

## Who still cares about the English School, and why?

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If it is true that definitional problems are always present in International Relations Theory, the English School is an evident example. Its boundaries are contested, its core arguments defined as heterogeneous by its proponents and inconsistent by its critics. Yet, the English School has its own identity. This is often reflected in the organisation and conceptualization of many IR textbooks that devote specific chapters to the School.<sup>1</sup> In spite of being considered a defeated approach by the IR mainstream, the English School still plays an important role in IR Theory, precisely because of its eclectic and multi-faceted contribution to the discipline.

A useful first step to discover who may be interested in the English School is to have a look at the website of the English School set up by Barry Buzan and currently hosted by the University of Leeds.<sup>2</sup> The list of contributors to the discussions held within the School is so long and varied that it provides a good

indication of why the School deserves attention: it has something to say about almost all the fundamental issues and debates in IR. Therefore, rationalism (another definition of the English School) should raise the interest, among others, of:

- those who are in favour of methodological pluralism;
- those looking for a plausible alternative to the divide idealism/realism;
- those who pursue normative approaches to IR;
- those who place the human being and cultural issues at the core of the IR research agenda;

This paper is structured in four sections according to these areas of interest.

### Methodological pluralism

On the question of method, two questions have characterised the rationalist approach. The first concerns its wide pluralism. The second was essentially defined by the polemic engagement of Hedley Bull, probably the most prominent among the English School scholars, in the debate between traditionalists and behaviouralists. Regarding pluralism, critics have often dismissed the approach of the English School as non-scientific and they have charged it

1. See for instance: Jackson and Sorensen (2007); Sterling-Folker (2006); Dunne, Kurki and Smith (2007); Burchill, Devetak, Linklater, Paterson, Reus-Smit and True (2001).

2. <http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/research/international-relations-security/english-school/> • (last accessed 20/2/2010).

with inconclusiveness and vagueness. Instead, Buzan argues that the English School offers a method for studying international politics that deserves more attention than it has usually received. Its proponents assert the validity and the under-utilization of this “historicist, constructivist, and methodologically pluralist” (Buzan 2001, 472) approach to International Relations Theory. Buzan is right in calling for more attention to a comprehensive approach to IR. He advocates a method that may be useful to tackle several, if not all, the most important theoretical and substantial challenges of international politics and the validity of which is not just limited to a few theoretical debates. To attain this goal, the English School makes use of a multi-level (of analysis) approach, and the historicist focus reflects as much a legacy of the origins of the School as its own enduring identity. IR is considered a humanistic discipline. It is therefore an appropriate field for historical and normative analysis. As Hollis and Smith would express the point, International Relations is a question of understanding rather than explaining (Hollis and Smith 1991). The pluralist aspect is witness to the openness of the School to approaches other than its own, thus enlarging the scope of its agenda.

On the quarrel between traditionalists and behaviouralist, Bull substantially reproduced and developed the historicist argument, stressing that IR is not an

exercise in statistics and quantitative methods but rather a deep historical knowledge coupled with thorough conceptualisation of international politics. Bull observed that history may not be sufficient to understand international relations but cannot be overlooked for at least four reasons (Bull 1972; 1995). First, certain political situations are not merely illustrations of general patterns but genuinely singular events. Second, any international situation is located in time and to understand it the scholar must place it within a sequence of events. Third, the quality, techniques and canons of judgment of diplomatic history as a discipline are often less obscure and controversial than those of theoretical studies. Fourth, history itself is the primary material for the social sciences, which have themselves a history and emerge within a defined historical context. Furthermore, Bull defended the composite approach of the English School asserting that IR is not a single discipline but draws from other disciplines, such as history, political theory and international law. The critics of the English School have never been entirely convinced by these arguments and maintained the idea that rationalism founded its presuppositions on a poor and imprecise methodology. Overall, in spite of the value of methodological pluralism, indeterminacy in method has always been one of the weaknesses of the English School approach to IR.

### **Beyond the divide between realism and idealism: the concept of international society**

The English School largely drew from, and shared elements of both idealism and realism, trying to combine them in an original synthesis. The key contribution to this purpose remains the concept of international society and the role of both interests and values to explain international cooperation.

