World Society and English School Methods

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The English School in IR theory is generally associated with the notion of international society. Indeed, it is often referred to as the international society approach. It is most commonly associated with Hedley Bull's Anarchical Society[i], where Bull contrasted British approaches to international relations with those American and realist approaches where states are driven solely by power politics and egoistic materialism, the only laws being "the laws of the jungle". Bull argued that although the international realm could be typified as anarchical, in the sense of lacking an overarching authority to define and enforce rules, it did not mean that international politics were anarchic or chaotic. Contrary to the billiard-ball metaphor of international politics, states are not just individual elements in a system. In practice, there is a substantial institutionalization of shared values, mutual understandings, and common interests; hence, the "anarchical society". Indeed, he argued that even ethics were an integral part of world politics, and that prudence and morality were not mutually exclusive.

There are several distinct focuses of the English School approach. Hidemi Suganami, who first suggested the title "British Institutionalists" for the School[ii], has pointed to its concern with institutions in the sense of operative principles, such as diplomacy, international law, the balance of power and state sovereignty. A second cut is that of Robert Jackson, who has identified the English School's subject more broadly as codes of conduct.[iii] His focus is not directly with institutions, but with the practices of statespersons to discern their normative content. A third focus is that of Richard Little and Barry Buzan who are concerned not with actors, but with environments of action. They argue that the central concepts in English School thought – international system, international society, and world society – are different environments of action, different social realities (structures in the contemporary parlance), which exist in a dynamic relationship with one another and which require incorporation into the consideration of conduct.[iv] In short, Suganami emphasizes institutions; Jackson emphasizes agents; and Little and Buzan emphasize structures.Navari has explored the explanatory preferences of the classical English School theorists as they appear in the classic texts.[v] She agrees with Little that structural concepts are at the centre of the English School approach, but she observes that the classical theorists did not initially employ their structural concepts in an explanatory mode. Their explanations, she points out, are generally in the intentional mode; that is, they explain events and outcomes via the main actors' aims and intentions. She observes that the classical English School thinkers distinguished between mechanistic (causal) outcomes and chosen (intentional) outcomes: for both Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, other "founding fathers", an international society, as opposed to a system, was primarily the product of choices, and not causes.[vi] Accordingly, she identifies the classical approach as participant observation.

If the focus is institutions, then the more appropriate approach would be via international law. Peter Wilson has explained the English School understanding of international law, distinguishing between Positive Law—law that has emerged—and Aspirational Law—laws and procedures that may be emerging.[vii] Applied to developments such as sovereignty, international law, and emerging regimes— human rights, ecology, etc.—the distinction implies different questions. To determine whether a substantive institution has emerged, the researcher should ask whether institutional developments, such as human rights, contain definite obligations, whether they are sufficiently defined to allow a judge to determine derogation, and whether derogation gives rise to a sanction of some sort. To determine whether a substantive new institution is taking shape, the researcher should ask whether resolutions lead to further elaborations in later resolutions, and whether the endorsement of a new institution is hearty or sincere, on the part of a government or population of a state (Navari has recently used the model to evaluate the emerging democracy

norm[viii]).

Richard Little has argued that the classical theorists in the English School tradition identified the reality of international relations with a diversity of action arenas, not merely with "international society," and that these insights are embedded in English School theory. He relates different methods to different levels of analysis and to different forms of social structure; and he argues that both were apprehended by the classical English School scholars. In consequence, he maintains that methodological pluralism is a necessary entailment, and a necessary requisite, of the English School approach, depending on the emphasis of the individual analyst and his or her particular research question[ix]. Little's schema draws three forms of structure, associated with international system, international society, and world society respectively. Each of these settings has different methods appropriate to its analysis – cost–benefit analysis in the context of a system of states; institutional analysis and comparative analysis in the context of a society of states; and, among other approaches, normative argument in the context of world society.

Buzan has gone further and proposed that Little's structure may be used to identify not only the sources of change in international society, but the identification of the causes of change. Elaborating on the concept of "world society", Buzan calls it "the idea of shared norms and values at the individual level but transcending the state."[x] It is constituted by the global societal identities and arrangements of individuals, non-state organizations, and the global population as a whole. He has argued that international society is not a way-station on the historical road from anarchy to a world society, but rather that an international society cannot develop further without parallel development in its corresponding world society; that is, by the development of elements of "world culture" at the mass level. But he also argues, in the manner of Hedley Bull, that a world society cannot emerge unless it is supported by a stable political framework and that the state system remains the only candidate for this. The methodological implications are that "world society" should be the focus of study, both as an object of growth and development and also as a source of change, but within the context of a (changing) state system.

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[i] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

[ii] Hidemi Suganami, "British Institutionalists, or the English School, 20 Years On," *International Affairs* 17:3 (2003), 253-72.

[iii] Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[iv] Richard Little, "International System, International Society and World Society: A Re-evaluation of the English School" in B.A. Roberson (ed.), *International Society and the Development of International Theory* (London: Pinter, 1998), 59–79; Richard Little, "History, Theory and Methodological Pluralism in the English School" in Cornelia Navari (ed.), *Theorizing International Society: English School Methods* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008); Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[v] Cornelia Navari, "What the Classical English School Was Trying to Explain and Why its Members Were not Interested in Causal Explanation" in Cornelia Navari (ed.), *Theorising International Society: English School Methods*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), 39–57.

[vi] See Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966)

for the early writings of the “founding fathers”.

[vii] Peter Wilson, “The English School’s Approach to International Law” in Cornelia Navari (ed.), *Theorizing International Society: English School Methods* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008) 167–88.

[viii] “Liberalism, Democracy and International Law: An English School Approach,” in Rebekka Freedman, Kevork Oskanian, and Ramon Pacheco (eds) *After Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[ix] Little, “History, Theory and Methodological Pluralism in the English School”

[x] Buzan, *From International to World Society,* 10.

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