An Overview of the English School's Engagement with Human Rights

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Students are often told that to study International Relations (IR) is to investigate relations *between* rather than *within* states. This is perhaps most often heard when critics of IR construct a 'straw-man' representation of the discipline which allows them to dismiss IR as too narrow. In other words, IR is said to be detached from the complexities of a twenty-first-century globalised world that demands students understand interconnected processes at the sub-national, national, and international level. The purpose of this piece, however, is to highlight that if one 'looks inside' IR one finds a much more diverse and enriching discipline. To do this, I focus on the English School's (ES) engagement with human rights to highlight that the ES has a strong tradition of concern regarding rights and responsibilities which stems from their world view that mass human rights violations within states are a matter of international concern.[i]

It is easy to understand why critics hold the view that state-centric approaches such as the ES do not accurately capture human relations from the local to the global level.[ii] Indeed, one of the founding fathers of what came to be known as the ES,[iii] Martin Wight, acknowledged that the study of international society concealed 'the *real* society of men and women'.[iv] The statement clearly demonstrates that Wight was all too aware that the complex relations between citizens and states were an overlooked and under researched issue in IR. The ES 'top down' focus was then seemingly cemented in Hedley Bull's seminal study *The Anarchical Society* which offered an even more state-centric interpretation of international society than Wight had originally envisaged.[v] Published at the height of the Cold War, Bull's analysis represents a well documented trade-off between justice and order in which Bull prioritised the moral value of order over the moral pursuit of a just cause. From a contemporary perspective, this became the *pluralist position* in the ES with scholars such as James Mayall and Robert Jackson upholding the norm of non-intervention.[vi]

A counter-development emerged in the 1980s. Bull's pluralist position changed as he argued that the consensus against Apartheid in South Africa should be used to mobilise international action against the human rights violations taking place.[vii] Expanding this understanding, R.J. Vincent's seminal study *Human Rights in International Relations* laid the foundation for what is currently referred to as the ES *solidarist position* as he argued that basic human rights should be understood as floor beneath states rather than a ceiling above them.[viii] In other words, even without a world government, political elites should abide by a universal moral minimalism. As contemporary scholars both inside and outside the ES have acknowledged, Vincent's work does not just stand as one of the first studies on human rights from an IR perspective but more importantly acted to rehabilitate 'serious theoretical discussion on human rights in general.'[ix] In the post-Cold War era, Tim Dunne and Nicholas Wheeler expanded this solidarist doctrine and in so doing, stood at the forefront of humanitarian intervention debate.[x] More recently, the solidarist baton has been passed on to Alex Bellamy, who works within an ES framework while producing cutting-edge

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research on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).[xi] At the same time, Dunne acted as director of research at the Asia Centre for the Responsibility to Protect.[xii] Accordingly, this historical trajectory helps illustrate that ES has played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary understandings of human rights and continues to do so.

With much ink spilt elsewhere on the division between the pluralist-solidarist divide outlined in the two different ES strands above, this author would like to raise a final point on the ES's potential contribution to a new research agenda. In William Bain's analysis of Nicholas Wheeler's decisive, *Saving Strangers*, he claims, 'it seems as though Wheeler merely invokes humanity as a self-evident moral truth – the authority of which requires no further explanation – which in the end cannot tell us the reasons why we should act to save strangers.[xiii] The statement draws attention to a problem that the ES has an under-theorised understanding of humanity which in turn fails to explain why 'we' should act to save 'them'. One response is to forge a better understanding of the relationship between the society of states and humanity which addresses the relationship between the ES and cosmopolitanism. Andrew Linklater has stood at the forefront of this research for over two decades.[xiv] Alternatively, ES scholars could focus on the concept of order, rather than humanity, to investigate the impact that mass human rights violations have on the ordering principles of international society. It is this latter research agenda that I develop in *Genocide and Its Threat to Contemporary International Order*.[xv] This is not to say that this latter focus is mutually exclusive from the former, but that these are two timely and important research agendas which ES scholars can make a significant contribution towards in the future.[xvi]

In summary, IR is often presented as somewhat of an ill, dying discipline that will fade away as it fails to explain and understand the complexities of the twenty-first century. Yet when one looks at the most important issues in contemporary international politics, the crises in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Mali to name just a few, it is evident that although the ES does not explain everything it does provides a fruitful framework for analysing the optimism and tragedy that lies at the heart of international society. After all, the ES view remains that 'there is more to international relations than the realist suggests but less than the cosmopolitan desires.'[xvii]

Notes

[i] In relation to globalization and the ES, see Barry Buzan, *From International Society to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[ii] Martin Shaw, *Global Society and International Relations, Sociological Concepts and Political Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), ch. 5. Also, Richard Falk, *Achieving Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2009), 17.

[iii] Roy Jones, 'The English School of International Relations: A Case for Closure', *Review of International Studies* 7:1 (1981) 1-13.

[iv] Martin Wight, 'Western Values in International Relations', in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics,* eds Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), 93.

[v] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society, A Study of World Order Politics*, 3rd ed. (London: Palgrave, 2002).

[vi] James Mayall, *World Politics: Progress and its Limits* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant, Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[vii] Hedley Bull, 'The West and South Africa', *Daedalus* 111:2 (1982), 266.

[viii] Raymond. J., Vincent, *Human Rights in International Relations* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 126.

[ix] Nicholas J. Rengger, 'The World Turned Upside Down? Human Rights and International Relations after 25 years', *International Affairs* 87:5 (2011), 1160.

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[x] Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[xi] Alex J. Bellamy, 'Humanitarian Intervention and the Three Traditions', *Global Society* 17:1 (2003), 3-20; Alex J. Bellamy, *Global Politics and The Responsibility to Protect* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[xii] Asia Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, http://www.r2pasiapacific.org/ (accessed February 26, 2013).

[xiii] William Bain, 'One Order, Two Laws: Recovering the "Normative" in English School Theory', *Review of International Studies* 33:4 (2007), 561.

[xiv] For an overview see Andrew Linklater, *Critical Theory and World Politics: Citizenship, Sovereignty and Humanity* (New York: Routledge: 2007). Also, his ongoing three-volume study on harm, Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011).

[xv] Adrian Gallagher, *Genocide and Its Threat to Contemporary International Order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[xvi] Professor Jason Ralph and I are currently supervising PhDs in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds related to these research agendas.

[xvii] Andrew Linklater, 'Rationalism' in Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, Jack Donnelly, Terry Nardin, Matthew Paterson, Christian Reus-Smit, and Jaqui True, *Theories of International Relation*, 4th ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 95.

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