

Pluralism, the English School and the Challenge of Normative Theory

Written by John Williams

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JOHN WILLIAMS, FEB 11 2016

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The pluralist position within the English School is typically associated with an account of international society that stresses three principal features: the centrality of inter-state consensus to international order, the significance of ethical diversity (or pluralism) amongst states, and the fragility of normative progress. This chapter aims to explain and challenge each of these features and to outline an alternative version of the pluralist position that retains key English School claims whilst arguing in favour of the potential insights available from reorientating analysis towards a subaltern perspective on politics as an important element of a normatively rich version of pluralism.

To turn to the first two of those pluralist characteristics, pluralist accounts of international society derive from essentially empirical claims: that international society's principal members are states which have, through historical interaction and experience reached consensus around certain norms and principles of behaviour sufficient to sustain order amongst themselves.[i] This process, the standard account continues, has been significantly affected by the fact of great diversity in ethical principles and schemas within and across political communities. As a result, the third claim follows: the consensus amongst diverse states that sustains order is a fragile one and seeking to push it in any specific 'progressive' direction is a dangerous course of action. This account is most typically associated with Hedley Bull, James Mayall and Robert Jackson as leading exemplars of the pluralist position.[ii]

This account reflects many of the virtues of the English School's approach to theorising international relations. The first two claims draw heavily on the English School's extensive interest in and work on the historical development of international societies, exemplified in a number of landmark volumes.[iii] This historical interest is also reflected in the contribution of English School scholars to understanding the institutions that manifest particular historical instances of international societies. Such institutions, understood as settled and durable social practices that help to constitute actors, frame practices and enable assessment of action in specific issue areas, have emerged as a major theme of contemporary English School scholarship.[iv] Such institutional constellations are historically dynamic, and therefore understanding the processes through which they change is an important empirical research project within the English school, and one with significant implications for normative analysis, too. This significance includes the idea of their fragility as a result of the historically specific and consensually based nature of such institutions.

The engagement between international society and the nature, development and effectiveness of international law as one institution of international society has greatly influenced English School efforts to formalise an account of 'pluralism' and 'solidarism' as distinct intellectual positions. Both labels originate in an assessment of the extent to which law enforcement takes place.[v] This has subsequently extended into the dominant contemporary understanding, rooted in the idea and ideal of 'solidarism' as a cosmopolitan ethic predicated on a universal human community rooted in the universal moral significance of each individual, such that international law and its

Pluralism, the English School and the Challenge of Normative Theory

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enforcement is an extension of cosmopolitan, even 'natural', rights possessed by all humans. This most commonly manifests itself in a commitment to universal human rights of the sort associated with landmark international declarations, treaties and covenants as the most politically prominent and theoretically dominant version of such cosmopolitanism. The English school's path to this form of solidarism is, characteristically, indebted to its engagement with changing historical context and circumstance, most importantly the development of debates over the nature of a post-Cold War international order and especially the emergence of intense debate about humanitarian intervention. In this arena, work by English School writers such as Andrew Linklater on political order and Nicholas Wheeler on humanitarian intervention proved to be influential well beyond the realms of the English School.[vi] The claim to offer a progressive account of not only how international society was developing but also how it ought to continue to develop appeared to have been passed to a liberal solidarism not just better able to capture the normative aspirations of the post-Cold War decade but also far more attuned to deep-rooted structural changes in world politics being wrought by globalisation and the challenge to the English School's state-centrism.[vii]

The transition from Bull's empirical assessment of the extent of consensus on the enforcement of international law to a far more self-consciously normative proposition is a path that pluralism has not followed to anything like the same extent. The best-known contemporary restatement of the pluralist cause, Robert Jackson's *The Global Covenant* remains rooted in the empirical claims about the historical evolution of inter-state consensus under conditions of ethical diversity I highlighted at the outset, with the same normative conclusion about the fragility of interstate order and thus the need for extreme caution in advocating alterations that cannot be demonstrably rooted in interstate consensus. Jackson's neglect of non-state forms of politics and political economy and resistance to cosmopolitan ethical propositions is striking.[viii] This led Andrew Hurrell to argue for the abandonment of the pluralist position as normatively viable within the English School, even though it may retain some analytical utility in accounting for the behaviour of non-liberal states.[ix] This analytical value has arguably increased subsequently, given the push-back against the liberal trajectory of the 1990s by established and emerging world powers such as Russia, China and India. The debates over the concept of Responsibility to Protect – arguably the high-water mark of liberal solidarist interventionism when launched in 2001 and subject to critique, resistance and reformulation, or even outright rejection, by Russia, China and many post-colonial states in the period since – is instructive in this regard.[x]

