

The Need for an English School Research Programme

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, FEB 2 2016

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Traditionally, the English School (ES) approach to international relations has not been overly concerned with typically American social science interest in methods and empirical testing. As Cornelia Navari notes in this volume, early ES scholars preferred to focus their attention on participant observation as opposed to structure, system or causal variables. It is this lack of methodological rigor that has hindered the development of the ES as a sufficiently empirical *theory* of international relations, and one that should be addressed in order to substantially increase the School's explanatory power in modern international relations theory.

A major problem facing the School's ability to be tested as a *theory* in the social science tradition is the lack of concern with methods and a clear framework by which one could determine whether a scholar was, or was not, using a distinctly English School approach. Dale Copeland effectively summarises a definite gap in ES thought: 'Without knowing clearly what it is that is being explained, there is simply no way of gathering evidence to support or disconfirm a particular [English School] author's position.'^[i] This is not to say that ES scholarship should adhere to the strict positivist standards imposed by American social science at all, but there is validity in saying there are too few commonalities between ES writers to define it as a coherent theoretical lens.^[ii] Richard Little, building on an argument first presented by Buzan, claims that there are at least three distinct ways to view the School:

ES theory may be considered first as a set of ideas to be found in the minds of statesmen; second, as a set of ideas to be found in the minds of political theorists; and third, as a set of externally imposed concepts that define the material and social structures of the international system.^[iii]

Further, some ES writers have attempted to cast the School as more valuable because of its methodological openness and critical possibilities. For instance, Roger Epp argues:

In other words, the English school recollects a tradition – the historicity of open-ended, intersecting, competing narratives – *within* which critical resources are already present. Its erudite, generous horizons contain what amount to enabling prejudices: the biases of openness to an indeterminate future.^[iv]

Even so, the lack of any identifiable hard-core assumptions or foundational principles makes theoretical evaluation of the School and its empirical validity virtually impossible.

Among the main reasons for the School's lack of attention in mainstream international theory is the inability of scholars to test the tenets of the ES, to identify exactly when it can be said a scholar is using the school (and not casually just referring to a society of states), and more importantly, evaluating whether the ongoing body of literature that falls under an ES schema is providing novel contributions, or if the more current conceptions of the School since its reorganisation are actually falsifying what early thinkers like Butterfield, Wight, Bull and Vincent had in mind.^[v] In

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order to address such theoretical looseness, there may be value in attempting to impose methodological rigour to the School.

Perhaps the ideal approach to formulating a more rigorous conception of the ES can be found in the works of Imre Lakatos. In many ways, Lakatos' work on Scientific Research Programmes tries to do exactly what early School thinkers sought to accomplish from the outset – to find a middle ground between two competing theories (in Lakatos' case between Popper and Kuhn) that both had relevance, but fell short in any kind of *truth*.^[vi] For Lakatos, the challenge was providing a way to balance the claims made by Karl Popper on one hand and Thomas Kuhn on the other. Lakatos' contribution to metatheoretical evaluation is a method of determining the novelty of theory and whether contributions actually add value, or ultimately degenerate, the hard-core assumptions of a hypothesis. The driving concern for Lakatos was to determine when one scientific theory should replace another. Lakatos saw Popper's views as too dependent upon falsification and a view of science as too open to dissent:

[Popper] still construes falsification as the result of a duel between theory and observation, without another, better theory necessarily being involved. The real Popper has never explained in detail the appeal procedure by which some accepted basic statements may be eliminated.^[vii]

Kuhn's theory, on the other hand, was far too subjective for Lakatos, as Kuhn believed that science was what the powers at large thought it was:

Kuhn certainly showed that the psychology of science can reveal important and, indeed, sad truths. But the psychology of science is not autonomous; for the-rationally reconstructed-growth of science takes place essentially in the world of ideas, in Plato's and Popper's third world, in the world of articulated knowledge which is independent of knowing subjects.^[viii]

As a result, Lakatos sought to 'develop a theory of scientific method which was sufficiently subtle to cope with the detail of the actual history of science and yet sufficiently rationalistic to resist the political dangers presented by Kuhn'.^[ix] This endeavour on the part of Lakatos led to the development of his scientific research programme method. This method consists of four primary components, namely a hard core, a negative heuristic, a positive heuristic and a protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses. According to Lakatosian logic, a theory is not dismissed based on falsification alone, but is instead evaluated as a series of contributions that either provide novel facts to a research programme, or may instead lead to the creation of a new one.

