

Is the English School Just Another Paradigm in IR?

Written by Ricarda Scheele

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RICARDA SCHEELE, OCT 24 2013

1. Introduction

The study of International Relations is characterised by competing theories and approaches whose advocates claim absolute knowledge. When early developments of the English School emerged around the *British Committee on the Theory of International Politics* in the 1960s, it was just an unexploited resource in IR as it still seems today. Its key thinkers' early rejection of positivism, the notion of an international society and even a world society as well as their concerns about norms and values were indeed unprecedented in the study of International Relations. Yet, its methodological pluralism also raised criticism, rejection and even hostility, particularly in the American IR community. In the early 1990s scholars, including Barry Buzan, rose to the challenge to make the English School more popular, applicable and accepted as a theory of thought. Within this ambition, the claim by Buzan (2001: 472) is to be located: 'The English School is not just another paradigm to throw into the tedious game of competing IR theories'. With his quote he contests not only the nature of the English School, but also its place in the discipline.

In what follows, this essay interprets Buzan's claim and examines whether the English School is a paradigm after the definition of Kuhn (1962) in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. As it is argued, the English School does not meet the criteria as its very characteristics inherently rule out such a classification. Consequently, one question remains: what is the English School instead? Given the lack of a fully unified community, an internal dilemma is determined to which even English School thinkers do not seem to find a consensus. On the one hand, this lies in the belief that the school ought to aim for a more coherent and strict research programme in order to become more widely used and accepted. On the other hand, scholars hold that for the school to maintain its characteristics and contributions to the study of IR, methodological pluralism has to be prioritised over mainstream demands. Consequently, it is maintained that the English School constitutes a *school* that does not compete with paradigms on the same basis, but instead is an arena for syntheses and even internal disputes. This label also accounts for the internal dilemma which is examined in this essay.

2. The English School and IR

To understand Buzan's claim concerning the under-exploitation of the English School in IR, an understanding of its key concepts is indispensable. Thus, fundamentals of the English School, its development as well as key debates in IR, referred to by Buzan as 'the tedious game' (2001: 472), are now examined prior to the interpretation of Buzan's quote.

The idea of the school has been that a comprehensive understanding of IR requires the consideration of more than one worldview (Little, 2000: 398; Devlen, James and Özdamar, 2005: 174). Its interpretive approach rejects positivism and the stiff application of scientific approaches. The emergence of the English School reaches back to the *British Committee on the Theory of International Politics*, initiated 1959, as well as to lectures at the *London School of Economics* held by Manning and Wight even before (Bull, 1976). In *Diplomatic Investigations*, today considered a milestone in the solidification of the school, Butterfield and Wight described the aim of the committee as an enquiry of 'the nature of the international states-system, the assumptions and ideas of diplomacy, and the ethics of international relations and war' (1966: 11). Waever (1998: 85), who identifies four evolutionary phases of the English School, considers the initiation of the committee and the publication of *Diplomatic Investigation* as the first

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phase, followed by a second and third phase of consolidation running approximately from 1966 to 1977 and 1977 to 1992 respectively. Waever's categorisation mainly orients towards publications of texts that contributed to the school's solidification. Whereas the 1970s and 80s were characterised by a recession with a decline in research due to the death of several founding fathers, the closure of the committee and consequently a lack of structure and input, the fourth phase running from 1992 is marked by the ambition of scholars to revive the English School[1]. In this phase, Buzan's quote is to be situated.

In the English School, three, apparently opposing theories, are combined, interlinked and synthesised: International system, international society and world society. Originally taken up by Wight (1991: 7), the three traditions show a different nature of international politics and cover 'interrelated political conditions which comprise the subject matter of what is called international relations'. Wight defined these attributed conditions as international anarchy, diplomacy and commerce, and the concept of society respectively. Methodological approaches are associated with each categorisation: Realism to Wight's Hobbesian international system, rationalism[2] to the Grotian international society and revolutionism to the Kantian world society (Buzan, 2001: 475). In an international system the maintenance of states' internal and external sovereignty has highest priority and power politics between states is the main level of analysis (Bull, 1977: 8; Buzan, 2001: 474). Bull defines an international system as follows: 'A system of states (...) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have a sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some measure – as parts of a whole' (1977: 9). This 'whole' is an international anarchy and is not only defined by co-operational, but also conflictual contact among states, features zero-sum games and struggles of states for power.

