

Pluralism and International Society

Written by Tom Keating

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TOM KEATING, MAY 15 2013

Much attention among English School scholars is devoted to developing the concept of international society through an exploration of its relationship with its alternatives: international system and world society.^[1] As Buzan and others have noted, however, the relationship between pluralist and solidarist positions within international society are equally significant. The latter relationship is particularly relevant today as developments in the arenas of globalization and security raise important questions about the substantive content of the rules and institutions in existence among the state members of international society. These developments present challenges to the rights of states while seeking to extend the rights of individuals and corporations.

Practices of economic globalization and human security have generated arguments about the need for and desirability of more intrusive forms of global governance – reflecting and applying values that would regulate or supersede the authority of sovereign states. Weinert recounts that “States increasingly face robust homogenizing pressures in the form of (a) transparent and accountable governance yardsticks; (b) conditionalities attached to development assistance and admission into international organizations; and (c) empowered citizens who make claims against states and international institutions that often echo (d) minimal standards of human rights.”^[2] For students of international society this represents a contemporary illustration of the tension between pluralism and solidarism. Hedley Bull first raised these issues in *The Anarchical Society* when he distinguished between pluralist and solidarist accounts of international society.^[3] Bull’s distinction rested on the normative content of the rules and institutions that demarcated international society and the degree to which they gave priority to order among states and the sovereign rights of these states as opposed to more substantive values such as human rights or justice that would limit these states’ rights. Bull, in turn, urged caution in adopting more pluralist approaches lest they fail to reflect a consensus among all members of the society of states.^[4] This more cautious view has been shared and reiterated by Robert Jackson in response to the interventions of the 1990s.^[5]

Others, including Wheeler and Linklater, have taken up the solidarist position emphasizing themes of justice and human security and defending interventionist practices.^[6] Buzan in reiterating the significance of these issues for the English School has also stressed that the pluralist-soliarist discussion is a discussion of what takes place within an interstate international society.^[7] The concern for human rights and human security that has been encouraged by developments both within and among states suggests a significant normative shift for international society as it extends the subjects of international society to include individuals and creates a tension between the state and other agents for the protection of these individuals. Within English School accounts, much attention has been given to the discourse and practice of human security and responsibility to protect as evidence of this turn towards solidarism.^[8]

The attention to human rights has been important in shedding light on abuses and strengthening the standards against which the practices of states are assessed. Yet as Jennifer Welsh reminds us and in spite of some hopes that this normative shift would lead to numerous interventions, such occurrences have been limited.^[9] In spite of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s claims that the aim of the UN Charter must be to protect individual human beings, it is clear that it lacks the capacity to do so on any sustainable basis. This has led to suggestions, such as that of Buchanan and Keohane, for legitimating alternative and more exclusive mechanisms for intervention.^[10] Such alternatives, however, may present a challenge to international order, especially if they are seen to serve national interests as opposed to solidarist values. For example, the interventions of individual states and collectivities such as NATO have been designed to provide a degree of protection for individuals facing harm in places such as Kosovo

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and Libya, but at the lowest possible risk and cost to the intervening party and in the absence of any consideration of the longer term and multidimensional security needs of the populations involved.

Humanitarianism has proliferated in the last twenty years, but the real effective transformation in human security such as has occurred has been in the increased capacity and responsiveness of local national governments to serve the security needs of domestic populations. Additionally the diplomatic activity surrounding this increased activity has yet to demonstrate a deep commitment in support of solidarist principles. Instead, concerns have reflected state interests and the implicit and explicit challenges to state sovereignty. From an English School perspective, attention to the practice of states and to the intention of those who Jackson describes as the diplomatic community is critically important in examining the substantive character of international society.^[11] The arena of economic globalization, while less widely discussed within the English School literature, is also of interest for here there is much greater evidence of a body of substantive rules and a more robust governance framework in the form of institutions and rules embodied in the European Union and the World Trade Organization.^[12] Gill has suggested that the institutions in support of globalization represent a form of constitutionalism. Yet the commitment to a common set of solidarist values in this area can also be questioned. Member governments regularly and repeatedly seek exemptions to rules or behave in ways that reflect a stronger commitment to local interests over shared values. Additionally the significant transition in the international distribution of power with the emergence of more active and influential states, including China, India, and Brazil has added a new set of interests and values into the governance process. It would seem from the diplomacy of these states in arenas including the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organization that their interests and aspirations for international order are not incompatible with a pluralist international society, even if they differ over substantive values.^[13] To ignore differences over substantive values in an effort to construct a solidarist international society that entrenched cosmopolitan principles at the risk of alienating these emerging powers might impede an opportunity to strengthen the fabric of a vibrant pluralistic international society.

