English School and Constructivism: a Model of Cooperation rather than Synthesis

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Within the study of international relations, there exist competing theories that seek to be *the* theory that is able to explain the behaviour of states in their interactions with each other. This trend has led to a number of debates that have guided the progress of the discipline – for example realism vs. idealism, neo-realist vs. neo-liberal, rational vs. constructivist and positivist vs. post-positivist. One important theme evolving from these divides has been the concept of synthesizing theories.

Synthesizing theories involves combining aspects of different theories in order to create a more explanative or understanding theory of the behaviour of actors in the international system. Combining theories like this, however, is counter-productive to building better concepts of behaviour because this creates theories that are too broad by accounting for many extra variables and/or perspectives. Rather than synthesize theories in this manner, it would serve the discipline much better to use theories in a cooperative manner where different theories would be used in specific contexts or situations so that knowledge can be deepened across the field rather than further competition between broad approaches that are doomed to be shallower in depth.

This paper will seek to establish an example model for the use this "theoretical cooperation," or division of labour, concept. This argument will be explored by creating a case for cooperation between the English School of International Relations and the Constructivist approach. The first section will give a brief survey of previous discussions of synthesizing the English School and constructivism and will highlight the basic issue that serves as the basis for the paper's argument. Section 2 will look at ontological reasons for cooperation between these two theories and the model based on these results. Lastly, Section 3 will examine proposed research agenda's for each approach and show how cooperation between the two can help each theory address areas that are currently considered lacking.

English School Synthesis

Theory synthesis has a long history within the English School. As an approach that incorporates aspects of three distinct approaches – Hobbesianism/Machiavellianism (realism), Grotianism (rationalism), and Kantianism (revolutionism)[1] – it is of no great surprise that the concept of the synthesis of theories has come under consideration [See Figure 1]. The English School is often described as being a "tamer" variant of realism, incorporating ideas of idealism into classical realism, but is actually more reflective of the presence of three competing traditions that are simultaneously at play. The fact that there are commonalities does not change the fact that it is a separate body of theory from the aforementioned approaches. Tim Dunne makes the argument that "points of contact between two bodies of thought does not signify their convergence. In short, the English School shares certain arguments with realism, but crucially, it is not reducible to it."[2] Beyond the original interplay of realism, rationalism and revolutionism, some recent English School theorists have explored the possibility of synthesizing the English School with other theories, most notably with constructivism, for the purpose of making it more applicable to current realities and in the hopes of increasing its popularity in American circles of IR.

Barry Buzan's *From International to World Society?* ambitiously attempts to incorporate the social constructivism of

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Alexander Wendt into English School theory. His goal is to better develop the world society 'pillar' of the English School and concludes that greater development in that area will help the English School to incorporate and understand globalization into its understanding of how the world works.[3] However, in his assessment of this attempt Emmanuel Adler (2005) argued that Buzan did not incorporate enough constructivist thought into his updated English School. He described that Buzan's work "radically redefines the English School (without, however, abandoning most of its basic assumptions) and makes one of the most successful attempts to date at a synthesis of constructivist and materialist modes of inquiry."[4] But in his eyes, this was not enough progress. He advocated a further synthesis of English School and constructivist thought to include concepts like intersubjective understandings and acceptance that constructivism is less a competing American version of the English School and more as a means of social inquiry that can be included by all types of thought in the way that rational choice has been adopted by some theories of IR.[5]

Many of these arguments concerning the synthesis of English School and constructivist thought draw upon evidence of constructivism present in the works of the school's early founding fathers like Charles Manning, Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. For early English School scholars, this was manifest in their recognition of the social construction of international societies by states, based on common ideas and norms.[6] The English School, however, has not extended its constructivist component to account for how the states, that create the international societies, are formed.[7] This is reflective of the extent to which each has taken from the other. Reus-Smit (2002) observed "scholars on both sides have read the literature of the other to find what is both comfortable and convenient, consciously or unconsciously ignoring other significant strands of thought."[8] This practice appears to present a dilemma of either choosing to remain with the selective reading of each other which can distort perceptions of each theory**[9]** or to take the two broad approaches and elaborate as Reus-Smit has argued to create too broad a theory to be easily understood and applied.[10] The argument of the next two sections is to offer an alternative way for the English School and constructivism to collaborate.

Section 2 – Ontologies

The English School and constructivist approaches to the study of international relations have similar foundations, yet are still different enough, to allow them to cooperate with each other to better understand international relations. This section will examine each approach's understanding of the international system, including the structure of the system and the ideas, norms and institutions that guide state behaviour, in order to show how their ontologies can work together to create better depth in our understanding of international relations.