This persistent empiricism inevitably and unavoidably hampers pluralism's normative dimension and stifles the possibility of a more ambitious normative agenda. Paradoxically, this comes at the expense of pluralism's ostensible interest in ethical diversity. By reducing ethical diversity to that manifest amongst the world's states and by seeing this phenomenon as an empirical fact about the world, pluralism of the sort typically associated with the English School is only able to offer a normative assessment of the *consequences* of the existence of ethically diverse states, it cannot offer a properly normative defence of the value to be found in such diversity itself.

Developing a pluralist account predicated on the desirability of ethical diversity in the world holds out the potential for pluralism to follow the path of solidarism towards becoming a more fully developed normative theory of international relations. In parallel with solidarism's commitment to ethical cosmopolitanism, usually via human rights, pluralism can offer an account of the ethical significance of diversity. Achieving this requires substantial development of some of the philosophical and methodological claims that are usually associated, although often only implicitly, with the pluralist position in the English School.[xi] Pluralism's empirical proclivities are manifest in its rather uncertain, and unsatisfactory, methodological stance. Often associated with what Bull[xii] described as a 'classical approach', something restated by Jackson,[xiii] this produces scepticism of formal methodologies, whether those associated with positivism or with philosophically oriented approaches to ethics.[xiv] In Bull's case in particular, this latter was also aligned with a high degree of moral scepticism, such that claims to access to moral truth or truths, and the means by which such access could be gained, was treated with considerable suspicion.[xv]

Overcoming moral scepticism and an empirical view dominated by an international society of states at a time when the transformations of world politics wrought by globalisation have dramatically extended the range of actors important to world politics is imperative to the future of a pluralist stance. Fortunately, there is much to commend the opportunities this offers, in terms of the theoretical development of the English School and the analytical insights, both empirical and normative, that are potentially available. Key to this is the recognition that ethical diversity is only loosely linked to statehood, and while pluralists have long accepted that the diversity of states is a poor facsimile of

Pluralism, the English School and the Challenge of Normative Theory

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the wealth of human communities and their diversity, its overwhelming commitment to the centrality of states to international relations and the necessity of preserving interstate consensus around rules and norms of state conduct have precluded any serious engagement with the full panoply of ethical diversity. An openness to human communities as the source of ethical diversity connects pluralism to engaging with a world politics unshackled from international society and enables it to better embrace the importance of the transnational and world society dimensions of the English School's theorising of international relations.[xvi] Further, a focus on community means that pluralism offers a way to recognise one of the most important features – analytically and normatively – of contemporary world politics: the complex interplay in human politics of simultaneous multiple community memberships, often establishing competing or even irreconcilable normative demands.[xvii]

This is not to dismiss the durability of international society and its normative agenda – pluralism's traditional arena of enquiry – but is to locate that within a far more diverse arena of world politics such that sub-state, non-state and transnational actors can be accommodated and the role they play in shaping ethical debate about how to live in a complex world can be analysed.[xviii] Seeing community as the key analytical level for theorising ethical diversity enables pluralism to encompass the multiplicity of ethical schemas that help to constitute individuals through their multiple community memberships, it also generates the potential for establishing within pluralism a distinctive ethical perspective to challenge its characterisation as conservative, even regressive.

