# Regional International Societies, the Polysemy of Institutions and Global International Society

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/01/from-e-pluribus-una-to-ex-una-plures-regional-international-societies-the-polysemy-of-institutions-and-global-international-society/

FILIPPO COSTA BURANELLI,  AUG 1 2013

The recent collection "System, Society, and the World: Exploring the English School of IR" has showed and indeed demonstrated the theoretical and analytical vitality, plurality and multifacetedness of the School, in terms of perspectives to adopt, methods to employ, issues to investigate and concepts to reframe. More than a case of closure (Jones 1981), it seems that the complexities of contemporary world politics, the need to rejoin the normative with the structural and the intractable fuzziness of relations among states in world politics require, if anything, an enlargement of the School. This is indeed very good news.

In this short paper, I want to stress an underlying tension highlighted by Yannis Stivachtis on the regionalisation of international society (Stivachtis 2013) but, perhaps, implicitly, present in other contributions of the collection, and to bring the argument on regional international societies a step forward. The argument is the following: if there are increasingly different regional societies within the international system, and if these international societies rely on different norms, rules and institutions among themselves, to what extent is it possible, and indeed accurate, to speak of a global/Western international society?

It should be stressed from the beginning that due to the limited space available here, I will stay in the comfortable position of presenting the problematique, without claiming to resolve it.

The argument of the "globalisation" of international society is very well-known and IR theorists are fairly acquainted with it. It is sufficient to recall that after the age of imperialism and colonisation (1500-1945), most of the pluralist institutions of international society (sovereignty, diplomacy, great power management, international law) and part of the solidarist ones (most visibly the market) have been adopted by all those newly independent states that entered international society after their proclamation of independence, ranging from the African ones in the 1960s to the former Soviet republics in the early 1990s (Bull 1977; Wight 1977; Bull and Watson 1984; Buzan 2004).

The narrative of regional international societies, as nicely and scholarly summarised by Stivachtis, holds that several sub-global regional social arrangements are differentiating one from another in terms of norms and institutions adopted, as well as in terms of "access" and "barriers" to membership (North 2007).

However, I argue, the regional agenda of the English School has so far neglected what I would define the polysemy of institutions within international society (Costa Buranelli 2013), which in turn relies on a distinction between norms and rules. By polysemy, a notion borrowed from linguistics, it is meant the condition by which a word, a concept or an idea has different meanings albeit retaining the same verbalisation (Lichtenberk 1991). The need to look at several interpretations of institutions and practices has been recently stressed also within Constructivist scholarship, especially if cultural, cognitive and juridical "priors" are to be taken into account in processes of norm diffusion and norm subsidiarity (Acharya 2004; Acharya 2011). As a matter of facts, it has been argued (Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez 2009) that a regional international society can form following three different paths (which are by no means mutually exclusive and can perfectly be at play simultaneously):

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1. a regional international society is born when it adopts one or more institutions than those present at the global level;
2. a regional international society is born when it rejects one or more institutions present at the global;
3. a regional international society is born when it adopts one or more institutions present at the global level but *interprets it/them in a significantly different way*.

This third point, as I said above, has been largely marginalised in the literature on regional international societies. And in my opinion it is exactly this third point that makes the idea of a global international society a difficult one to defend.

As a matter of facts, even those institutions that seem to be universally adopted and accepted may be seen as contested and subject to multiple interpretations. One does not have to go too far to notice how the notion of sovereignty has undergone massive re-interpretations and re-conceptualisation, not just in textbooks but very much in world politics as well. The hot debate on the responsibility to protect (R2P), for example, while largely studied and framed in terms of the "solidarisation" of international society when it comes to protect human rights beyond borders and frontiers, has paid less attention to the problematic dichotomisation of the pivotal institution of international society itself.

Pascual and Benner, for example, have pointed not just at a dichotomy in the interpretation of sovereignty, but rather at a tripartition of it. They argue that the "pooled sovereignty" of the European Union, the "sovereignty as responsibility" as proclaimed by African states and regional organisations (most notably the African Union) on the basis of the Guiding Principles of International Displacement, and the "sovereignty as non-interference" in ASEAN and post-Soviet countries (most notably exemplified in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) represent a real rift in the interpretation and adoption of what is usually considered as the least problematic and most common institution of international society (Pascual and Benner 2012). While the pluralisation of sovereignty is not a novelty in the IR literature[1], here what is stressed is the differentiation of interpretation of its *practice*, not just of its *status*.

The market seems to be another institution far from having a single, uncontested meaning. The recent economic and financial crisis has forced states to reconsider their approach to a liberal, unregulated economy and to worldwide free competition. Quite ironically, capitalism, while widely accepted by international society members, is no longer a private property of liberalism. Rising and dynamic economies outside the Western domain of the global economy are showing that a successful and better protected market economy is possible if the state is taken back into the equation, warranting social protection to its citizens and diminishing the potentially disastrous effects of a unregulated financial activity.

Free enterprise and non-interference of the State in the economic activity of market operators, a defining characteristic of the market economy in the global era (Rosenberg 1994), has yielded to alternative, more hybrid forms of market economies. While China is often taken as a case study here, other economically successful states have entered the market with a strong state component within their domestic economies: Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey, South Africa and Kazakhstan are only the most prominent examples (this is a point tangentially made in Ralph 2013) and the impression is that the appeal of state-led capitalism is proselitising more and more successfully. Recent acrimonious discussion within the WTO, once the temple of Western economic liberalism, have showed how the institutionalisation of the market as meant in the West is far from being accomplished.

