism* in its unacceptable form—often masquerading as *realpolitik*.¹⁴⁹

The thesis also focuses on the importance of neutrality as a facet of the identity of the Irish state: ‘in popular understanding it [Irish neutrality] was felt to be a general attitude to war and military alliance which *was a feature of the identity of the state* in international affairs and a continuing commitment of Irish governments’.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, this thesis argues for an understanding of the importance of neutrality as ‘*an element of a people’s identity—however inconsistent it may be with the reality of foreign policy*’.¹⁵¹

Finally, underpinning its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the *Unneutral* model of neutrality, the *Irish neutrality* thesis considers the role and influence of *public opinion, movements, interest groups and industrialists*,¹⁵² casting the public as a *bulwark* against neorealism and *realpolitik*,¹⁵³ as *active participants* in the concept of neutrality.¹⁵⁴ It posits the expression of *public consensus* as the key to a successful declaration of neutrality¹⁵⁵ and talks of strengthening ‘*the domestic base of neutrality*’,¹⁵⁶ variables that would be unheard of in a neorealist analysis of neutrality.

THE POLICY CONNECTION

Critical theorists argue that the influence of realist assumptions extended far beyond the academy to structure policy-making, particularly in the United States.¹⁵⁷ According to Vasquez, ‘realism has always prided itself as a theory of the world that aims to guide practice, and surely this is one of the reasons it has dominated international relations inquiry since World War II’.¹⁵⁸ The academic sub-field of strategic studies is now considered to be ‘primarily a policy-prescribing enterprise’, and as a result, Ayoob argues, the analysis of security cannot be de-linked from the interests of the great-power patrons and their own interest in catering to the needs and demands of policy-makers in the major capitals of the world.¹⁵⁹

‘Logically, policy direction derives from the meaning of a concept’.¹⁶⁰ What this deconstruction has shown is that different IR theoretical worldviews deliver different meanings of the concept of Irish neutrality. Therefore, an IR theory or worldview drives the meaning of a concept, which in turn drives policy direction. Kruzal, for example, identifies two different types of neutrality adherents that he calls ‘neutrality realists’ and ‘neutrality idealists’, and ‘the two schools of thought yield very different foreign policy agendas’.¹⁶¹ But ‘for those who believe that we live in a humanly constituted world, the distinction between theory and practice dissolves: theory is a form of practice is a form of theory’.¹⁶² A poststructuralist perspective melds neo-realism with anti-neutrality discourses; they are constitutive. It is useful to recall Cox’s famous edict; ‘theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’,¹⁶³ because it suggests the idea that an IR theoretical worldview is adopted for a purpose, out of a particular set of interests, to achieve a particular policy aim.

Is neo-realism deliberately chosen as a worldview by European and Irish elites in order to de-legitimate neutrality? Certainly, advocates of the ‘unneutral’ discourse have consistently argued that Ireland should join NATO and/or a European Union defence alliance.¹⁶⁴ Or is it the case that, as Booth puts it, ‘nobody can be blamed for their upbringing, their teachers, their time or their place’ and that students over the years have simply ‘been taught solely by those content to work within this framework?’¹⁶⁵ Given the political stakes involved, it is most probably the former, for although ‘ideas—worldviews, principled beliefs and knowledge—not only define the meaning of power but also affect the reasoning process by which state actors define their interests’,¹⁶⁶ it is important to consider the corollary implied thus far, that ‘in the concrete, policy may be driven by the interests of the actors, resulting in the reverse causal sequence. One’s interest in a particular policy can be a powerful motive for defining the concept underlying it in terms restricted to that policy’.¹⁶⁷

Thus, it is logical to identify the hegemonic elite interests as drivers behind the adoption (conscious or otherwise) of neo-realism and the promotion of its discourse undermining Irish neutrality.