In contemplating the future balance between a more pluralist or solidarist international society, attention to the practice of individual states is of critical importance. Welsh, and Vincent before her, remind us that state practice provides the clearest reading on the acceptability and meaning of these solidarist principles that have become more commonplace in contemporary international society. State practice may reveal a profound level of skepticism towards principles that impede the sovereign authority of national governments to resist the homogenizing practices of entities such as the EU and the WTO or from a NATO vision of R2P. Often the pressures for solidarist values emanate from dominant powers with less regard for the concerns of lesser powers and with the ability to reject such values when desired. In view of such a possibility support for a more pluralist international society is understandable. This was indeed Bull's primary concern. As Welsh notes it was also a concern for Vincent even as he tried to extrapolate a more responsive approach to human rights. "In the end, he could not accept a normative approach to international relations that would allow the strong—who were both "untrusted and untrustworthy"—to impose justice as they understood it."^[14] Perhaps this lies at the root of concerns about the future direction of a more solidarist international society. "The key challenge," for English School proponents of a more solidarist approach, Bellamy and McDonald maintain "is whether practices of security can emerge that are sufficiently solidarist to have real impact...whilst sufficiently pluralist to meet Hedley Bull's concerns about the dangers of undermining international order."^[15] The pluralist cornerstone, one that respects and protects state sovereignty even as it acknowledges the enhanced concern for rights or the shifting demands for a more integrated global economy, remains a critical foundation for international society.

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Tom Keating is a Professor and former Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta, where he has also served as former Vice-Dean in the Faculty of Arts. This article is part of e-IR's edited collection, *System, Society & the World: Exploring the English School*.

[1] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[2] Matthew, S. Weinert, "Reframing the Pluralist-Solidarist Debate," *Millennium* 40:1 (2011), 33.

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- [3] Hedley Bull, "The Grotian Conception of International Society" in Martin Wight and Hubert Butterfield (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).
- [4] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 157.
- [5] Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- [6] Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community* (London: Macmillan, 1998).
- [7] Buzan, *From International to World Society*, 139.
- [8] Wheeler provides among the most extensive discussions in his, *Saving Strangers*; also See Alex J. Bellamy and Matt McDonald, "Securing International Society: Towards an English School Discourse of Security," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 39:2 (2004), 307-324.
- [9] Jennifer Welsh, "A normative case for pluralism: reassessing Vincent's views on humanitarian intervention," *International Affairs* 87:5 (2011), 1193-1204.
- [10] Allen Buchanan and Robert O. Keohane, "The Preventive Use of Force: A Cosmopolitan Institutional Proposal," *Ethics and International Affairs* 18:1 (2004), 1-22.
- [11] See for example, Cornelia Navari, "The concept of practice in the English School," *European Journal of International Affairs* 17 (2010), 611-630; William Bain, *Between Anarchy and Society: Trusteeship and the Obligations of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- [12] Barry Buzan, "International Political Economy and Globalisation," in Alex J. Bellamy (ed.), *International Society and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115-134.
- [13] See for example, Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walker, *China, the United States, and Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Shogo Suzuki, "Seeking 'Legitimate' Great Power Status in the Post-Cold War International Society: China's and Japan's Participation in UNPKO," *International Relations* 22:1 (2008), 45-63; Jonathan E. Davis, "From Ideology to Pragmatism: China's Position on Humanitarian Intervention in the Post-Cold War Era," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 44:2 (2011) 217-283; Allen Carlson, "Moving Beyond Sovereignty?," *Journal of Contemporary China* 20 (2011).
- [14] R.J. Vincent cited in Jennifer Welsh, "A normative case for pluralism: reassessing Vincent's views on humanitarian intervention," *International Affairs* 87:5 (2011), 1202; see also R.J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- [15] Bellamy and McDonald, "Securing International Society," 309.

About the author:

Tom Keating is a Professor Emeritus and former Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta, where he has also served as Vice-Dean in the Faculty of Arts. He is the author of *Canada and World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and also of *Global Politics, Emerging Networks, Trends, and Challenges* co-authored with Andy Knight (Oxford University Press, 2010).

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