

The Need for an English School Research Program

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, MAY 21 2013

Traditionally, the English School (ES) approach to international relations has not been overly concerned with typically American social science interest in methods and empirical testing. As Cornelia Navari notes in this volume, early ES scholars preferred to focus their attention on participant observation as opposed to structure, system or causal variables. It is this lack of methodological rigor that has hindered the development of the ES as a sufficiently empirical *theory* of international relations, and one that should be addressed in order to substantially increase the School's explanatory power in modern international relations theory.

A major problem facing the School's ability to be tested as a *theory* in the social science tradition is the lack of concern with methods and a clear framework by which one could determine whether a scholar was, or was not, using a distinctly English School approach. Dale Copeland effectively summarizes a definite gap in ES thought: "Without knowing clearly what it is that is being explained, there is simply no way of gathering evidence to support or disconfirm a particular [English School] author's position." [1] This is not to say that ES scholarship should adhere to the strict positivist standards imposed by American social science at all, but there is validity in saying there are too few commonalities between ES writers to define it as a coherent theoretical lens. [2] Richard Little, building on an argument first presented by Buzan, claims that there are at least three distinct ways to view the School: "ES theory may be considered first as a set of ideas to be found in the minds of statesmen; second, as a set of ideas to be found in the minds of political theorists; and third, as a set of externally imposed concepts that define the material and social structures of the international system." [3] Further, some ES writers have attempted to cast the School as more valuable because of its methodological openness and critical possibilities. For instance, Roger Epp argues: "In other words, the English school recollects a tradition – the historicity of open-ended, intersecting, competing narratives – *within* which critical resources are already present. Its erudite, generous horizons contain what amount to enabling prejudices: the biases of openness to an indeterminate future." [4] Even so, the lack of any identifiable hard core assumptions or foundational principles makes theoretical evaluation of the School and its empirical validity virtually impossible.

Among the main reasons for the School's lack of attention in mainstream international theory is the inability of scholars to test the tenets of the ES, to identify exactly when it can be said a scholar is using the school (and not casually just referring to a society of states), and more importantly, evaluating whether the ongoing body of literature that falls under an ES schema is providing novel contributions, or if the more current conceptions of the School since its reorganization are actually falsifying what early thinkers like Butterfield, Wight, Bull and Vincent had in mind. [5] In order to address such theoretical looseness, there may be value in attempting to impose methodological rigor to the School.

Perhaps the ideal approach to formulating a more rigorous conception of the ES can be found in the works of Imre Lakatos. In many ways, Lakatos' work on Scientific Research Programs tries to do exactly what early School thinkers sought to accomplish from the outset – to find a middle-ground between two competing theories (in Lakatos' case between Popper and Kuhn) that both had relevance, but fell short in any kind of *truth*. [6] For Lakatos, the challenge was providing a way to balance the claims made by Karl Popper on one hand and Thomas Kuhn on the other. Lakatos' contribution to metatheoretical evaluation is a method of determining the novelty of theory and whether contributions actually add value, or ultimately degenerate, the hard core assumptions of a hypothesis.

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According to Lakatos, a theory is not dismissed based on falsification alone, but is instead evaluated as a series of contributions that either provide novel facts to a research program, or may instead lead to the creation of a new one.

Evaluating theory in the Lakatosian sense requires the substantiation of empirical facts, however, which is an ongoing flaw in English School work (especially when examining world society arguments). Lakatos claims, “the time-honoured empirical criterion for a satisfactory theory was agreement with the observed facts. Our empirical criterion for a series of theories is that it should produce new facts. *The idea of growth and the concept of empirical character are soldered into one.*”[7] Within ES circles, the need to empirically verify theoretical contributions tends to be ignored.[8] Instead, English School approaches prefer to favour rationalist methods that highlight the evolution of international societies throughout human history. Unfortunately, even this claim to historical explanation by ES writers is interpreted as weak. For a school that prides itself on offering a historical approach to international relations, there are surprisingly few diplomatic-historical analyses that extensively utilize archival sources or documentary collections.”[9] Beyond the lack of empirical content of ES theory, even the use of historical explanation is questioned in terms of what the school is trying to do through its work.[10] William Bain asks: “But if it is clear that English School theorists take history seriously, their purpose for doing so is a great deal less so. Once we have gotten inside history and have allowed our imagination to roam freely, we are still left to ask: What is historical knowledge for.”[11]

It would be a drastic understatement to say creating an ES research program would be challenging but it is necessary. The largest obstacle for the formulation of such a program would be the 3 levels of analysis that are simultaneously involved in the School’s tenets – system, international society and world society. Each level has its own concerns and understandings, though there is one key commonality in each – the role of the state – and this could easily serve as a starting point in building hard core assumptions.