In this context, then, it is important to acknowledge that ‘neutrality is by its nature a challenge to the principal theories of international relations, because it derives from the possibility that the use of force in international relations can be restricted and regulated’.¹⁶⁸ The following quotation from a rather benign explanation of neutrality based on a neo-realist perspective illustrates this notion:

*Neutrality is the opposite of a typical policy followed by a small state. Given its narrow power base, one would assume a tendency on the part of the small state, particularly while confronting a great power, to try to balance its inherent weakness by drawing on external sources of strength. Neutrality is the opposite situation: one in which the small state, of its own accord, chooses to rely exclusively on internal sources of strength rather than on powerful allies.*¹⁶⁹

Seeing neutrality in non-realist, positive terms, is ‘to see neutrality as an indication of evolutionary change and gradual transformation of the international system. This change provides choices beyond the established ones and those favoured by traditional theory—thus also further eroding the adequacy of this theory’.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, the deconstruction in this paper (or a decision to support a social constructivist concept of neutrality) not only reverses the violent hierarchy of the *Unneutral* thesis over the *Irish neutrality* thesis at the micro-level of the selected texts, but supports a macro-level reversal and displacement of neo-realism by social constructivism in IR theory.

Do neutral states’ policy-makers view neutrality in non-realist terms? An examination of the only Irish White Paper on foreign policy shows few obvious signs of a radical theoretical position on neutrality amongst Irish foreign-policy elites. Joenniemi notes a similar situation in other European neutral states, which is partly due to a failure to escape from the (neo)realist theory associated with military organisations such as NATO and also the political pressure to form a European Union military alliance. As he puts it:

The neutrals themselves do not harbour *counterhegemonic* tendencies. They tend to argue their case *within the framework of the dominant theory*...in some cases this may have been a *conscious* choice, but more often it is because the Euro-neutrals are very much part of the *same intellectual and politico-ideological tradition as the major powers*. The neutrals also subscribe to the *perceived universalism* of the *dominant theories* and *modes of explanation*. They *subordinate* themselves to the *dictates of these theories* without too much concern about the *implications for their self-understanding*.¹⁷¹

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that different IR theory assumptions underpin the different concepts of neutrality in the two theses on Irish neutrality. The deconstruction undertaken in this paper has displaced the hegemonic position of the ‘unneutral’ discourse on Irish neutrality both in the media and the academic literature. To view this article as merely a way to understand ‘the debate’ on Irish neutrality misses the entire point of employing a poststructuralist approach—although it is understandable given that the implications of the deconstruction may not be well received by mainstream IR and political science—because the poststructuralist thrust argues that the dominant truth-claims about Irish neutrality’s mythical, ‘unneutral’ status do not have any objective, scientific grounds. Rather, they are based on a (neo)realist ideology that is probably adopted out of elite political interests. Neo-

realism is not dominant in IR because it is a particularly good explanation of international politics or foreign policy; it is dominant because of the political structures, institutions and elites supporting it.

Consequences arising from the deconstruction for (1) elite discourses in the academic literature and print media include placing an onus on commentators to own up to their metatheoretical perspective and interests; and (2) for research approaches employed in academic studies of Irish neutrality, there is an obligation to be aware of the metatheoretical biases in the literature. These biases may also lead to the formulation of inappropriate hypotheses in the study of public attitudes to foreign policy. For (3) the formulation of Irish foreign policy, the deconstruction shows that there is a need for a theory and for conceptualisations of neutrality that differ from the hegemonic ones; that is, for a theory that does not take the neutrals as mere objects of the international power game but as independent subjects who, through their ability to inject interests and values into international politics, are capable, at least to some extent, of affecting the course of developments in the international community.¹⁷² Finally, with regard to (4) the current status of Irish neutrality and public opinion, the deconstruction carried out in this paper has implications for the debate on the perceived credibility of Irish neutrality and the perceived 'rationality' of public opinion on Irish neutrality. It is now clear that any serious researcher must consider non-realist theories as an aid to understanding Irish neutrality and the dynamics of public support for Irish neutrality, instead of residing in the 'rationalist' hegemony of the (neo)realist paradigms.

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