The concept of international society forms the core of the English School and has already been prioritised by Butterfield and Wight (1966: 12) in *Diplomatic Investigations*. An international society is present when a group of states share common interests and values and 'form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions' (Bull, 1977: 13). States adhere to common rules and values, because they interact and depend on each other in terms of trade, economic or social interaction. Yet, states' sovereignty maintains highest priority and its preservation is subordinate to the preservation of international society itself. In a world society the level of analysis changes from states and their elites to the individual (Bull, 1977: 24). There is no escape from values and common rules and institutions establish based on a sense of common values across individuals. This leads to a limitation of states' sovereignty and to the suspension of a system of states. Concluded, the three concepts entail different ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies (Little 2000: 399; Neumann, 2001: 503). Their equal recognition involves pluralism in many ways and, combined with the early and consistent rejection of positivism and the inclusion of norms and values, constitutes a main contribution to the study of IR.

The English School also has to be considered within the realm of IR. The discipline, whose nature in itself is subject to debates, is characterised by competing theories whose proponents claim absolute knowledge. The categorisation of IR development in four key debates indicates the continuous competition for attention and prevalence. One reason why this competition seems to be a never-ending process is given by Kuhn (1962: 148), who argues that proponents of opposing theories live in different worlds that are incommensurable.

Buzan (2001) takes up these circumstances within the study of IR and argues for the reconvention of the English School. His starting point is the school's reputation within the Western IR community and the title 'The English School: an underexploited resource' already indicates both his dissatisfaction and ambition to enhance the present usage. Buzan assesses the situation from two perspectives. From an external point of view, Buzan (2001: 471) argues that the time is ripe and IR would be a valid enterprise, because its *zeitgeist* had changed from a theoretical environment towards a discipline more receptive to pluralistic and normative debates. Internally, he maintains that the English School sets apart from other IR theories insofar as it does not reduce itself to a single research programme, recognises three different stories of IR and features historicist, constructivist and pluralist approaches (2001: 471). These are opportunities for the English School to occupy a middle ground and to differentiate from the 'tedious game of competing IR theories' whose claim for absolute knowledge, according to Buzan, still wrongfully dominates the discipline.

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These arguments form the basis for Buzan's legitimation that the ES 'deserves' to have a bigger role in IR and is able to lay the foundation for a grand theory. Yet, he acknowledges present limitations to the school's functionality. In his opinion, the school lacks direction, cohesion and clarity and calls it a 'laissez-faire attitude that will not suffice' (2001: 479). Substantial redevelopment including more research, clarifications and a clear research programme are key prerequisites for the ES and its scholars to achieve. This intention is also evident in an earlier work in which he proposed stronger connections between the English School and constructivism (Buzan, 1993); an ambition to position the school as a research programme next to Neorealism and Liberal Institutionalism.

3. The English School – A Paradigm?

Buzan claims that the ES is 'not just another paradigm' within the study of IR. In order to evaluate Buzan's argument, the following hypothesis is initially tested: 'The English School is a paradigm in the discipline of IR'. The term paradigm most commonly refers to Thomas Kuhn's (1962) concept developed in his work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn (1962: x) defines paradigms as 'universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners'. He proposes two key characteristics that will be further used for analysing the English School. First, a paradigm 'attract[s] an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activities' and, second, it is 'sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve' (Kuhn: 1962: 10).