Rationalism, along with realism, recognizes the great importance of power and the pre-eminence of states in the international arena. Nonetheless, it denies the view of international politics as a state of nature without norms. Drawing largely from Grotius, the English School argues that power and law are both present in the international context. The principal differences of the School from idealism and realism are reflected in the conceptualisation of international society. This is a fundamental definition to understand both the rationalist peculiarity as compared to other stances in IR and the originality of its positions in current debates within the discipline. International society is a norm-governed form of association, where norms emerge only as a requirement for cooperation. Unlike idealism, here international norms do not involve common projects or identities. This means that accepted norms do not go beyond what is required for social coexistence. The international society then performs the important role of providing the anarchi-



cal international system with order. Rationalism recognizes the essential anarchical nature of the international context, but suggests that institutions and practices, such as diplomacy and international law, contribute to the maintenance of the international order, understood as pattern of international activities that sustain basic goals.

How does the English School move forward and explain the formation of international institutions? It is at this stage that values come into play. International organisations are the result of both common interests and values. If international co-existence facilitates, and is underpinned by, rules governing cooperation, international organisations are based on interests, consent and a rudimentary form of justice understood as an expression of the prevailing values in the international society. Common interests are the basis for any international joint effort. Consent is expressed by states to develop institutions promoting those norms that help maintain cooperation and co-existence. Justice in this case means that the same rules apply to everybody, it is a basic commutative (based on rules) form of justice. The innovative character of the English School is to be found in the com-

bination of both common interests and values (bull 1977), an anticipation of a constructivist approach to international relations. Such a conceptualisation of the international society poses a good number of challenges to IR theorizing, the implications of which will be dealt with in the next two sections.

### **A normative approach to the study of international relations and International Relations Theory**

A broadly normative approach to International Theory is one of the most interesting aspects of the English School. Normative concerns as applied to the definition of the international society represent both one of the most challenging suggestions of rationalism and one of its typically tortuous and some times inconclusive paths. The purpose of the English School was 'not to study diplomatic history in the usual sense, nor to discuss current problems, but to identify the basic assumptions that lie behind diplomatic activity, the reasons why a country conducts a certain foreign policy, the ethical premises of international conflict...'.<sup>3</sup> This early statement by Butterfield expresses the explicitly normative commitment of the English School scholars. The departure from realism is evident in that realism conceived of morality and international politics as absolutely distinct spheres.

The application of a normative perspective to the concept of international society resulted in

three fruitful developments. First, the attention to the determinants of foreign policy completed the detachment from the realist/neo-realist paradigm. While neorealism conceived of the system structure as dominant over the units, the English School attributes a significant role to units (especially to the most powerful ones) in shaping the international society. As Buzan suggested, this makes the English School thinking close to Wendt's constructivism in that 'anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt) 1992). This is not the only point of contact between Wendt and the English School. In fact the latter seems also to anticipate that the units' perception of one another is a major determinant in their interactions. This is what Lars Cederman defined as 'strategic tag', which perfectly applies to understand for instance the evolution of Argentine-Brazilian relations since the late 1970s (Cederman 2001).<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the attention devoted to the units invariably calls for the consideration of cultural factors as determinants for international relations. Rationalist scholars maintain that states become so involved in the international system that they transform it into a society. This transformation takes place on the basis of accepted norms and institutions. Now, the problem is: on what grounds are these norms internationally accepted? Do states share a common culture that makes them inclined to accept the same norms? The answer to this ques-

3. Herbert Butterfield, letter to Martin Wight in 1958, quoted in Adam Watson, *The British Committee for the Theory of International Politics*: [www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/research/english-school/watson98.pdf](http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/research/english-school/watson98.pdf) (last accessed 20/2/2010).

4. For the application of the concept to Argentine-Brazilian relations see Gardini (2010, 178-179).



tion is relevant to another important IR divide: the one between cosmopolitans and communitarians. In fact, if the values underlying international norms were pre-existing state interaction, the English School position would shift towards cosmopolitanism. If the values were the result of the interaction, the perspective would be rather a communitarian one.

