

# World Society and English School Methods

Written by Cornelia Navari

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CORNELIA NAVARI, JAN 17 2016

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The English School in IR theory is generally associated with the notion of international society. Indeed, it is often referred to as the international society approach. Its emblematic text is Hedley Bull's *Anarchical Society*[i], where Bull contrasted British approaches to international relations with those American and realist approaches where states are driven solely by power politics and egoistic materialism, the only laws being 'the laws of the jungle'. Bull argued that although the international realm could be typified as anarchical in the sense of lacking an overarching authority to define and enforce rules, it did not mean that international politics were anarchic or chaotic. Contrary to the billiard-ball metaphor of international politics, states are not just individual elements in a system. In practice, there is a substantial institutionalisation of shared values, mutual understandings and common interests; hence, the 'anarchical society'. Indeed, he argued that even ethics were an integral part of world politics, and that prudence and morality were not mutually exclusive.

'International society' is currently understood in two senses. On the one hand there are its fundamental or 'primary' institutions, as Barry Buzan has distinguished them.[ii] These are its bedrock institutions, which Buzan has characterised as agreed practices that have evolved over time. Originally identified by Hedley Bull, there were five sets of practices that contributed to maintain order in international society: diplomacy, international law, great power management, power balancing and the regulated use of force (or simply 'war' as Bull understood the term). Buzan has recently added the market, reflecting the developing institutions underpinning globalisation and K. J. Holsti has added colonialism, a tendency in which he includes humanitarianism and rights interventionism.[iii] These practices exist as habits and common understandings, with a few rules. But they are also institutionalised in 'secondary' institutions – international organisations such as the United Nations. The best known example is the requirement for Security Council concurrence to initiate measures to protect the peace and punish offenders of civilian immunity in wartime, which is an institutionalisation of great power management.

As developed by Hedley Bull, an international society was to be contrasted with an international 'system'. In a system, patterns of regular behaviour could be observed, such as during the Cold War when the United States and Soviet Union avoided interfering in one another's blocs or spheres of influence. But such evidence of mutual restraint should not be taken to be signs of an emerging society since they were not underpinned by joint values or mutual understandings. They were the result of fear, or a prudent calculus on interests, likely to change as interests changed. As Barrie Paskins has observed, a 'community of terror' is not a community.[iv] By contrast, the understandings underpinning an international society represent deep values, such as the value of sovereignty or the value of international law, unlikely to change (or at best to undergo slow evolution.) Equally, however, an international society does not imply a deep commitment to communal values. If one contrast was with a system, the other was with a 'community'. In an 'international community', mutual understandings have developed to the point of shared goals and common world visions. A society, as understood by Bull, is characterised only by a shared view of proper procedures, and by procedural norms, not by shared ends. Barry Buzan has made a contrast between a 'thin'

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international society, such as represented in the United Nations, with a 'thick' international society as represented by the European Union.[v] Some would argue that the European Union is well on the way to becoming a true international community, with a common vision of the political good and a common defence system, common laws and agreed adjudication, leaving behind the idea of self-help that marks an international society.

Buzan has also been at the forefront in developing the idea of a world society, the term he prefers to that of 'international community'. A true world society is marked by 'the global identities of individuals'. It has less to do with how states behave than how individuals perceive their identities — whether, for example, young persons in Britain conceive of themselves as European as well as, or instead of, British. Buzan calls it 'the idea of shared norms and values at the individual level but transcending the state.'<sup>[vi]</sup> It is constituted by the global societal identities and arrangements of individuals, non-state organisations and the global population as a whole; and it would be institutionalised in a wealth of non-governmental organisations, such as Oxfam or Doctors without Borders or the International Society of Authors.

Navari has explored the explanatory preferences of the classical English School theorists as they appear in the classic texts.<sup>[vii]</sup> She agrees that the ideas of system, society and community can be used as structural concepts, each related to different modes of action; she also agrees that they are at the centre of the English School approach. But she observes that the classical theorists did not initially employ their structural concepts in a causal mode. They did not originally look for the causes of events, such as the causes of wars, at least not as 'causality' is understood in the formal literature. Their explanations, she points out, are generally in the *intentional mode*; that is, they explain events and outcomes by reference to the main actors' aims and intentions. She observes that the classical English School thinkers distinguished between mechanistic (causal) outcomes and chosen (intentional) outcomes: for Herbert Butterfield, Martin Wight and other 'founding fathers', an international *society*, as opposed to a system, was primarily the product of choices, and not causes.<sup>[viii]</sup> Accordingly, she has identified the classical approach as 'participant observation'. In this approach, the research explains the conduct of foreign policy by observing the formulators of that policy and by gaining an understanding of their intentions.

