

# Lost in Translation? Importing the English School to America

Written by Alan Klæbel Weisdorf

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ALAN KLÆBEL WEISDORF, AUG 2 2013

Over the years there have been several calls for reinvention, reconsideration and even a reconvention of the English School in the study of world politics (cf. Wæver 1992, 1999; Dunne 1998; Buzan 1999, 2004; Linklater & Suganami 2006; Weisdorf 2011a). Indeed, the potential is obvious; the English School promises a more complex and historical sensitive approach to both specific political developments and global historical trends. Still, the School seems to evade and resist all previous endeavors at being 'disciplined'. However undeterred, in the anthology *System, Society & the World – Exploring the English School of International Relations* from 2013, edited by Robert W. Murray, we find yet another well-intentioned attempt at bringing the English School back into the limelight of IR academia.

The explicit context of this particular exploration is to impart upon the English School the methodological virtues of North American social science "in order to substantially increase the School's explanatory power" (Murray 2013b: 67). As Murray is well aware, this is not a novel critique of the English School (cf. Copeland 2003; Finnemore 2001), and the editor is also aware of the limitations of said critique. There are after all limits to how far one can bend the English School to the positivist standards before the traditions breaks; the English School stood after all on the side of the traditionalists in the so-called 'second great debate', famously epitomized in Bull's defense of the 'classical approach' (1969).

I recognize the potential value of the editor's call for a more rigorous approach to the English School. However, ultimately the editor's search for a coherent theoretical lens and the purported need to produce a clear research program means settling too many outstanding questions within the English School and thus cutting away too much of the 'creative ambivalence' that characterize the academic production of the many writers associated with the School. As I will try to illustrate below, the editor is too critical of the English School's current value as a more 'open source' of concepts and inspiration (cf. Murray 2013b: 70), and at the same time generally too accepting of a rather conventional account of the English School's theoretical and conceptual framework; a framework that is based primarily on the works of Hedley Bull. Ultimately, I cannot escape the feeling that something truly valuable is being 'lost in translation.'

In Murray's interpretation, the English School was conceived as an attempt at incorporating realism and liberalism into one integrated account that encompass both positions (2013a: 8). Indeed, there is little doubt that the many authors later associated with the English School found both the idealist and the realist position of the so-called 'first great debate' to be unsatisfactory. But there is no evidence to suggest that the English School authors saw their work collectively as a *designed* integration of those two positions (Weisdorf 2011a: 21f). As I see it, the editor's narrative is simply too convenient in terms garnering American recognition of the English School's position within the pantheon of 'proper' IR theories. I would argue that the fact of the matter is rather more messy and inconclusive. Indeed, one can reasonably ask whether, there really 'was' an English School at all until it was retrospectively agreed upon in the academic community. In fact, Roy Jones (1981) claim of the existence of a so-called 'English School' was rejected by Sheila Grader as late as 1988. This should in and of itself make one wary of settling to quick on a definite conception of what constitutes English School theory.[1]

As it were, Murray's understanding of the English School draws heavily, bordering on exclusively, on the works of

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Hedley Bull (Bull 1995). Accordingly, Murray introduces the reader to Bull's triad of 'international system', 'international society' and 'world society' as the core concepts of the English School. In this Murray is apparently on safe ground. Bull is after all a quite central figure in the English School, and many modern works of English School apply or develop that particular conceptual triad. However, while taking Bull's concept as a focal point for a specific research program in itself could be justified, establishing the triad as a *defining* characteristic of the English School is a problematic assertion.

Firstly, the triad in itself is a much debated construct among writers in the tradition of the English School (cf. Buzan 2004) and in my opinion fraught with theoretical issues that threaten the value of the central idea of 'international society' within the English School (Weisdorf 2011a: 58-78). This leads to my second point: there is no consensus among the original English School scholars that 'international system' and 'world society' are meaningful concepts at all, at least not within the framework of Bull's triad. Key writers, such as C.A.W. Manning and Alan James rejected the idea of an 'international system', stating that only an 'international society' makes sense (James 1993: 278ff; Manning 1962). Indeed, Adam Watson in his seminal work on the evolution of international societies questions whether an 'international system' makes sense seen in isolation and apart from 'international society' (1992: 312). So perhaps it would be more useful to consider Bull's triad a particular variant of the English School rather than a defining characteristic.[2]

Furthermore, I am not comfortable with the way the editor implicitly conflates Bull's triple concepts of international system, international society and world society with Martin Wight's 'three traditions': Realism, Rationalism and Revolutionism (Murray 2013a: 8f). Bull is the originator of this link (1995: 39), however Wight is much vaguer, as he states "[the three traditions] can be *in some sense* related to the three interrelated political conditions [of international anarchy, diplomacy and commerce and the family of nations]" (my emphasis, 1991: 7). I believe that it is a category error to lump together Bull's structural concepts with Wight's notion that discourse and ideas play a constitutive role in the formation of world politics. For example, Realism, as a 'tradition' in Wight's sense, is just as important for the formation and development of international society as the tradition of Rationalism. I would argue that Wight's 'three traditions' is an important freestanding insight into the nature, workings and evolution of world politics. It is an idea that challenges not only the neat theory-practice distinction so prevalent in IR theory; it also places into question the idea that the English School should somehow be a middle position between realism and liberalism understood as Rationalist IR theories. In short, the conflation of Bull's triad and Wight's traditions risk losing the empirical and critical potential of Wight's original idea (cf. Manners 2003).