Evaluating theory in the Lakatosian sense requires the substantiation of empirical facts, however, which is an ongoing flaw in English School work (especially when examining world society arguments). Lakatos claims:

The time-honoured empirical criterion for a satisfactory theory was agreement with the observed facts. Our empirical criterion for a series of theories is that it should produce new facts. *The idea of growth and the concept of empirical character are soldiered into one.*^[x]

Within ES circles, the need to empirically verify theoretical contributions tends to be ignored.^[xi] Instead, English School approaches prefer to favour rationalist methods that highlight the evolution of international societies throughout human history. Unfortunately, even this claim to historical explanation by ES writers is interpreted as weak. 'For a school that prides itself on offering a historical approach to international relations, there are surprisingly few diplomatic-historical analyses that extensively utilise archival sources or documentary collections.'^[xii] Beyond the lack of empirical content of ES theory, even the use of historical explanation is questioned in terms of what the school is trying to do through its work.^[xiii] William Bain asks:

But if it is clear that English School theorists take history seriously, their purpose for doing so is a great deal less so. Once we have gotten inside history and have allowed our imagination to roam freely, we are still left to ask: What is historical knowledge for.^[xiv]

It would be a drastic understatement to say creating an ES research programme would be challenging but it is

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necessary. The largest obstacle for the formulation of such a programme would be the three levels of analysis that are simultaneously involved in the School's tenets – system, international society and world society. Each level has its own concerns and understandings, though there is one key commonality in each – the role of the state – and this could easily serve as a starting point in building hard-core assumptions.

Identifying the hard-core assumption of a given research programme becomes essential in attempting to apply methodological and metatheoretical coherence to a theory. According to Lakatosian theory:

All scientific research programmes may be characterized by their *hard core*. The negative heuristic of the programme forbids us to direct the *modus tollens* at this hard core. Instead, we must use our ingenuity to articulate or even invent auxiliary hypotheses, which form a *protective belt* around this core, and we must redirect the *modus tollens* to these. It is this protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses which has to bear the brunt of tests and get adjusted and re-adjusted, or even completely replaced, to defend the thus-hardened core. A research programme is successful if all this leads to a progressive problemshift; unsuccessful if it leads to a degenerating problemshift.[xv]

The challenge posed by the English School would be trying to gain acceptance from School adherents that the state, and a monolithic view of the state at that, would be ideal as a hard core, and further, exactly where to apply certain assumptions given the multi-level analysis within the School. In an effort to demonstrate what such a programme would look like, it would be necessary to examine the international system, international society and world society.

The International System

- *Hard Core* – states are the primary actors in international politics.

The state in this level of analysis is closely related to the realist understanding, where states are understood as monolithic actors seeking to maximise their security and/or power and pursue their self-interest based on rational calculations of other actors' preferences. Hard-power capabilities are what differentiate states, not any conception of form.

- *Protective Belt of Auxiliary Hypotheses* – security and/or power maximisation is the underlying goal for states. As Waltz claims: 'In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquillity, profit, and power.'[xvi]

Assessing problem shifts in the systemic level would remain intra-programme shifts if they contributed novel facts about the centrality of the security-maximising state and did not betray the negative heuristic. Richard Ashley, for instance, focuses criticism at the systemic research programme proposed here by attacking the hard core:

Excluded, for instance, is the historically testable hypothesis that the state-as-actor construct might be not a first-order given of international political life but part of a historical justificatory framework by which dominant coalitions legitimise and secure consent for their precarious conditions of rule.[xvii]

Such a claim would become degenerative to the research programme because of its attack on the programme's core assumptions. Instead, scholarship on balancing behaviour, forecasting ability, rationality of states and hard power considerations would likely adhere to the hard-core assumptions of the research programme. Inter-programme shifts would be disloyal to the negative heuristic and would attempt to alter hard-core assumptions. For instance, if states were removed as primary actors in international politics, if the existence and anarchic nature of the international system were brought into question, no novel facts would be contributed to such a research programme.

International Society

- *Hard Core* – states are the primary actors in international politics. States here, however, are not monolithic actors that are only concerned with hard power capabilities as defined in realist literature. Rather, the English School has varying notions of states and statehood, but international society adherents remain

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committed to the state as the primary actor through which international relations is conducted.

