A Brief Case for the English School

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For most of its history, three paradigms have dominated the discipline of International Relations: realism, liberalism, and—depending on the decade—either constructivism or Marxism. These research programs compete and inform one another, each with a particular set of tools and assumptions. Much of the work done in IR ultimately falls under the broad umbrella of one of these three great paradigms.

Or so it goes. In fact, this story reflects an almost exclusively American perspective on IR. Elsewhere in the world, scholars' understandings of IR have long drawn upon a fourth approach, one whose rich literature engages the very foundations of international politics: the English School. Established during the 1960s and 1970s in the writings of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull, the English School examines the emergence, character, and effects of international society, particularly its importance to world order. Indeed, long before constructivism the English School had fixed society and socialization at the centre of its approach to international relations.

Yet the American academy practically ignores the theory. While in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, as many as nine percent of IR scholars identify with the English School, in the United States these scholars sum to scarcely two percent. By contrast, self-identified realists, liberals, and constructivists each constitute as much as 21 percent of the American community. Moreover, many students have not even heard of the English School before—likely because American professors dedicate less than 3% of their Intro IR

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courses to the paradigm.[1] This neglect of one of the oldest and richest theories of international relations demands redress.

This essay presents an abbreviated introduction to the English School (ES) and the arguments for its distinct approach to international relations. Scholars have treated both topics before, far more extensively and exhaustively than the space this article allows; yet, these treatments rarely reach beyond the ES community, and the American academy remains largely indifferent to the theory. Therefore, this essay purposes not to present new material but rather to outline the English School for an audience unfamiliar either with its ideas or with its merits as a distinct paradigm.

Part I briefly surveys the distinct approach of the English School to international relations. Part II identifies flaws in the paradigm, focusing particularly on its scientific shortcomings. Part III argues for the incorporation of the English School program within the American academy, not only because it engages questions that academy ought to ask, but also because American political science can best address the theory's flaws. Finally, the essay concludes with two exhortations: first, for scholars to synthesize ES accounts with their own research, and second, for professors to include classic English School texts in their syllabi.

The English School and IR Theory

The English School begins with the division of IR theory into three categories: Hobbesian, Kantian, and Grotian.[2] Where realism traces its ancestry to Hobbes and liberalism to Kant, the English School derives from Hugo Grotius' 17th-century writings on international law. Thus, while ES scholars do not expect a world-state or a Kantian federation to emerge, neither do they treat international relations as a Hobbesian world untamed by moral or social force. Instead, they sit squarely between the extremes.

For Hobbes, the state of nations is a state of war. Anarchy precludes the possibility of actual rules and norms, and distrust lurks in all dealings. Realists have largely followed his example, emphasizing the recurrence of war and the inherent commitment problems of international politics; moreover, they tend to treat norms

and institutions as epiphenomenal, of no actual causal weight in the calculations of power-maximizing states. The harsh reality of anarchy makes international politics eternally antagonistic.

For Kant, the spread of democratic ideas and institutions must result in a *Perpetual Peace*. Liberals thus hypothesize the pacifying power of interdependence, the attenuation of anarchy by international institutions, the possibility of collective security, and, most importantly, the peaceful relations between democracies.

By contrast, Grotius, while accepting international relations as a state of nature, views this condition as creating the possibility of society and not the necessity of war.[3] Hedley Bull—the most important theorist within the ES tradition—began his project thus:

> Anarchy: "Absence of rule; disorder; confusion" (*O.E.D.*) The term here is used exclusively in the first of these senses. The question with which this essay is concerned is whether in the international context it is to be identified also with the second and third.[4]

The passage captures the essence of the English School as the *via media* of IR theory: it accepts the realist position of anarchy as given, rejecting the liberal idea of the international authority of rules and institutions; but it rejects the realist conclusion of the inevitability of strife, accepting the liberal belief in the possibility of moral progress in the international system. In international politics, the absence of rule does not necessitate the absence of order, and anarchy and society can coexist.

This society is the central idea of the English School, and *The Anarchical Society* is its central text. In it Bull lays out his concept of an international society: "when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values…conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another."[5] He proceeds to outline a theory of international order, or the means by which this society is and has been preserved. He remarks on the roles of European-style diplomacy, civilizational commonalities, the balance of power, and international law in the development of the modern order. He also considers the importance of each factor

and how else actors might maintain society. Ultimately, his broadly analytic and historical analysis established the norm of ES inquiry, and his unequalled exploration of international society and order became the permanent basis of the paradigm.