International law as well, considered as a monolithic and fairly straightforward institution, is no less subject to redefinition or renegotiation. While in the West there is the tendency to consider individuals part of international law as well, other states rely on a more conservative reading of this institution, entrenching the subjectivity of states and nothing else. Evolution of inter-state relations under international law is countered by those revisionist states which use international law as a means of resolution of conflicts and misunderstandings, rather than as means to modernise and update international society (and, at least in Western intentions, world society).

Making reference to Higgins' crucial distinction between international law as a system of neutral rules and international law as a system of decision-making directed towards the attainment of certain declared values (Higgins

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1995: vi), it can be argued that international law is subject of contestation between those states that seek an improvement and indeed a "solidarisation" of international society via the use of international legal norms and those states that consider international law as the garrison of order and the safe-box of revisionist states in the present world order. The two differences seem to lie not much in the norms emphasised, but rather in the developmental or, on the contrary, the conservative nature of international law, as an instrument of progress or as a tool to enhance the status-quo (for the interpretation of international law in the CIS, for example, see Allison 2009).

Of course, there are other potentially global norms that are subjected to negotiation and interpretation, such as democracy and human rights, but their non-acceptance in non-Western domains is more evident. The focus here needs to be on those institutions that have led theorists to speak of a global, "thin" international society (Buzan 2004).

The central problem highlighted here seems to be that the so-called institutions, or norms, of international society as treated by the English School (especially the analytical strand of it) are more ideal-types, or big concepts, than specific practices or patterns of durable relations. Clearly, in every theory there is a tension between simplification and analytical clarity. Too much of the former is detrimental to the latter, and vice-versa. However, I argue, if we are to study the specificities of sub-global, regional and therefore *differentiated* international societies the balance will necessarily shift towards more analytical precision, and therefore shades and nuances in the adoption of institutions must be stressed.

Following Wittgenstein, according to whom "meaning is usage", the meaning attached to a given institution by a regional group of state will inform and indeed constitute the practice of international politics and the patterns of socialisation among those states, thus drawing the normative and institutional boundaries that define that group as a specific sub-global international society. This, however, creates problems. If even sovereignty and international law, the two "bedrocks" of a pluralist, thin international society, are subject to multiple conceptualisations and interpretations, then how is it possible to speak of a global international society? Interestingly enough, Roger Epp concluded his article by saying that, since historical and cultural nuances play a pivotal role in defining IR "universal concepts", "[e]ven sovereignty will not be the same" everywhere (Epp 2013: 31).

To be sure, one can present the following counter-argument: although there may be different interpretations of an institution, there is always a "core meaning" that allow parties to find a common minimal agreement in the interpretation of a norm. There is certainly truth in this. But the pivotal question is: to what extent does the "minimal" core allow to speak of a global international society? There seems to be general, albeit shallow, acceptance of the *norms* of international society, meant as "principles of conduct", but with an increasing disagreement on the *rules* of it, meant as the ways to *implement* and *practice* its norms. The present status (and indeed evolution) of international politics seems to resemble a "minimal", rather than a thin, international society, where diplomacy seems to be the only institution to enjoy truly full-fledged, common understanding and univocal meaning. This is not entirely different from a pre-global international society, where different societies interacted via diplomatic means and, despite sharing few or no common institutions, were able to regulate their intercourses with fairly shared relational procedures (Watson 1992).

Of course, the present configuration of international relations is very different from those times. A global market economy, environmental concerns, new social media and conditions of political and financial interdependence do not allow us to live in self-enclosed bubbles. But the polysemy of institutions may be taking regional international societies more and more apart, and their future coexistence seems to lie in the constant contestation and renegotiation of fundamental norms and institutions.

Moreover, the polysemy of institutions compels English School theorists to reflect on methods and methodologies, as timely stressed by Navari and Murray in their articles (Murray 2013; Navari 2013). For if institutions assume different meanings in different cultural and social contexts, a renovated attention to participant-standpoint and interpretivism seem to be preferable to analytical, mind-world dualist methods, where the interpretation and indeed the framing of an institution may be more difficult to grasp.

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In sum, it may be poetic, indeed seductive, but perhaps not entirely exaggerated, to argue that the present state of international society resembles, on a bigger scale, Watson's pendulum. In the course of history, several independent societies (or systems, as Wight called them) have been unified and indeed merged into a single Western, global international society. With the competing but at the same time interpenetrating forces of globalisation on the one hand and nation- and culture-driven reactions to it, several sub-global international societies are now slowly but inexorably redefining the contours of global international society, speaking the same language but meaning different things.

A single international society is therefore fragmenting into several ones. From *e pluribus una* to *ex una plures*: whether this is a good or bad thing will depend on our normative stance and our interpretation of international relations. A more humble, but nonetheless difficult task, would be to figure out whether this trend is irreversible, or rather a contingent feature of present-day international society. A third task would be to assess what the prospects for order and justice are in a world inhabited by several international societies. The English School has the theoretical vitality, and indeed the analytical richness, to dig into these big questions. Do not grand questions, in the end, demand grand theories?

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[1] Recall's Krasner's quadripartition of sovereignty in Westphalian, interdependence, international and   domestic (Krasner 1999).

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