

# An Introduction to the English School of International Relations

Written by Robert W. Murray

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## An Introduction to the English School of International Relations

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, JAN 5 2016

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Most theories that examine the global arena focus on either one, or a small number of, issues or units of analysis to make their case about the nature or character of the global realm. While some theorists may desire alterations or a decline in the power of the state, states have not declined so far as to be removed from their place as the central actors in international relations. Even those efforts that aim at changing politics above the state level to focus more on humanity than purely state concerns often rely on states to implement new doctrines. The changes to interstate relations and the new issues facing the world at present require new ways of approaching international relations, without abandoning rational preferences completely. One often overlooked theoretical lens which could allow for the type of theorising required to encompass a more accurate evaluation of contemporary international relations is referred to as the English School.<sup>[1]</sup>

Succinctly, the English School, or society of states approach, is a threefold method for understanding how the world operates. In its original articulations, the English School was designed to incorporate the two major theories that were trying to explain international outcomes – namely, realism and liberalism. In order to come to a better, more complete understanding of IR, English School theorists sought to answer an essential question: 'How is one to incorporate the co-operative aspect of international relations into the realist conception of the conflictual nature of the international system.'<sup>[2]</sup> According to English School logic, there are three distinct spheres at play in international politics, and these three elements always operate simultaneously. They are, first, the international system; second, international society; and third, world society. Barry Buzan provides an explanation of each sphere:

1. **International System** (Hobbes/Machiavelli) is about power politics amongst states, and Realism puts the structure and process of international anarchy at the centre of IR theory. This position is broadly parallel to mainstream realism and structural realism and is thus well developed and clearly understood.
2. **International Society** (Grotius) is about the institutionalisation of shared interest and identity amongst states, and Rationalism puts the creation and maintenance of shared norms, rules and institutions at the centre of IR theory. This position has some parallels to regime theory, but is much deeper, having constitutive rather than merely instrumental implications. International society has been the main focus of English School thinking, and the concept is quite well developed and relatively clear.
3. **World Society** (Kant) takes individuals, non-state organisations and ultimately the global population as a whole as the focus of global societal identities and arrangements, and Revolutionism puts transcendence of the state system at the centre of IR theory. Revolutionism is mostly about forms of universalist cosmopolitanism. It could include communism but, as Wæver notes, these days it is usually taken to mean

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liberalism. This position has some parallels to transnationalism but carries a much more foundational link to normative political theory. It is the least well developed of the English School concepts and has not yet been clearly or systematically articulated.<sup>[3]</sup>

The English School incorporates realist postulates, such as an emphasis on the primacy of states interacting in an anarchic system, but combines that realist understanding with the notion of a human element emerging from the domestic sphere. Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell claim that 'international relations cannot be understood simply in terms of anarchy or a Hobbesian state of war'.<sup>[4]</sup> The most important element of the English School, international society, therefore operates based on the influence of both the international system (realism) and world society (revolutionism).

Within the English School itself there are two distinct divisions, which interpret the conduct and goals of international society very differently. The first is the *pluralist* account, which adheres to a more traditional conception of IR by placing its emphasis on a more Hobbesian or realist understanding of the field. Pluralists, according to Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, stress the conduct of states within anarchy but are still sure to note that states cooperate, despite the existence of self-interest.

A pluralist framework places constraints on violence, but it does not outlaw the use of force and is, in any case, powerless to eradicate it ... . War is not only an instrument of realist foreign policy but is also a crucial mechanism for resisting challenges to the balance of power and violent assaults on international society.<sup>[5]</sup>

The pluralist version of international society is founded upon minimalist rules, the protection of national sovereignty, and the quest to create and maintain international order. The constraints imposed on international society by the system of states and the condition of anarchy are thought to be the most important factors in explaining and understanding the conduct of a pluralist society of states, and such a close relationship to realist theory is what keeps the pluralist conception of the English School within a traditional IR framework.

The second interpretation of international society is referred to as the *solidarist* account. Solidarist conceptions of international society are interpreted in various ways, and can incorporate a variety of IR theories. Solidarists typically place their emphasis on the relationship between world society, or third level, and international society. In its earliest articulations, solidarism focused predominantly on Kantian or liberal understandings of IR, since the primary focus was on how the individual within the state affected the conduct of the society of states.<sup>[6]</sup> This allowed for notions such as human rights, individual security and peace to permeate the normative foundations of the international society.

Over time and since the end of the Cold War, the solidarist account of international society has also been used and interpreted by critical theorists, who want to maintain the state in their theory but find a way to include critical, global or human concerns. Barry Buzan argues:

This view stresses global patterns of interaction and communication, and, in sympathy with much of the literature on globalization, uses the term society mainly to distance itself from state-centric models of IR ... [world society] is aimed at capturing the total interplay amongst states, non-state actors and individuals, while carrying the sense that all the actors in the system are conscious of their interconnectedness and share some important values.<sup>[7]</sup>

The focus on individuals, norms, values and even discourse have come to provide a forum for liberal and critical projects in IR to use the English School as a method of both explaining and understanding the world from a perspective which does stray from realism but does not reject the primacy or necessity of the state in global affairs.

There is little doubt that the English School has grown in its popularity since the end of the Cold War, and the post-1990s period in English School theory has been termed as the School's 'reorganisation' by Buzan and other prominent scholars who adopt the international society approach. One of the most interesting elements of the School is the diversity of theoretical allegiances and geographical location of those who consider themselves to be within the School and the plethora of work done under the society of states banner over the last two decades.<sup>[8]</sup> A large advantage to a middle-approach like the English School is that on one level, it does incorporate the realist elements

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of IR with an emphasis on the state. On another level, however, the world society element of English School theory is able to allow for a wide array of theorists to discuss various critical elements and their effects on the society of states. Whether these come in the form of emancipation theory, globalisation theory, neo- or postcolonial theory or even postmodern thinking, the critical thinkers who choose to adopt an English School method are forced to ground their work in some understanding of the state or international society. Making sure that any contemporary efforts to examine the international arena can maintain traditional elements is an essential component of modern IR. Robert Jackson highlights this point as he states:

Contemporary international relations theory tends to be a mixed bag of unrelated approaches which usually are not in dialogue. I would borrow less from unrelated disciplines and make better use of the abundant traditional resources which are available for theorizing contemporary problems of international relations seeking thereby to add to our accumulated historical stock of knowledge.<sup>[9]</sup>

As a result of such a pluralistic model, the English School can be said to represent a coherent and advantageous method for achieving a broad and complex understanding of modern international political issues.

## Notes

[1] For a comprehensive introduction to, and historical account of, the English School, see Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 1998).

[2] B.A. Roberson, 'Probing the Idea and Prospects for International Society', *International Society and the Development of International Relations Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002), 2.

[3] Barry Buzan, 'The English School: an underexploited resource in IR', *Review of International Studies* 27:3 (2001), 474.

[4] Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell, 'Bull's Conception of International Society', *Hedley Bull on International Society* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 4.

[5] Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 131.

[6] Ole Wæver, 'International Society: Theoretical Promises Unfulfilled?', *Cooperation and Conflict* 27:1 (1992), 98.

[7] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 64.

[8] For a comprehensive bibliography of English School sources, see 'The English School of International Relations Theory', <http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/research/international-relations-security/english-school/> (accessed January 25, 2013).

[9] Robert Jackson, 'Is there a classical international theory?', *International theory: positivism and beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 216.

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