

The English School, Post-Western IR, and Beyond

Written by Josuke Ikeda

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JOSUKE IKEDA, SEP 6 2013

The globalization of the English School (ES) is currently taking place. It involves the spread of the original research agenda, its 'reconvening' at the global level[1], and the regional breakdown of its methodology and application. After all, this is just one part of the expansion of international society at large. The difference between the two projects seems to be obvious – when Hedley Bull and Adam Watson compiled a number of essays under the title of the *Expansion of International Society*, their major focus was on the institutional development (and the resulting reactions) going beyond the European context; the movement under discussion here is the expansion of the international society *approach* – an intellectual one. But such a difference is still somewhat superficial, as there has been significant overlap between the two. This point already appeared at the early age of the School, when C.A.W. Manning deemed the world a “social cosmos” and the discipline as a “social cosmology.”[2] As Hidemi Suganami famously indicated, ES is an institutionalism.[3] Here “institutionalism” has a double meaning – ES as a theoretical approach to analyze institutions of international society, while the School itself applies an institutionalist (or ‘early constructivist’) model to set up an analytic framework of the society of states. In some sense, the globalisation of the ES is not a new phenomenon, as the expansion of international society and the international society approaches have developed in tandem over the last 50 years. The expansion of international society has been one of its foundations, and we may simply call the latter the globalisation of ES.

Then, it may be an interesting question how people and areas outside the direct Western legacy have been watching and reacting to the phenomena. In one sense, it can be grasped as a counter-representation of growing powers such as BRICS[4]. Indeed even in the Asian context, claims for “Chinese”, “Indian”, “Korean”, or “Japanese” conceptions of international society have been backed by their rapid growth as major actors in world politics. Also true is it that, as Bull argued and Jason Ralph indicated, behind such political claims there has been a struggle for achieving equal political status on par with, or a “psychological awaking” towards, the existing members of the premier league. Having said that, however, there is a tricky situation too, because the majority of its possible audience comprises the people from the non-West who are trained in the Western IR discipline. What can be derived from this is that the critical engagement towards the globalization of international society, and of the ES, is still carrying some colonial nuance. Importantly, when one attempts to engage in the critical assessment of international society, it is not quite enough to see it as political revolt against the West. If there may be an epistemic revolt, the English School would need to engage in some reconsideration of its own knowledge and intellectual praxis as well.

Recent movements named as “non-Western” or “post-Western” IR theory thus seem to reflect this requirement. Perhaps one advantage of the latter over the former is its postcolonial quality. The “provincialization” of Europe, borrowing the word from Dipesh Chakrabarty (and its effective interpretations in IR by Giorgio Shani and Rosa Vasilaki), or of international society, entails the decentralisation of a particular system of knowledge at a deeper level[5]. Existing modes of epistemology and ontology are called into question. In 1990s, Martin Hollis and Steve Smith famously argued that there are always two stories in IR theory[6]. That was an observation reflecting upon the field’s bifurcation into positivism and postpositivism. Though in a different context, Post-Western IR’s very aim is to show the fact that there are always more than two stories.

Nevertheless, there is one possible pitfall even in taking a post-Western approach. Historically speaking, the will to be radical through continuous criticism has been a major intellectual tradition in the modern West.[7] Its aim is to set up a counterpart against the totalising tendency in politics, and criticism has been regarded as the “continuation of

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politics by other means”[8]. The representation of such “politics” is often called “the political”, which is different from mere politics or bureaucracy[9]. Such movement is usually based on what had once been deemed as non-political. Interestingly, Martin Wight once observed the “positive denial” by the non-political as a major element of “Western Values of International Relations.”[10] Now one question comes up: if the very foundation of post-Western IR, the nexus between the critical in theory and the political in practice, is in fact Western in its cultural ethos, how may we overcome the problem of “Westfailure”?[11]

In some sense, it is not a matter of whether to overcome or not. The globalization of ES is reflecting the one of IR discipline and theories. What becomes clearer is the fact that we cannot talk theoretical purity anymore, whether “West” or “non-West”. If seeing “the globalization of world politics” as an intermingling process among various cultures, the framework to capture, explain and understand it may have good reasons to follow. When we return our eyes to some other chapters in *System, Society and the World*, there are already some clues. One is to switch attentions to wider social configuration. Andrew Linklater’s essay on civilization and international society, together with recent publications of Peter Katzenstein’s project, gives an important implication on the potentiality of civilization as an alternative lens[12]. However, as Linklater cautiously observes, what becomes more important may not be civilization per se, but what is happening inside the civilization framework, which he describes as a “different, but interwoven civilizing process.”[13]