According to Kuhn (1962: 43), a paradigm's prevalence in social sciences is limited in time since in the course of scientific development a paradigm is naturally replaced by another. Kuhn here introduces the notion of 'paradigm shift' and the alternation between phases of normal science and of a revolutionary phase. He maintains that paradigms are incommensurable and it is not possible to tell which explanatory capacity is better. Instead, only the research community decides; a paradigm is valid as long as the community accepts it. To evaluate scientific growth of theories objectively, Lakatos (1970: 132-7) introduced research programmes to prescribe sequences of problems, techniques and methods when pursuing research.

Kuhn's first core aspect holds that a paradigm attracts an enduring community away from other approaches. From the argument it follows that an exclusive cycle whose members belief in the pre-eminence of their scientific achievements is formed. Here Kuhn (1962: 20) maintains that advocates of a paradigm only communicate with those who share their view. This does not apply to the English School. There is indeed a distinct research community associated with the school, which, however, is not exclusive. Based on methodological pluralism the English School shares certain epistemological and methodological aspects with other theories, which is the basic condition that theories can actually 'talk to each other'. A dialogue with IR theories is even desired by its advocates (Little, 2000; Dunne, 1995) given the school's ambition to occupy the middle ground in IR. Buzan (2004: 2) explicitly addresses his thoughts to 'followers of the Wendt's mode of constructivism'.

Consequently, English School advocates are not so much occupied with associating themselves with the school and dissociating from other approaches. According to Bellamy (2005: 4), they are more concerned 'with unravelling contemporary political puzzles than explicitly identifying themselves within schools of thought'. Calls are made both internally and externally that the vague, physical and contextual boundaries need to be marked out (Buzan, 2001; Finnemore, 2001). A fierce criticism of the school's supposedly imprecision was raised by Jones (1981), who in the same breath called for its closure. Thus, as opposed to paradigms whose advocates spend their energy on justifying their thoughts and defending it against criticism, English School thinkers are predominantly content-driven.

Another feature speaks against school's categorisation as a paradigm. Kuhn considers paradigms incommensurable, because they tell stories from different perspectives. This provokes fragmentation of IR and theories' struggle for prevalence. The English School approaches the concept of incommensurability by incorporating different worldviews and synthesising theories. This makes the English School in turn commensurable with other theories, such as constructivism (Buzan, 2004: 3). The school clearly features a synthetic account and does not embrace either/or framings typical for paradigms (Bellamy, 2005: 11). Thus, it takes up methodological approaches from different theories and forms a distinct notion. This also implies the inclusion of realism and positivist approaches, which aloud Little (2000: 404), at first sight, seems 'perverse', but is just consistent. What it

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differentiates is the unexceptional application of scientific approaches to IR. Wight (1991: 30) argued that no concept should triumph over the other as has been the case in the 'inter-paradigm debate'. This notion also excludes a research community's belief in the pre-eminence of a paradigm.

The second aspect of Kuhn's paradigm holds that a paradigm is open-ended and provides the research community with sets of problems to solve (1962: 10). In a phase of normal science one paradigm prevails and only then knowledge progresses. This progression is achieved by researching within the ontology of the paradigm, in short 'puzzle-solving' (Kuhn, 1962: 35), in order to find consistent solutions and to maintain the paradigm's pre-eminence. Consequently, there is no aim for novelty or anomalies. Advocates of paradigms follow a deductive research approach and often 'force nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education' (Kuhn, 1962: 5). In other words, empirical data has to fit the paradigm, not vice versa. The English School seems to pursue a different path.