ES literature has, since the 1970s and 80s, had a strong preoccupation with world society and how international society interacts with humanity. This has led to many arguments about humanitarian intervention, civilization, legitimacy, justice, and responsibility. Buzan claims that the reason for the world society emphasis was a shift from international to world.[12] Other School contributors have accepted this contention as almost a given reality, yet no attention has been given to empirically testing such a significant claim. Have states become less relevant and humanity more the focus of state behaviour? Have normative ideals of morality and cosmopolitanism become the driving forces behind the actions of international society?

This is not to say that the world society fixation is flawed, but rather speaks to the need for a methodological framework that allows observers to test the School’s tenets and whether modern ES literature is adhering to the same hard core assumptions as the School’s organizers. Without being able to ask such questions, it might be that there is an English School discourse that includes references to international society, institutions and law, without there actually being a coherent and organized school of thought.

All legitimate theories must stand up to testing in order for them to be taken seriously. To date, the English School has been limited in its appeal precisely because its adherents have little or no interest in operating according to a set of defined methodological rules. Without the value provided by methodological rigor, the School faces questions about its ability to be taken seriously as a *theory*. History might demonstrate that various international societies have existed, but where did they come from, how are they created and who determines whether a particular society of states can be identified either as solidarist or pluralist in nature? When do international societies change or collapse? Even within the ES itself, the solidarist versus pluralist division makes it difficult to answer why the School exists at all; it seems as if both sides of the debate assume that it is still relevant and adds something to the way international politics is explained, though *how* this is done is ambiguous.

Without any sort of method to evaluate its contributions to the field, what function does the ES serve in the broader scope of international theory? There is where Lakatos may be of assistance, in that his work helps scholars to explore “how to assess theories, and how to decide whether, over time, theories about international relations are getting any better.”[13] Promoting a middle way of theory-making is not exclusive to the ES, as constructivism has more recently argued how to incorporate aspects of realism and liberalism into one approach, but constructivist scholars have dedicated themselves to answering questions about a constructivist methodology.[14] Within those

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identified as ES scholars, one can classify realists, liberals, Marxists, postmodernists, Frankfurt School proponents, constructivists, and a variety of others, but other than a specific set of discursive elements and conceptual categories (i.e. international society, world society, etc), how is one to prove these thinkers are contributing to the ES or whether a totally new series of research programs have appeared since the end of the Cold War?

Until the practitioners of the English School begin to define precisely what an ES research program would look like, the School's impact on international theory remains outside the mainstream. This is certainly not an effort to *Americanize* the English School but rather to hold the School to the same standards as other approaches to international relations. Martha Finnemore provides a succinct argument for why methodological concerns matter: "Americans are fond of asking what the value added is of a theoretical approach: providing a strong demonstration of this for the English School would be powerful for that audience." [15] Lakatos' work on research programs would be immensely helpful in this regard because of its ability to allow for flexibility while still identifying either a single or a series of hard core assumptions by which the School and its adherents would have to employ in order to demonstrate the School's theoretical impact on actual world events.

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[1] Dale Copeland, "A Realist Critique of the English School," *Review of International Studies* 29:3 (2003), 431.

[2] The main commonality between English School theorists is their use of the idea of international society. See Brunello Vigezzi, *The British Committee and the Theory of International Politics 1954-1985* (Milan: Edizione Unicopli Srl, 2005).

[3] Richard Little, "History, Theory and Methodological Pluralism in the English School," *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), 78.

[4] Roger Epp, "The English School on the Frontiers of International Society" in Tim Dunne, Michael Cox and Ken Booth (eds), *The Eighty Years' Crisis: International Relations 1919-1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61.

[5] For more on the School's reorganization, see Barry Buzan, "The English School: an underexploited resource in IR," *Review of International Studies* 27:3 (2001), 471-488.

[6] Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, "Lessons from Lakatos," *Progress in International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 21-25.

[7] Imre Lakatos, *The methodology of scientific research programmes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 35.

[8] Mayall argues that the English School follows in the empiricist tradition of Locke and Hume, but notes this differs from the positivist method of empirically testing theory. See James Mayall, "The Limits of Progress: Normative Reasoning in the English School," *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), 211-212.

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[9] Copeland, "A Realist Critique of the English School," 432.

[10] For an interesting analysis of history in the English School, see William Bain, "Are There Any Lessons of History?", *Review of International Politics* 44:5 (2007), 513-530.

[11] William Bain, "The English School and the Activity of Being an Historian," *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), 148.

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

[13] Elman and Elman, "Lessons from Lakatos," 21.

[14] An essential contribution to constructivist methods and theory making is found in Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[15] Martha Finnemore, "Exporting the English School?", *Review of International Studies* 27:3 (2001), 513.

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