Since Bull, the ES has expanded beyond broader questions of international order and justice, addressing topics from socialization to revolution. Modern ES scholarship publishes in a variety of journals, most notably the *Review of International Studies*. There and elsewhere ES scholars take up issues from terrorism to normative theory.[6] Most powerfully, the School engages the question of revolution, since of all paradigms it can best capture the danger revolutionary ideology presents to a settled states system.[7]

Throughout these works runs the common ES theme: that out of anarchy emerges an international society, wherein actors respect the essential rights of one another and cooperate to maintain the stability of their relations. The story of realism is conflict, the story of liberalism, progress. The English School balances the two, neither bleak nor triumphant, describing the fragile society born of international anarchy and the delicate order that protects it.

Flaws in the ES Approach

The ES has three major flaws: its core ideas remain vague and underspecified; it cannot account for the emergence of society; and it largely rejects the idea of social scientific inquiry. Taken together, these call into question its continuing merit as an independent IR paradigm.

The ES prides itself on its analytic categories, early in its history elaborating the most sophisticated conceptions of some of the most important phenomena in international relations. Yet these concepts remain unclear. The core ideas advanced by Bull and Wight evince remarkably little theoretical development since their first exposition thirty and forty years ago. Indeed, instead of improving clarity the ES proliferates a sundry of vague and often incompatible conceptions of international society.[8] Where realism and liberalism refine their conceptions of actors, regimes, and institutions to almost technical levels, the English School stagnates. Nevertheless, this imprecision should not challenge the theory overmuch. The balance of power has long proven notoriously difficult to

define, yet stands at the center of some of the most respected theories in the discipline.[9] The English School's concepts require clarification, but so do all research programs' ideas.

More problematically, the English School lacks a theory of the emergence of international society. Given the unrivalled importance of this concept to the School, this gaping chasm in the literature fundamentally impedes further theorizing: if the ES cannot say what causes international society, it cannot hope to understand what maintains it. This lacuna has not gone without attempted correction. Barry Buzan argues that "a common desire for order is the minimum necessary condition to begin the evolution of international society along *gesellschaft* lines."[10] Yet Buzan's claim commits a fundamental error: as Waltz says, final causes are not efficient, and wishing otherwise will not make them so. Dilemmas of collective action, reputation, and information all oppose the easy move from desire to practice. The wish for international society can no more effect its realization than can the wish for world peace. Without a better understanding of the origins of international society the English School cannot progress. All English School theory depends upon the resolution of this essential question.

Finally, the ES tends to disdain positive social science, though the position is not universal. Ostensibly the ES prides itself on methodological pluralism. In reality, such professed pluralism disguises a simple lack of standards. As Martha Fennimore observes, "there is remarkably little discussion of research methods…[or] answers to such basic evidentiary questions as how do you know that you are correct."[11] Similarly, Linklater and Suganami contend that "English School authors are deeply sceptical about ever finding scientific laws pertaining to international relations," yet also favor historical generalization—they are torn between a 'nomothetic' and 'ideographic' view of political science.[12] In general ES scholars are content to deal with a little cognitive dissonance and ignore this incongruence. But this will not do. The positions are incompatible. Either the English School must make its peace with science or the two must part ways. With a contradiction at its heart, no wonder ES methodology appears unintelligible. Until it resolves this tension, the ES will not attract scholars outside its narrow community.

Toward an (American) English School

These three flaws have haunted the English School since its inception, and they remain unaddressed. Fortunately, with its emphasis on the scientific study of politics, the American academy—and perhaps only the American academy—possesses the tools necessary to remedy the shortcomings in the ES approach. Where the English School is vague, the American academy is almost painfully precise, operationalizing everything. If Michigan can code two centuries of conflict then it can refine a definition or two. More promising still, formal methods might help explain the emergence of international society. Perhaps where thick sociological theories have failed, an economic, structural explanation can succeed: it is possible that game theory can do for peace what it has done for conflict. Finally, the culture of the leading American journals imposes a rigor on the field. What are now untried conjectures would become, if taken up stateside, tested hypotheses. In short, the American academy can instill in the ES a much-needed discipline, clarifying its concepts, testing its ideas, and explaining the center of its theory—international society.

As American political science can strengthen the English School, so too can the English School enrich American discourse. The strength of the American academy is its rigor, but this strength may also blind it: too often American scholars have neglected problems beyond the ready reach of their paradigmatic toolkits. By contrast, the ES has not hesitated to inquire after the great questions, developing the tools and concepts necessary to their understanding. Two questions in particular highlight the possibilities of inter-paradigmatic enrichment.