Already in *Diplomatic Investigations*, Butterfield and Wight (1966: 12) maintained that 'their procedure has been, rather, empirical and inductive'. It rejects the procedures, in particular of dominant American theories, to operationalise concepts and formulate testable hypotheses. It is the appropriate methods that follow from a set of questions, not the other way around (Hurrell, 2001: 489). Furthermore, the different exploitation of history is to be emphasised, which is 'investigated rather than postulated' (Neumann, 2001: 503). Another aspect is the engagement with novelties and anomalies which would unsettle the paradigm. The main aim is to uphold a paradigm's validity, which results in the fact that anomalies are explained within the paradigm's boundaries. English School scholars seem to acknowledge the explanatory limitations of the school and try to incorporate new problems and diverse opinions. Evidence can, for instance, be found in *Diplomatic Investigations*. Allowing for different perceptions on the same phenomena, Butterfield and Wight published two essays on 'The Balance of Power'. Yet, the school's tolerance and incorporation of different world views should not be over-interpreted. Methodological pluralism builds *the* characteristic of the school and, thus, virtually requires this tolerance and openness to novelties.

Yet, the school's tolerance also reaches internal limitations. One example is the inherent contradiction between the enforcement of human rights and the maintenance of states' sovereignty (Cohen, 2004). This also reflects the school's bipolarity between 'solidarists' arguing for state interventions to promote human rights, and 'pluralists', concerned with the violation of states' sovereignty. Also Buzan (2001: 479) expresses his concern that this polarisation might not only split IR in general, but the English School's *via media*.

With his quote Buzan has clearly started a fundamental discussion about the English School's nature. The analysis clarified that the school's characteristics exclude a classification as a paradigm and the hypothesis is to be rejected. The school does not provide model problems and solutions as its methodological pluralism prevents to determine which of the involved variables have priority. Furthermore, the school neither is an exclusive cycle working towards its pre-eminence nor does it attempt to research within the given ontological approaches to uphold its validity. As will be made clear in the following section, given its severe internal disputes it cannot even be considered community-based. In the context of his article, Buzan's predominantly negative connotation of a paradigm is evident. He argues that the English School stands above paradigms and is *the* solution to the tedious games in IR. However, Kuhn (1962: 16) certainly has a point when explaining the importance of paradigms for the production of knowledge: ' (...) [I]t permits selection, evaluation, and criticism'.

4. The English School – What is it?

The previous analysis showed that the English School does not meet the criteria of a paradigm. As a logical consequence, the true nature of the school and its position in the discipline of IR is now examined.

Buzan argues that it is 'not just another paradigm' in the study of IR. Right after his claim, Buzan (2001: 472) provides an explanation which gives the reader an indication of what he means: 'It is, instead, an opportunity to step outside that game, and cultivate a more holistic, integrated approach to the study of IR'. Indeed, the terms 'paradigm' and even 'theory' are rarely associated with the English School in academic literature. Rather, it is called a 'cluster of scholars' (Suganami, 2005: 35) or a 'platform from which to build bridges to related discourses' (Buzan, 2001: 480).

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Indeed, the approach to draw upon other disciplines such as history, law, philosophy or theology as well as the concern about norms and values and the rejection of positivists methods definitely set the English School apart.

Yet, another aspect determines the school's nature. It constitutes an early attempt to establish a counterpart to the worldwide dominant US community in IR (Brown, 2009). Buzan stresses his ambition of forming a community that is not only distinct from the American, but one that can also compete with it on equal footing. It is Britain's own brand, Brown argues (2009: 222). Indeed, Buzan's ambition mirrors the concerns of many scholars, also outside the English School, since in 1977 Hoffmann had declared what was evident at this time: IR is an American discipline. Thus, Buzan's reference to a paradigm in 'tedious games' can be considered a direct link to the American positivist community. In this line, the English School can be considered a means to challenge American IR and to establish a distinct British approach.