If one has to identify one particular idea that is common to all writers of the English School then I would argue it is 'international society'. As Wight precisely states, "The most fundamental question you can ask in international theory is, What is international society?" (1987: 222). 'International society' is not an unproblematic concept in itself, as Wight's quote suggests. However, the concept does define a meaningful frame for both further theoretical innovation and empirical investigations; including the historical sociology of different international societies, normative questions and dilemmas active in specific international societies, the nature of institutions and practices in specific international societies, the constitutive role of diplomatic 'games' and 'myths', the genealogy of statehood and more.

Indeed, the concept of 'international society' allows, especially in the vein of C.A.W. Manning, a clear and determined step away from the state centrism that hampers so many mainstream accounts of contemporary and historical world politics. In fact, I would argue that the very idea of international society challenges the ontological foundation of much IR theory, that is, the state as the first fact of world politics (Weisdorf 2011a: 254-257; 2011b: 178). It is therefore unfortunate that Murray defines 'the role of the state' as the starting point in building some core assumptions for this new English School research program (2013b: 69). This is especially curious in light of Watson's concern with empires (1992) and Wight's notion of suzerain state-systems (1977), both examples of political configurations that challenge conventional understandings of statehood.

In this article, I have focused on challenging the editor's representation of 'the English School' as a particular and coherent set of concepts. However, my intention was not to present an alternative orthodox interpretation of the English School. But to exemplify the precarious nature and the many pitfalls involved in any endeavor at 'disciplining' the English School – of any attempt to reduce the complexity of such a rich and diverse tradition to a simple formula.

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My real concern is that we are going to see a rather impoverished version of the English School that passes through the editor's filter in order to 'fit' a North American conception of proper IR theory. Furthermore, I sense a strong need for the editor to position the English School in relative proximity to the tradition of Realism, thus conceivably increasing the respectability of a new English School research program within the North American IR community. I believe that this well-meaning ambition could jeopardize something valuable in the English School tradition.

I must confess, I don't see the English School as a *theory* waiting to be defined, and I am not convinced of the added value of the English School being transformed into a very specific and coherent theoretical lens. Despite, or maybe because of, this theoretical deficit, I and many other scholars have found in the English School writings a virtual cornucopia of inspiration, whether it concerns theoretical innovation or empirical investigation. Consequently, I do not share the editor's concern that many different writers, representing very different philosophical positions, have identified their works as contributing to the English School (cf. Murray 2013b: 70). I am more concerned with the prospect of an exclusive, narrow and monopolized conception of the English School. This is not to say that there is no need to establish more rigorous and focused research programs. Like the editor, I have argued that the ideas present in English School writings needs to be developed theoretically in order to reach a greater potential (Weisdorf 2011a: 58-60). I agree that it is important, as Murray states, to be able to ask and answer questions along the lines of "where do international societies come from?" and "what is their social nature?" (2013b: 69). But it has to be done with a great degree of sensitivity to the ambivalent richness of the School. Indeed, the 'English School' seen as a 'whole' tradition is maybe too multifaceted philosophically, theoretically and methodologically to be captured within one 'English School research program'.

As an alternative, I would argue that perhaps more could be gained by taking a more pluralistic approach to the challenge of strengthening the English School as a recognized approach to the study of world politics. This could be accomplished by establishing several separate and connected research programs each based on more focused areas of research – much indeed, as the scholars of the English School themselves did. This does not preclude that each of these research programs all share a common anchor in, what I consider, the fundamental English School idea; that is that the question of world politics should not be investigated through the lens of realism's 'problem of anarchy', but as a 'problem of (international) society' (Weisdorf 2011a: 31).

Indeed, the edited collection *System, Society and the World* illustrates the value of a pluralist approach to world politics under the umbrella of 'English School' research. Many of the selected contributions exhibit in a few short pages the many interesting research avenues offered by the classical English School concepts such as pluralism/solidarism and world society, while others exhibit original theoretical innovation and perspectives inspired by English School ideas.

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[1] The dispute surrounding Tim Dunne's *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* also serves to illustrate the lack of consensus on 'whom' and 'what' constitutes the English School (Weisdorf 2011a: 24-28), although there is today generally agreement that the 'English School' constitute a distinct tradition in IR (Linklater & Suganami 2006: 25).

[2] The same could be said for the internal debate between self-proclaimed pluralists and solidarists concerning the balance between order and justice in world politics. Their discussion is insightful and clearly based in the English School tradition, but the debate is not, I would claim, an indispensable feature of an English School research program.

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