Thirdly, concerns with ethics directly relate to the tension between order and justice. Hedley Bull recognised that conflicting goals can co-exist within the international society obliging states to make a choice between the two competing principles. He also moved a step forward noting that the concept of justice itself may be subject to different interpretations. However, justice may also be understood in a minimalist way as the principle that the same rules apply to everybody (commutative, or rule-based justice as opposed to distributive or goods-related justice). Yet this would only move the crucial point a bit further: who decides about the 'common' rules and their desirable acceptance? This seems to lead to a cultural relativism very close to communitarianism. None the less, Bull regains immediately a *media via*, typical of the English School, by referring to the international society order as a prerequisite for a desirable humanity order, thus implying the generalised acceptance of order as an indispensable value to attain basic goals such as survival and co-existence.

### **The centrality of the human factor and cultural issues**

Bull's work on the interplay of cultural factors and political behaviour, both defined in normative terms, opened the way to fruitful contemporary studies. This added to the already rich and varied range of research that rationalism has directly or indirectly originated. The traditional interest of the English School for ethic and humanistic studies, including international law, is now part of the current IR mainstream. Issues such as human rights, humanitarian intervention, regional integration, world governance, identity and religious revival are firmly on the agenda of international politics. In recent years interesting contributions have appeared on the unresolved question about the relations between the international society and the different cultures co-existing within it. Chris Brown's research to test whether the concept of international society proves satisfactory in a world where the majority of states are non-European has not been fully conclusive. In fact, both the proposed explanations (the "universal appeal" and the "Europe of mind") are far from unproblematic (Brown 1995). Looking at topical events in world politics, the purported split of the world into a "zone of peace" and "zones of turmoil" appears far more convincing (Singer and Wildavsky 1993). Another interesting link exists between the English School and critical theorists. While the two approaches share a basic starting

point on cultural relativism broadly understood, they differ in their analysis of consequences and implications. On the one hand, rationalism has developed this argument towards a prospective clash of civilisations, further discussed and elaborated by Huntington (1993); on the other, Critical Theory has followed the way leading to the equation of morality and politics, thus constituting a radical challenge to the epistemic foundation of the traditional paradigms. In any case the centrality to international politics of the human being, its ideas, values and beliefs as well as of its community and time is an enduring legacy of the English School. It should be the task of the foreign policy analyst to understand not the world as it is or was, but as seen and perceived by the key actors given their temporal, social and political circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

Last but not least, a final reason, and perhaps not a negligible one, to look with sympathy at the English School is that it represents a genuinely non-American current of thought in International Relations Theory. This pluralism of views can only be beneficial to a discipline too often characterized by parochialism and almost dogmatic crusades. This is even more important in an increasingly open, fluid, and multi-polar world characterised by the growing relevance of non-Western powers, issues and perspectives. Furthermore, despite its name and its essentially British roots, the



English School tries to spread to, and gather contributions from all over the world. Continental European scholars are more and more active within the School and its echo has gained disciples as far as China.

Despite some areas of uncertainty and some theoretical vagueness, the English School has proven to be the most credible challenger to overcome the divide realism vs. idealism and to temper the claims to novelty of social constructivism. The English School defends a pluralist and comprehensive approach to International Relations. The concept of international society still generates academic interest and explains a good number of things in the contemporary international order. The English School normative approach has raised interesting points and brought about significant questions on culture and identity and their relation with politics and morality. Not despite of, but precisely because of its eclecticism, the English School has at least partially addressed most of the topical issues on the agenda of contemporary IR Theory. Rationalism appears far from being defeated. On the contrary, favourable conditions in the international political and academic environment present it with a unique opportunity to raise its profile and gain credibility not only on both sides of the Atlantic but far more broadly. For all these reasons, the English School deserves attention and interest. Furthermore, as a Cambridge-educated scholar I do believe that it would be desirable that also IR scholarship in Cambridge concede more room to rationalism. The British Committee for the Theory of International Politics, which generated the English School, was born and flourished in Cambridge, that academic establishment should make a flag of it.

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