- *Protective Belt of Auxiliary Hypotheses* – security and/or power maximisation remains the primary goal of states, but security is maintained by dialogue, cooperation and institutional binding. The first concern for states is to survive in the international system, which means the establishment of some kind of hard power balance. Once this is achieved, states are able to use international society as a means to safeguard that hard power equilibrium and to capitalise on the other capabilities they may have.

Problem shifts in the theory of international society would be numerous and also difficult to assess. As long as the state remains at the centre of a theory, whether identified as pluralist or solidarist, it is likely to remain an intra-programme shift. This being said, any theory involving an international society should reject any overly world society-based arguments that seek to emphasise humanity over a system and society where states are the primary units of analysis.^[xviii] The openness that the English School is so proud of is not totally closed by using Lakatosian logic; it just becomes easier for scholars to evaluate whether a contribution is providing novel facts or is actually degenerative. Tim Dunne asserts: 'It is clear ... that the term international society has been used by a variety of theoretical orientations as a general signifier of the institutional context within which interstate interactions take place.'^[xix] Dunne is correct to point out that English School foundations have been incorporated into the works of various theorists, but it is also important for those loyal to the English School to be able to identify when a theory is betraying its foundational elements.

By opening the concept of the state, this research programme is able to appreciate states' involvement in the international political economy, their sometimes irrational behaviour and institutional reliance and the conditions under which institutions must discuss the possibility of humanitarian intervention. In this sense, international politics remains a uniquely statist concern and states are perceived to act only when it is in their self-interest; at the same time, security and power are no longer strictly seen as hard power in nature given the heavily social elements of international society that in many ways equal or supersede traditional realist arguments in English School literature in determining or explaining state actions and outcomes. Each theory in this research programme should adhere to the basic identifying aspects of English School theory – the existence and importance of institutions, both primary and secondary. By doing so, one can more aptly identify a novel contribution to English School thought or dismiss it as degenerative.

World Society

- *Hard Core* – humans are the primary actors in global politics, but cannot achieve their ends without the existence of a strong and functioning international society.

States remain central to understanding the international arena, but world society is more concerned with the relationship between humans and the society of states. Securing individual rights and life become the primary tasks of states in all of their forms.

- *Protective Belt of Auxiliary Hypotheses* – human security is the end at which global politics aims, but states must be involved in finding ways to achieve this end. Without states and their involvement in institutions at the international society level, the impact of individuals is likely to be negligible.

The most contentious aspect of evaluating English School thought arises when world society becomes heavily involved.^[xx] In terms of security, contemporary discourse has become increasingly interested in the relationship of human security to the society of states. Progression in theoretical terms may bring the institutions of international society into question, but should not dismiss the predominance of the state or its role in protecting, or harming, the interdependent conception of humanity. In their description of Nicholas Wheeler's work, Bellamy and McDonald typify how solidarist studies provide novel facts to the English School research programme:

However, although he argues that it is possible to conceive of situations where the security of individuals or communities should – and indeed does – take precedence over the security of states, he is reticent about how far

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these developments can go. He is therefore committed to retaining the state as the principle *agent* of security though he argues that individuals, particularly individuals subjected to systematic abuse, should be the primary *referent*.^[xxi]

The intention of this proposed English School Scientific Research Programme is to help scholars recognise when a theoretical contribution is either novel or degenerative. Theoretical plurality may be a positive aspect of using the English School approach in the first place, but in some cases it has become far too open and prevents the approach from entering the mainstream of international theory.

ES literature has, since the 1970s and 80s, had a strong preoccupation with world society and how international society interacts with humanity. This has led to many arguments about humanitarian intervention, civilisation, legitimacy, justice, and responsibility. Buzan claims that the reason for the world society emphasis was a shift from international to world.^[xxii] Other School contributors have accepted this contention as almost a given reality, yet no attention has been given to empirically testing such a significant claim. Have states become less relevant and humanity more the focus of state behaviour? Have normative ideals of morality and cosmopolitanism become the driving forces behind the actions of international society?

This is not to say that the world society fixation is flawed, but rather speaks to the need for a methodological framework that allows observers to test the School's tenets and whether modern ES literature is adhering to the same hard-core assumptions as the School's organisers. Without being able to ask such questions, it may be that there is an English School discourse that includes references to international society, institutions and law without there actually being a coherent and organised school of thought.

