The State of the Art of the English School

This brief article wants to document the state of the art of the English School of International Relations. As a matter of fact, next year will mark the 35th anniversary of one of the most famous antagonistic quotes in the discipline of International Relations (henceforth IR). In 1981, in the pages of the Review of International Studies, Roy Jones argued for the 'closure' of the English School, due to its lack of coherence as a research programme, the vagueness of its aims, the poorness of its methodology and the disputable status of the School as a 'theory' (Jones 1981).

Today, not only is the School still open, but it has strengthened its position in academia and academies,[1] it is in dialogue both with other theories in IR and with other disciplines outside the domain of IR, it is becoming more and more fertile in terms of research programme and output, it is in tune with contemporary events and it is even rediscovering its original historical vein.

Proof of this may be found in the following elements: a compendium published for the International Studies Association (ISA) (Navari and Green 2014), a new introductory book published by Barry Buzan (Buzan 2014), an increase in membership in the English School section of the ISA and the establishment of four fully operative working groups with world-wide membership: on the Institutions of International Society, on Regional International Societies, on Solidarism and Pluralism in International Society, and on the History of International Society.

Without neglecting significant criticism and legitimate disagreements on some of the tenets of the theory (Finnemore 2001; Copeland 2003; Spegele 2005), the turning point of the revitalisation of this school of thought (I have chosen this term to satisfy also those allergic to theory not concerned with strict causation) is a famous paper presented by Barry Buzan at the British International Studies Association (BISA) (Buzan 1999). Since then, the English School has engaged with numerous debates within IR, and has been able to provide insightful contributions and additional research material to both young and established scholars. Here, I will focus on the most recent ones.

Developments of and in the English School

The first new research agenda, inaugurated in 2009 by Buzan's and Gonzalez-Pelaez's book on the Middle East (Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez 2009), is undoubtedly the regional one. Departing from the global level of analysis, dear to the first generation of scholars, English School research has recently focussed on the regional level of analysis, applying socio-structural theory of norms and institutions at the sub-global level. Insightful and innovative pieces of work have been produced by a variety of scholars on a variety of regions: Europe (Stivachtis 2008), Scandinavia (Schouenborg 2012), Latin America (Merke 2011), East Asia (Buzan and Zhang 2014), Eurasia (Pourchot and Stivachtis 2014; Kaczmarska 2015), African Union members (Tan Shek Yan 2013), and Central Asia (Costa-Buranelli 2015a).

The merits of this agenda are evident: first, it contributes to a more refined and more theoretically grounded understanding of how norms and institutions are framed, localised and understood in contexts that may be markedly different from the solidarist, liberal Western 'global level'; in this respect, a much-welcome special issue of Global Discourse edited by Yannis Stivachtis critically considers the very existence of a 'global' international society. Second, it brings the English School outside the domains of Eurocentrism. This is something to cherish, especially given the Eurocentric character of its historical production (Bull and Watson 1984). Third, it adds to the wider

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academic field of comparative regionalism, emphasising not institutional design (Acharya and Johnston 2007) nor forms of cooperation (De Lombaerde and Schulz 2009) but primary institutions and socio-structural dynamics.

The second agenda inaugurated, coincidentally again in 2009, is the one on methods. As we have mentioned above, methods have been the Achille's heel of the School for a long time. Yet, the project convened by Navari et al. (Navari 2009) has systematised the methodological (dispersed) pluralism of the School into a coherent toolkit, with better specified epistemological and methodological assumptions and more refined methods of analysis. This agenda is by no means exhausted, with works currently being produced on causation (Friedner Parrat 2014) and even possible dialogue with process-tracing (Costa-Buranelli 2015b).

The third agenda, which brings the English School 'back to the roots', is the historical one. English School scholars have (re)started exploring different international societies across history (Aissaoui 2013), adding original research to the narrative of the 'expansion of international society' (Schulz 2014; Costa-Buranelli 2014), focussing on world society and its impact on the normative structure of international society in given historical times (Pella Jr 2015). This is a very much welcome development of English School research as it positions the School as a valid platform (but by no means the only one) to facilitate dialogue between International Relations and History.

The fourth and last agenda, to demonstrate the vitality and fertility of the School, is concerned with the relationship between *primary* institutions (meant durable, routinised practices, such as sovereignty, diplomacy and international law) and *secondary* institutions (meant as international organisations, such as the UN or ASEAN). Following the work of Buzan (2004) and Holsti (2004) on how these two ontologies are related, Knudsen (2015) and Spandler (2015) have provided new theoretical insights insisting on the mutual relationship between these two categories: if primary institutions give birth and make possible secondary ones, it is also true that secondary ones may shape and modify primary ones. In this respect, Cornelia Navari has convened a research project studying international organisations through the theoretical prism of primary institutions called 'International Organisations in the Anarchical Society'.

Is the English School appealing?

All this is promising and certainly discourages new calls for closures. Nonetheless, it is important to discuss what the importance of the English School is. Why should a first-year student be interested in it? The answer, in my opinion, lies in three of its features: holism, poly-methodology and historical vein paired to normative reasoning and problematisation. I will dig deeper into each of these features.