Another point to note is the importance of translation. Given that multiple processes are on-going at the inter-civilizational level, there may emerge an increased demand for the pragmatic processes, which enable interactions. Here translation may occupy an important place. On the one hand, there is a thought that translation is a key for building cosmopolitan ground. On the other, translation also works to illustrate gaps and differences of what is incommensurable among cultures. Whichever position one takes, it is crucial to recall that words and ideas are always involved inside the inter-civilizational process. As long as translation itself belongs to one process, there appears a possible agenda to explore how different ideas have travelled and formed particular (international) societal frameworks. Such a proposal is not far away from the ES agenda. In his paper of “Western Values in International Relations”, Wight advocated engaging in a history of patterns of ideas.[14] A similar thought was presented earlier in a much more comprehensive way in the work of Adda Bozeman.[15] The former lacked inter-civilizational scope, while the latter the modern and contemporary coverage. Now we may have little reason for not building on these works, exploring the inter-civilizational process of developing, translating, and interpreting particular ideas which have constructed our world.

The suggestion of an inter-civilizational History of Ideas presents three pressing questions. One is the possible location of theory. In the ES, theory has been located somewhere in a wider spectrum of social inquiry. Even if one envisions a post-ES approach, one is not still free from the matter of methodology. Secondly, there is a question of rationalism. Here it is worth noting Suganami’s indication as

“[i]f the historical account of the expansion of international society given by the English School is closely intertwined with their rationalist international theory, then counter-narratives to the English School history should be explored in the traditions outside rationalism, that is, in the realist and revolutionist traditions, as well as any other traditions of political thought found outside the West.”[16]

Certainly, recent work on Confucian international society and its theorization were attempts to answer this question, but the more important point would be an inquiry into whether (and if positive, how) we may establish newer version of “methodological pluralism” at the inter-civilizational level. Finally, it would be interesting to see what comes after the globalization of ES, and of international society. This leads to the question of a normative world or of world society, yet the more pertinent question is if it is possible to conceive of a post-colonial, or post-Western version of world society, and if positive, what it would look like.

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edited with Makoto Sato and Makoto Onaka, Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Hyouron-sha, 2013, forthcoming, in Japanese), which is the first research volume on ES in Japan.

[1] Hidemi Suganami once characterised this as the shift from club-like *Gemeinschaft* to the emergence of global *Gesellschaft*, even though the latter does not exclude the succession of the former by younger generations. See Hidemi Suganami, “The English School, History and Theory”, *Ritsumeikan International Affairs*, 9, 2011, p.32.

[2] C.A.W. Manning, *The Nature of International Society* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962), pp. 132 and chapter XVI.

[3] Hidemi Suganami, “British Institutionalists, or the English School, 20 Years On”, *International Affairs*, 17(3) (2003), pp. 253-272.

[4] Jason Ralph, “Another Revolt against the West?”; Roger Epp, “Translation and Interpretation: The English School and IR Theory in China”, both in Robert W. Murray (ed.), *System, Society and the World*, published for e-International Relations.

[5] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Political Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Giorgio Shani, “‘Provincializing’ Critical Theory: Islam, Sikhism, and International Relations Theory”, *Cambridge Review of International Studies*, 20 (3), 417-433; and “Towards a Post-Western IR: The *Umma*, *Khalsa Panth*, and Critical International Relations Theory”, *International Studies Review*, 10 (4), 722-734; Rosa Vasilaki, “Provincialising IR? Deadlocks and Prospects in Post-Western IR Theory”, *Millennium*, 41(1), pp. 3-22.

[6] Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Introduction.

[7] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Introduction (The Rise of Modern Paganism)* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), Overture.

[8] Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso), p. 29.

[9] Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner), pp.2-6.

[10] Martin Wight, “Western Values in International Relations”, in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), p.122.

[11] Originally the term “Westfailure” is from the late Professor Susan Strange. Yet unlike her usage the author is using the same word in a very different meaning, indicating the discipline’s

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failure not to see outside of the West as a possible resource of own development. For the original use, see Susan Strange, “The Westfailure System”, *Review of International Studies*, 25(3), pp. 345-354.

[12] Andrew Linklater “Civilizations and International Society” in *System, Society and the World*, pp. 25-28. Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

[13] Linklater, *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[14] Wight, “Western Values in International Relations”, pp. 90-91.

[15] Adda Bozeman, *Politics and Culture in International History: From the Ancient Near East to the Opening of Modern Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960). It is also worth noting that one of praises for the book appeared at the backpage is provided by Wight himself.

[16] Suganami, “The English School, Theory and History”, p. 43.

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