Conclusion

All legitimate theories must stand up to testing in order for them to be taken seriously. To date, the English School has been limited in its appeal precisely because its adherents have little or no interest in operating according to a set of defined methodological rules. Without the value provided by methodological rigour, the School faces questions about its ability to be taken seriously as a *theory*. History might demonstrate that various international societies have existed, but where did they come from, how are they created and who determines whether a particular society of states can be identified either as solidarist or pluralist in nature? When do international societies change or collapse? Even within the ES itself, the solidarist vs pluralist division makes it difficult to answer why the School exists at all; it seems as if both sides of the debate assume that it is still relevant and adds something to the way international politics is explained, though *how* this is done is ambiguous.

Without any sort of method to evaluate its contributions to the field, what function does the ES serve in the broader scope of international theory? That is where Lakatos may be of assistance, in that his work helps scholars to explore 'how to assess theories, and how to decide whether, over time, theories about international relations are getting any better'.^[xxiii] Promoting a middle way of theory-making is not exclusive to the ES, as constructivism has more recently argued how to incorporate aspects of realism and liberalism into one approach, but constructivist scholars have dedicated themselves to answering questions about a constructivist methodology.^[xxiv] Within those identified as ES scholars, one can classify realists, liberals, Marxists, postmodernists, Frankfurt School proponents, constructivists and a variety of others, but other than a specific set of discursive elements and conceptual categories (international society, world society, etc.), how is one to prove these thinkers are contributing to the ES or conclude that a totally new series of research programmes has appeared since the end of the Cold War?

Until the practitioners of the English School begin to define precisely what an ES research programme would look like, the School's impact on international theory remains outside the mainstream. This is certainly not an effort to *Americanize* the English School but rather to hold the School to the same standards as other approaches to international relations. Martha Finnemore provides a succinct argument for why methodological concerns matter: 'Americans are fond of asking what the value added is of a theoretical approach: providing a strong demonstration of this for the English School would be powerful for that audience.'^[xxv] Lakatos' work on research programmes would be immensely helpful in this regard because of its ability to allow for flexibility while still identifying either a single or a series of hard-core assumptions by which the School and its adherents would have to employ in order to demonstrate

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the School's theoretical impact on actual world events.

Notes

[i] Dale Copeland, 'A Realist Critique of the English School', *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003), 431.

[ii] The main commonality between English School theorists is their use of the idea of international society. See Brunello Vigezzi, *The British Committee and the Theory of International Politics 1954–1985* (Milan: Edizione Unicopli Srl, 2005).

[iii] Richard Little, 'History, Theory and Methodological Pluralism in the English School', *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), 78.

[iv] Roger Epp, 'The English School on the Frontiers of International Society', *The Eighty Years' Crisis: International Relations 1919–1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61.

[v] For more on the School's reorganisation, see Barry Buzan, 'The English School: An Underexploited Resource in IR', *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001), 471-88.

[vi] Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, 'Lessons from Lakatos', *Progress in International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 21-5.

[vii] Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 94.

[viii] Ibid., 92.

[ix] Brendan Larvor, *Lakatos: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 45.

[x] Lakatos, *Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, 35.

[xi] Mayall argues that the English School follows in the empiricist tradition of Locke and Hume, but notes this differs from the positivist method of empirically testing theory. See James Mayall, 'The Limits of Progress: Normative Reasoning in the English School', *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), 211-12.

[xii] Copeland, 'A Realist Critique of the English School', 432.

[xiii] For an interesting analysis of history in the English School, see William Bain, 'Are There Any Lessons of History?' *Review of International Politics* 44 (2007), 513-30.

[xiv] William Bain, 'The English School and the Activity of Being an Historian', *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), 148.

[xv] Lakatos, *Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, 48.

[xvi] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), 126.

[xvii] Richard Ashley, 'The poverty of neorealism', *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 270.

[xviii] For more on the essential position of the state in international society, see Hedley Bull, 'The State's Positive Role in World Affairs', *Hedley Bull on International Society* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 139-56.

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[xix] Tim Dunne, 'The New Agenda', *International Society and its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 66.

[xx] This is primarily due to the inconsistency with which the term world society is used. See Richard Little, 'International System, International Society and World Society: A Re-evaluation of the English School', *International Society and the Development of International Relations Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002), 59-79.

[xxi] Alex Bellamy and Matt McDonald, 'Securing International Society: Towards an English School Discourse of Security', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 39:2 (July 2004), 316.

[xxii] See Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[xxiii] Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, 'Lessons from Lakatos', 21.

[xxiv] An essential contribution to constructivist methods and theory making is found in Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[xxv] Martha Finnemore, 'Exporting the English School?' *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001), 513.

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