Buzan and others maintain that the only way to compete with established IR theories is introducing a clear research programme to develop a more coherent and 'robust body of thought' (Buzan, 2001: 479). Here indeed, Buzan's quote uncovers an internal dilemma with both descriptive and normative dimensions. The dilemma lies in the internal and external disunity of scholars about what the English School is and what it should be. On the one hand, textual clarifications are demanded in order for the school to be better understood, accepted and applied (Finnemore, 2001). Guzzini (2001) maintains that the English School community should decide for certain ontological and methodological ideas and Dunne (1995) even calls for the complete exclusion of certain ideas. He argues that the school's anti-positivism and anti-realism has to be stressed in order for the school to be more trusted. To become accepted in the US, the school's added value needs to be clarified, says Finnemore (2001: 512). Also Buzan (2001: 479) favours this side and claims that the school's fragmentation leads to the fact that its 'main opus is becoming less than the sum of its parts'. They hence call for a refinement, the enhancement of causal explanatory capabilities and consequently seek to render the English School more mainstream. Such developments, however, would evidently limit the school's distinctive characteristics and ultimately render it just another paradigm.

For this reason, another group of scholars seeks to promote the school's characteristics and prioritise its contributions over far-reaching acceptance and usage in IR. Little is a key advocate of this approach. His central argument is that an comprehensive understanding of IR is only possible when embracing the school's methodological pluralism. For Little this also includes to acknowledge or borrow from realism or liberalism without caring about accusations of inconsistency. Like Little, also Hurrell (2001: 489) demands stronger contributions from cognate disciplines. Jorgensen (2000: 28) argues that neglecting mainstream approaches and staying an outsider can even be advantageous as the school's richness becomes evident.

The discord between these two present positions makes clear that the English School still seems to be in an process of identification. It seeks to synthesise fragmentations in IR, but is in itself highly fragmented. Here the term *school* should be emphasised. The label accounts for its tolerance, its incorporation of partly contradicting ideas and concepts and does not require its advocates to be in complete agreement. As an arena for synthesising and integrating knowledge and even internal disputes, the English School does not compete with paradigms on the same level. In his article about the under-exploitation of the school, Buzan missed this internal dilemma and the opportunity this debate might have for the English School's future development in the discipline of IR.

5. Conclusion

Buzan claims that the English School is 'not just another paradigm' in the study of IR and, thereby, provokes questions about the school's nature and its place in the discipline. To evaluate this claim, the essay first identified the school's main contributions to the study of IR as being its consistent rejection of the rigid application of positivism, its methodological pluralism and its concern about norms and values in international politics. After contrasting these characteristics with the notion of a 'paradigm' as elaborated by Kuhn (1962), the essay demonstrated that the English School does not meet the criteria of a paradigm. In fact, the school's characteristics inherently rule out this classification. The methodological pluralism, hence the recognition of the notions of an international system, an international society and a world society render the targeting of model problems and solution an impossible, and indeed undesirable endeavour. Furthermore, the English School neither is an exclusive cycle working towards its pre-

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eminence, nor does it attempt to research within given ontological approaches to uphold its validity. Instead, the English School constitutes a valuable means to challenge the present thought patterns in the study of International Relations.

At the same time, the essay detects severe disputes among its advocates about the school's nature and its future direction. An internal dilemma lies, on the one hand, in scholars advocating a more coherent research programme to further the acceptance of the English School in the discipline and, on the other hand, in scholars defending the school's distinct characteristics over its mainstream use. This dilemma reveals much about the school's true nature. It constitutes a *school* and an arena for synthesising and exchanging knowledge and allows for debates and even disputes beyond the ontological boundaries of existing theories in IR. In the discipline, however, the winners of the game are still the ones who tell the stories in the end (Jorgensen, 2000: 10). Hence, it remains to be seen to what extent the distinct nature of the English School will ultimately enable its scholars to write stories.

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[1] Waever denoted the fourth phase from '1992 to the present'; meaning 1998, the date of his publication. I assume that this phase can be easily extended to today, given the still active ambition of scholars to promote the English School. An example is a project at the University of Leeds ('English School and International Relations Theory').

[2] The English School uses a different notion of rationalism than realists: their notion is not utilitarian but a progress of reasoning and a progress influenced by norms (Little 2000: 404).

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Written by: Ricarda Scheele
Written at: University of Bristol
Written for: Dr. Benoit Pelopidas
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