First, what is the role of the balance of power *vis-à-vis* international society and how is international order constructed and maintained? To some extent liberalism has taken up the latter question, most recently in John Ikenberry's *After Victory*. Yet these treatments evince many of the same flaws as the ES.[13] Moreover, liberalism tends to focus more narrowly on institutions, examining the conditions of international politics within international society rather than the foundations of that society. As Armstrong observes, liberalism and regime theory deal almost exclusively with

collaboration and not the deep patterns that make such collaboration possible.[14] That the American academy neglects such questions is surprising, not least because the modern liberal order is largely an American creation, and America of all countries has an interest in its continuation.

Second, how are states socialized into international society? In particular, how does international society deal with revolutionary states? Of all the paradigms the English School can best address revolution. Realism cannot understand it, since to a realist all states are quite alike. Though realism originated the status quo/revisionist distinction,[15] realists have never adequately addressed the dichotomy.[16] As well, though constructivism has long concerned itself with socialization, it has never produced a cogent theory of the process. By contrast, the English School engages revolution from the perspective of an established order. Its analysis focuses on the ideas which undergird international society, the clash of ideologies in international conflict, and the mollification and integration of revolutionary regimes. Recent events in the Middle East have only highlighted the inadequacy of IR theories; perhaps the English School can help elucidate a stronger theory of revolution and world order.

Still, the concern then arises that an 'Americanization' of the English School would destroy its distinctive character. Most ES theorists would consider the imposition of positive social science anathema to their program. Even those American scholars who do engage the ES often treat it as exotic, like an anthropologist in an isolated culture, hesitant to alter its ideas lest they impinge its strangeness.[17] Regardless, the English School must overcome its flaws or fade into oblivion. If the choice is a loss of distinctiveness or death then the ES must sacrifice its peculiarities to ensure its continued existence.

Thus, the time is ripe for a new synthesis of the English School with American IR. With liberalism ES can illuminate international institutions and their deeper relevance to international society. With constructivism it can finally begin to outline a theory of socialization. Yet perhaps the richest potential for synthesis lies between the English School and realism.

In *The Balance of Power* Richard Little enumerates the four great modern theorists of the august idea: Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer, and Hedley Bull.[18] Surprisingly for a theorist most interested in society, civilization and norms, Bull articulates a sophisticated notion of the balance of power and its importance to world order. Though he ultimately demurs on its indispensability, he argues that for the greater part of modern history the balance of power has provided the foundation of international order. Wight goes further, recognizing the balance of power as both "the guarantee of the independence of Nations…[and] the cause of war…the absence of government means…[states] will seek to maintain some kind of balance between them."[19] Where liberalism and constructivism often deride the realist preoccupation with the balance of power, the English School shares it, privileging the perennial notion within its theory of international society.

Besides the balance of power, the ES shares with realism an emphasis on structure.[20] Anarchy is not just "what states make of it."[21] International politics have an intrinsic structure, and this structure determines the range of state action. Reality exists beyond social construction, and its constraints are actual, not imagined. Recognizing these two commonalities, Barry Buzan has attempted to synthesize neorealism and the English School. His synthesis, though not unproblematic, illustrates the potential for theoretical development. Buzan is also famous for promoting the ES outside its normal audience, calling for its greater engagement with other traditions. The English School has extended its hand and it is time that American scholars took it.

Conclusion

The American academy is infamously insular. Thus, while U.S. scholars estimate that English School scholarship constitutes only four percent of the IR literature, U.K. authors estimate the same proportion at twenty-five.[22] Yet the School is no mere regional theory, rather contributing much to American scholarship and bringing a deeper understanding of international politics than the political science in the States usually obtains. The questions it raises and the concepts it has

developed are indispensible to a full understanding of international relations. In addition, only American-style political science can remedy its chronic infirmities, introducing powerful methods and scientific clarity into its otherwise murky theorizing. The time is propitious, therefore, for American scholars to begin to synthesize the school with their own approaches.

Even more importantly, professors should consider the inclusion of ES works in their syllabi, particularly in introductory IR courses. At the least students should read the first and fifth chapters of Bull's *Anarchical Society*, together a mere 40 pages—surely a total even the most indolent freshman can digest. The first chapter presents a counterpoise to Waltz without the extreme position (or arduous prose) of Wendt, introducing the idea that society can emerge from anarchy. It also enables students to see that realism's conclusions, for all their theoretical rigor, do not follow from their premises—all without rejecting anarchy as the wellspring of IR theory. The fifth chapter engages the most important topic in international relations, the balance of power, and offers a necessary compliment to its treatments by neorealists and constructivists. In particular, the brief section on the Functions of the Balance of Power addresses its importance, including its foundational role within the modern Western system, without mistaking it as inevitable, presenting in pages what has taken others innumerable books.