Central to this claim for the potential for a progressive pluralist position is an argument derived from the origins of the subaltern studies historiographical movement, associated initially with historians of the Indian sub-continent.[xix] One of the most interesting aspects of that work, redolent of its indebtedness to an intellectual tradition that traces its origins back through Gramsci to Marx, is the powerful claim that understanding power structures is best achieved from the perspectives of the victims of such structures.[xx] This, too, challenges the normal pluralist perspective, which typically heavily privileges political elites and their perspective on the ethical challenges of maintaining the rules and norms of international society and its institutions.[xxi] This creates a critical edge to pluralism that Hurrell,[xxii] for example, regarded as blunted beyond repair and creates the conditions whereby the productive theoretical tension between pluralism and solidarism, which had run into the sands of ostensible incommensurability and pluralism's normative theoretical inadequacies, can once again contribute positively to the development of English School theory.

English School pluralism need not deserve its current reputation as a statist, conservative and declining facet of the English School project, retaining only some analytical utility in relation to the behaviour of some states within international society. What ought to be the core normative claim of a pluralist position – that the ethical diversity of human communities is to be valued and championed – can be recovered from the empiricism and moral scepticism of its post-Bull agenda. To do so requires substantial revision to pluralism's methodology and a far-reaching reorientation of its analytical focus towards communities, in their diversity, multiplicity and continuing interaction through individuals' multiple memberships. The costs involved, however, are repaid by the opportunity to re-establish pluralism as a vital contributor to the English School's distinctive theoretical ambition to offer analytical insight and normative evaluation of a world politics that goes far beyond the inter-state.

Notes

[i] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 13.

[ii] Bull, *The Anarchical Society*; James Mayall, *World Politics: Progress and Its Limits* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Robert H. Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barry Buzan, *An Introduction to the English School of International Relations: the Societal Approach* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 89-112.

[iii] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds, *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: a Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1992); Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius,*

Pluralism, the English School and the Challenge of Normative Theory

Written by John Williams

Colonialism and Order in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[iv] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Laust Schouenborg, 'A New Institutionalism? The English School as International Sociological Theory', *International Relations* 25:1 (2011), 26-44; Kilian Spandler, 'The Political International Society: Change in Primary and Secondary Institutions', *Review of International Studies* 41:3 (2015), 601-22.

[v] Hedley Bull, 'The Grotian Conception of International Society', in *Hedley Bull on International Society*, eds Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

[vi] Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations for a Post-Westphalian Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998); Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[vii] John Williams, 'Pluralism, Solidarism and the Emergence of World Society in English School Theory', *International Relations* 19:1 (2005), 19-38.

[viii] Jackson, *The Global Covenant*.

[ix] Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 292.

[x] E.g. Alex Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect: a Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[xi] John Williams, *Ethics, Diversity and World Politics: Saving Pluralism From Itself?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 36-110.

[xii] Hedley Bull, 'International Theory: The Case for the Classical Approach', *World Politics* 18:3 (1966), 361-77.

[xiii] Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, 44-96.

[xiv] E.g. James Mayall, 'The Limits of Progress: Normative Reasoning in the English School', in *Theorising International Society: English School Methods*, ed. Cornelia Navari (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 209.

[xv] Renee Jeffery, 'Australian Realism and International Relations: John Anderson and Hedley Bull on Ethics, Religion and Society', *International Politics* 45:1 (2008), 52-71; John Williams, 'Hedley Bull and Just War: Missed Opportunities and Lessons to be Learned', *European Journal of International Relations* 16:2 (2011), 179-96.

[xvi] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*

[xvii] Williams, *Ethics, Diversity and World Politics*.

[xviii] *Ibid.*, 111-48.

[xix] E.g. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[xx] Williams, *Ethics, Diversity and World Politics*, 124-34.

[xxi] Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, 134; Peter Wilson, 'The English School Meets the Chicago School: The Case for a Grounded Theory of International Institutions', *International Studies Review* 14:4 (2012), 567-90.

Pluralism, the English School and the Challenge of Normative Theory

Written by John Williams

[xxii] Hurrell, *On Global Order*, 292.

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John Williams is Professor of International Relations in the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University, UK. His research work on the English School has concentrated on normative theory, particularly in relation to pluralism and the ways in which ethical diversity in world politics can be understood. This work has culminated in *Ethics, Diversity and World Politics: Saving Pluralism From Itself?* (2015 Oxford University Press) which seeks to fundamentally reform the pluralist strand of English School theory as a normatively progressive basis for understanding world politics beyond the society of states.