There are, however, other distinct approaches in the English School armoury, which relate to different research concerns. Hidemi Suganami, who first suggested the title 'British Institutionalists' for the School,<sup>[ix]</sup> has pointed to its concern with institutions. The fundamental or primary institutions of international society such as diplomacy, international law, the balance of power and state sovereignty are regularised and partly institutionalised practices. These would be identified by their regulatory rules, such as the rules for receiving diplomats or the rules on the extra-territoriality of an embassy. A second set is those of Robert Jackson, who has identified the English School's subject more broadly as 'codes of conduct'.<sup>[x]</sup> His focus is not so much with institutions as with the practices of 'statespersons' to discern their normative content. The questions he asks are, for example, how does a UN agent dealing with refugees understand his or her responsibilities, and to whom or what do they consider themselves responsible? A third focus is that of Richard Little and Barry Buzan who are concerned not with actors but with 'environments of action'. They argue that the central concepts of English School thought – international system, international society, and world society – are different environments of action, different social realities ('structures' in the contemporary parlance), which exist in a dynamic relationship with one another and which require incorporation into the consideration of conduct.<sup>[xi]</sup> In short, Suganami emphasises institutions; Jackson emphasises agents; and Little and Buzan emphasise structures.

If the focus is institutions and rules, then one approach would be via international law. Peter Wilson has explained the English School understanding of international law, distinguishing between Positive Law – law that has emerged – and Aspirational Law – laws and procedures that may be emerging.<sup>[xii]</sup> To determine whether a substantive institution has emerged, the researcher should ask whether institutional developments, such as human rights, contain definite obligations, whether they are sufficiently defined to allow a judge to determine derogation, and whether derogation gives rise to a sanction of some sort. To determine whether a substantive new institution is taking shape, the researcher should ask whether resolutions lead to further elaborations in later resolutions, and whether the endorsement of a new institution is hearty or sincere, on the part of a government or population of a state (Navari has recently used the model to evaluate the emerging democracy norm<sup>[xiii]</sup>). This is classic institutional analysis as understood in political science.

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If the focus is on codes of conduct, then the procedure would be, as Robert Jackson has explained, the personal interview where the research interrogates the subject's reason for acting. In this method, the interviewer takes an 'insider view'; and he relates the present concerns of the subject to the classic concerns of statesmanship, such as how to understand security, or how to construct a balance of power to achieve stability.[xiv]

Richard Little has justified the use of varied approaches by reference to the underlying understandings of the classical English School theorists. According to Little, the classical English School theorists identified the reality of international relations with a 'diversity of action arenas', not merely with 'international society', and these insights are embedded in traditional English School habits of analysis — notably, different methods as applicable to different levels of analysis and to different forms of social structure. In consequence, he maintains that methodological pluralism is a necessary entailment, and a necessary requisite, of the English School approach, depending on the emphasis of the individual analyst and his or her particular research question.[xv]

Little's schema draws directly on the notions of international system, international society and world society, respectively. He argues that each of these settings has different methods appropriate to its analysis: cost-benefit analysis in the context of a system of states; institutional analysis and comparative analysis in the context of a society of states; and institutional analysis and normative argument in the context of world society.

Buzan has gone further and proposed that Little's structure may be used to identify not only the sources of change in international society but also the identification of the causes of change. Elaborating on the concept of 'world society', he has argued that international society is not a way station on the historical road from anarchy to a world society but rather that an international society cannot develop further without parallel development in its corresponding world society; that is, by the development of elements of 'world culture' at the mass level. But he has also argued, in the manner of Hedley Bull, that a world society cannot emerge unless it is supported by a stable political framework and that the state system remains the only candidate for this.[xvi] The methodological implications are that 'world society' should be the focus of study, both as an object of growth and development and also as a source of change, but within the context of a (changing) state system.

## Notes

[i] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

[ii] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 161-204.

[iii] K.J. Holsti, *Taming the Sovereigns: Institutional Change in International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[iv] Barrie Paskins, 'A Community of Terror?', in *The Community of States*, ed. James Mayall (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 85-95.

[v] Barry Buzan, 'The English School: an underexploited resource', *Review of International Studies* 27:3 (2001), 487.

[vi] Buzan, 'English School: an underexploited resource', 477; see also John Williams, 'The International Society-World Society Distinction', in *Guide to the English School in International Studies*, eds Cornelia Navari and Daniel M. Green (Oxford: Wiley, 2014), 127-42.

[vii] Cornelia Navari, 'What the Classical English School Was Trying to Explain and Why its Members Were not Interested in Causal Explanation', in *Theorising International Society: English School Methods*, ed. Cornelia Navari (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), 39-57.

[viii] See *Diplomatic Investigations*, eds Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966) for the early writings of the 'founding fathers'.

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[ix] Hidemi Suganami, 'British institutionalists, or the English School, 20 years on', *International Affairs* 17:3 (2003), 253-72.

[x] Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[xi] Richard Little, 'International System, International Society and World Society: A Re-evaluation of the English School', in *International Society and the Development of International Theory*, ed. B.A. Roberson (London: Pinter, 1998), 59-79; Richard Little, 'History, Theory and Methodological Pluralism in the English School', in *Theorizing International Society: English School Methods*, ed. Cornelia Navari (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), 78-103; Buzan, *From International to World Society*.

[xii] Peter Wilson, 'The English School's Approach to International Law', in *Theorizing International Society: English School Methods*, ed. Cornelia Navari (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), 167-88.

[xiii] Cornelia Navari, 'Liberalism, Democracy and International Law: An English School Approach', in *After Liberalism*, eds Rebekka Freedman, Kevork Oskanian and Ramon Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[xiv] Robert Jackson, 'The Classical Approach as a craft discipline', in *The Global Covenant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 77-96.

[xv] Little, 'History, Theory and Methodological Pluralism'.

[xvi] Buzan, 'English School: an underexploited resource', 486.

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