The English School, so often forgotten in the States, has one of the richest literatures in political science, and no understanding of international politics is complete without its conceptions of order and society. It deserves equality with the great IR paradigms and a place in any introduction to the discipline. It is time IR theory embraced the English School.

Notes

[1] Richard Jordan, Daniel Maliniak, Amy Oakes, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney, "One Discipline or Many? TRIP Survey of International Relations Faculty in Ten Countries," Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project, Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations, The College of William and Mary, 2009.

[2] Martin Wight originates the distinction, calling the categories Realist (for those who, like Hobbes, emphasize anarchy and war), Revolutionist (for those who, like Kant, believe in the essential unity, and especially the moral unity, of mankind), and the Rationalist (for those who, like Grotius, believe man's rationality tempers his baseness). Martin Wight, *International Theory: the Three Traditions* (Leicester: Lecester University Press, 1991), 8-15. (Note that, though the work was published posthumously in 1991, its ideas were well known to early theorists of the ES, including Bull, who drew upon them in his 1966 essay and throughout his career.)

[3] Wight paraphrases the Grotian position thus: the "state of nature, therefore, is a condition of sociability, if not of society…This is the argument Locke uses against Hobbes…the state of nature is not a state of war." Ibid, 38.

[4] Linklater and Suganami draw particular attention to this remark. Qtd in Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *The English School of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 45.

[5] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Scoiety: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 13.

[6] For instance, Barak Mendelsohn examines terrorism to leverage the challenge to international society from units it cannot recognize as legitimate. Barak Mendelsohn, "Sovereignty under attack: the international society meets the Al Qaeda network," *Review of International Studies* 31(2005): 45-68.

[7] The socialization of the Bolsheviks after 1918 is a favorite topic; see for instance Stephen White and Stephen Revell, "Revolution and integration in Soviet international diplomacy, 1917-1991," *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 641-654. The best general treatment of revolution in the ES, and the work typically cited by ES perspectives on the topic, is David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[8] Indeed, Jones even uses the concepts' obscurity to advance his own argument against positivism. R.J. Barry Jones, "The English School and the Construction of International Society," in *International Society and the Development of International Relations Theory*, ed. B.A. Roberson (London: Continuum, 2002), 233.

[9] Waltz counts at least eight different definitions. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 117.

[10] Barry Buzan, "From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory meet the English school," *International Organization* 47.3 (1993): 336.

[11] Martha Finnemore, "Exporting the English School?" *Review of International Studies* 27.3 (2001): 509-10.

[12] Linklater and Suganami, 97.

[13] Still, for all its merits even Ikenberry's treatment fails to adequately clarify the

meaning of international order, defining order as "the 'governing' arrangement among a group of states, including its fundamental rules, principles, and institutions," though it never clarifies which rules are "basic" to the system, or how such rules can be objectively identified. G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 23.

[14] David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: the Revolutionary State in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 309.

[15] The distinction appears in the works of Carr, Morgenthau, and Kissinger, all early realists.

[16] The most sustained attempt is Randall Schweller's neoclassical realism; see for instance Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19.1 (1994): 72-107. Unfortunately, as Legro and Moravcsik point out, with Schweller's argument "coherence and distinctiveness are thereby sacrificed," undermining his attempt to account for domestic preferences within the realist framework. Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24.2 (1999): 30-1.

[17] Finnemore goes so far as to argue that "cohesion and discipline [are] antithetical to the" English School. Finnemore, 509.

[18] While Bull is out of place among the three realists, he absolutely belongs in any text on the balance of power. Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[19] Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, 2ed, Eds. Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1986), 184.

[20] Cf. the place of neorealism and ES within Wendt's typology of IR theories. Though he classifies neorealism as between individualistic and holistic, the theory is called structural realism for a reason, and its omission of the structural sources of identity and preference formation should not obscure its overwhelming reliance on international structure. After all, Waltz expressly condemned any theory that did not rely upon the 3rd image as reductionist, and his successors largely followed this dictum. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 30-2.

[21] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics," *International Organization* 46.2 (1992): 395.

[22] Jordan, Maliniak, Oakes, Peterson, and Tierney, 2009.