By holism I simply mean the denial that either agency or structure have precedence in determining the course, the content and the characteristics of world politics. International politics, and especially international society, defined as an arrangement with which states regulate their relations through the use and the common understanding of norms, rules, practices and institutions, is the result of the co-constitution of the agents giving birth to the structure and the structure constituting the roles, the behaviours and the identities of agents. With its emphasis on institutions, the English School allows students and scholars alike to avoid the narrowness of reductionist theories and the deterministic fetishism of structural theories (mostly neorealism and neoliberalism).

The co-constitution of international society and its members, therefore, allows scholars to approach world politics both from the bottom up (how states and individuals sustain, challenge and modify the content and the practice of international society) as well as from the top down (how states and individual conform to and are constituted by the social web of norms, rules and practices informing international relations). This, as it is evident, is a characteristic that the English School shares with Constructivism, and parallels between the two have been already noticed elsewhere (Reus-Smit 2009). It goes without saying that this approach to world politics, relying on both structure and agency and on their co-constitution, is better equipped to explain 'change' in world politics: of identities, of practices, of values.

Moving to the issue of methodology, the English School's renovated interest for methods has already been noted above; nevertheless, it is important to specify that given the plurality of methods available to English School scholars, any research program conducted using ES theory will inevitably benefit from a polyphony of sources and data, not

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necessarily available (or, even worse, interesting) to other theories. As a postulate, it follows that such variety of methods encourages, by definition, a dialogue with other disciplines outside the IR Ivory Tower but nonetheless tangential, such as history, sociology, international political economy, security studies (Buzan 2015) linguistics (Costa-Buranelli 2015c) and anthropology (Terradas 2015). There is also an aspect related to cultural sensitivity, particularly in Asia, where the School is diffusing: despite criticism to its Eurocentric epistemology and overall an expression of Western (theoretical) domination, the English School is considered also open to non-Westphalian politics and is, therefore, anti-hegemonic (Zhang 2014: 235-236).

The third aspect of the English School that makes it appealing to young students and established scholars working in this tradition is its sensitivity to history, the relationship between history, the present and normative reasoning. Unlike realism, which studies history to find and prove recurrent patterns of states' behaviour in world politics, and differently from liberalism,[2] which tends to study history in a progressive and teleological way, the ES studies history in its own rights, focussing on orders, patterns of relations, practices and institutions as arising, deceasing and evolving over time.

This historical sensitivity is, *ça va sans dire*, always accompanied by a desire, a need, an impulse to trace the normative foundations of (historical) international societies. Attention to the values, the priorities, the moral philosophy underpinning relations between states has always been a feature of any English School research program (and, again, one of its peculiarities as compared to realism and liberalism in their neo- variants and constructivism, which are much more interested in epistemological questions than in normative ones).

In fact, the recent research on regions and non-Western international organisations outlined above has shown how values, political priorities and conceptualisations of legitimacy vary across cultures, regions and social systems. Yet, discussions on human rights (Vincent 1987), humanitarian intervention (Wheeler 2003), the benefits of a pluralist order (Ralph 2007) and the ethical consequences of borders and territoriality (Williams 2006) signal that

'the English School is grounded in the practical, in the real-world tussle of power and interests, while at the same time it works through what is possible to say about the nature of obligation and moral responsibility among international actors. This is where ethics and practical interest meet, and it represents the unique contribution of the English School to contemporary normative IR theory' (Cochran 2014: 200).

Indeed, an English School approach to the study of the recent financial crisis, the massive influx of refugees in Europe and the expansion of ISIS in the Levant illuminates important questions concerning the legitimacy, the viability and the practicality of the practices sustaining contemporary international society, with a specific emphasis on the institutions of sovereignty, borders, the market, humanitarian intervention and the protection of the state-system itself.

Conclusions

From what was discussed above, it is clear that the English School of International Relations has resisted well to criticism and calls for closure over the years, refining some of its under-specified aspects without losing its central identity. Not only is it an ecumenical school of thought able to dialogue with several disciplines and other schools of thoughts in International Relations, but it has also been able to bring about a coherent and multifaceted research program thanks to its ontological and methodological pluralism, as well as thanks to the fruitful synergy between senior and junior scholars.

Yet, as Jorgensen has astutely observed, 'the English School is currently in an interregnum between orthodoxy and innovation' (2015: 358), and therefore challenges still lie ahead. For example, the School has yet to provide for what really counts as a primary institution of international society (Jørgensen 2015). This is, in fact, a largely under-researched aspect of English School theory, albeit work on this has recently commenced (Wilson 2012). Also, the study of interregional societies remains largely unexplored, despite tentative initial research (Linsenmaier 2015).

The next years will test the School's ability to live up to its new, promising research agendas. Yet, the sizzling

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community that is forming across the globe, paired to innovative and fresh theorisation well in tune with a solid tradition of thought, is certainly reason for hope.

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[1] Tim Dunne (2008, 2010) asserts that three indicators demonstrate that the English School has been taken increasingly seriously in the global IR epistemic community since the publication of his 'Inventing International Society' (1998): influential textbooks on IR theory now include a chapter on the ES (pedagogical indicator); leading IR journals, notably RIS and Millennium, and the influential CUP/BISA series have consistently published increasing number of works on the ES (editorial indicator); and the fact that 'beyond its heartland, there is significant interest in its [ES] work in continental Europe as well as the USA, Canada, Australia, China and India (Dunne 2010, 136) (epistemic/academic indicator).

[2] This is also a difference with CS, of course with exceptions (See Reus Smit su Constitution of IS)

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