The English School can be understood as a theory of international relations that posits that there is a society comprised of states in the international system. The idea behind this position is a relatively simplistic one: "just as human beings as individuals live in societies which they both shape and are shaped by, so also states live in an international society which they shape and are shaped by."[11] The shape that this society takes is established by Hedley Bull, in his *Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* , who argues "a society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions."[12]

Constructivism's understanding of the international system, does not seek to establish what form the international system takes, rather it describes how the structures and forces that are present in the system are socially developed by actors. Tim Dunne describes this similarity between the approaches as, "both regard the inter-state order as a fundamentally social sphere which constitutes states as agents and socializes them into following its rules and conventions. And both view norms and institutions as expressions of shared knowledge and shared values."[13] The distinction is essentially in how each approach views the nature of the actors and forces. The English School understands that states and the ideas, norms, and values that shape their behaviour as being already existent in society, while constructivists seek to show how these same things are, themselves, a result of being constituted by actors and forces. According to this perception, these elements "are social constructs in so far as their shape and form is imbued with social values, norms and assumptions rather than being the product of purely individual thought or meaning."[14] This process is referred to as socialization and is a "process by which social interaction leads

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novices to endorse expected ways of thinking, feeling and acting."[15] The English School lacks a developed understanding of this process of socialization that constructivists use to explain how these social facts are constructed.[16] Thus, the English School describes what is and what could be, while constructivism shows how these concepts change over time and why changes occur.

This section, thus far, has sought to show the ontological similarity that exists between the English School and constructivist approaches to the study of international relations. While there are some aspects that are not similar between the two, this does not mean that these things contradict the propositions of the other approach. These "gaps" can provide an opportunity for the two approaches to work together to build a greater understanding of the international system.

This belief, that the two approaches can work together, has been influenced by the "recent challenge posed by constructivism [that] has brought a greater conceptual clarity to many implicit assumptions in English School theorizing."[17] This challenge is the result of the School's inability to account for how the aspects that are critical to the formation of its theory, are formed. Constructivists, on the other hand, can account for the reasons in why these elements are able to develop. Studying the social construction of international relations "suggests difference across context rather than a single objective reality. Constructivists have sought to explain or understand change at the international level."[18] However, in this view "actions continually produce and reproduce conceptions of Self and Other, and as such identities and interests are always in process."[19] This fluidity in the conceptualization of these elements is well constructed to reflect the ever-changing nature of the international system but, this prevents any substantial analysis of state behaviour and why states act beyond explaining how concepts and structures have been developed. To further clarify the issues, the English School cannot account for why things change over time and constructivism cannot stand still long enough to examine international society as it is or look into the future to see how it could be. It is these main lacunae that give rise to the ability of these approaches to work together to provide greater depth to the study of international society.

The method of "theoretical cooperation" would envision that the English School be utilized in situations of static identities and realities. In other words, it would be ideal to use this for understanding international society in short and specific time periods and/or conditions. Constructivism would then be used to analyze the development of important elements, like identity, ideas, norms, and institutions, as they change from one time frame to another [Figure 2]. This proposition advocates the use of theories for the appropriate purpose, rather than synthesis. Synthesizing the two would work counterproductively to increasing clarity in the study of international society because as they are already very broad approaches to begin with. Creating an

even broader theory would further increase confusion as to purpose of each theory.[20] Martha Finnemore, in her critique of Buzan's call to "reconvene" the English School, notes the lack of clarity already present within the English School. She argues that to increase clarity, it is necessary for English School scholars to engage in situating their theory against the other theories in the discipline.[21] Merging the English School with constructivism would work against this goal by increasing uncertainty in how the English School relates to the rest of the discipline.

Section 3 – Research Agendas

This last section will seek to further the argument of the previous section by examining some of the proposed research agendas for both the English School and constructivists. This examination will show that both approaches face similar future challenges and therefore could work together to address these internal issues or shortcomings. In seeking to justify their "via media" position and build better theories, some prominent scholars of the English School and constructivism have created agendas for the future in order to grow. It will be these research agendas that will be examined here.

Upon reviewing some of the agendas that have been proposed for each approach, one issue that is common to both and that requires consideration is the internal divide between views of pluralism and solidarism in the study of international society. In their examination of the future of constructivist work, Finnemore and Sikkink (2001) found that there were two views within constructivism that held biases and blindspots that would require further research in

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which to resolve. They described the first group of constructivist thinking as "trying to show that global social structures exist and have powerful effects. These scholars tend to emphasize adherence with international norms or rules and downplay variations in compliance."[22] This group of scholars also reflects the thinking of one view of international society by English School scholars. Referred to as solidarists, they "presuppose that the potential scope for international society is somewhat wider, possibly embracing shared norms about such things as limitations on the use of force, and acceptable 'standards of civilization' with regard to the relationship between states and citizens."[23] Both groups are essentially one side of an argument over whether the presence of an international society reflects that there exists norms between individuals across the world who imbue states with these common ideas, values and norms, or, whether states are individual communities whose similar interests reflect the common goals of the state institutions. This latter group, called pluralists, argues that in "international society, the institutional framework is geared towards the liberty of states and the maintenance of order among them. The rules are complied with because, like rule of the road, fidelity to them is relatively cost free but the collective benefits are enormous."[24] The constructivists who focus on pluralist conceptions of international society are interested in variations in response that these norms have on different actors and how these variances have developed.[25]

Constructivists and English School theorists would benefit to work in cooperation because they both have to deal with the internal conflict between pluralists and solidarists. In 2001, Barry Buzan in his argument to reconvene the English School argued that one necessary task on the future agenda for the school was to address this conflict. He posed the question: "Is international society a system for preserving the distinctiveness and independence of states within a limited framework of shared rules, or does it develop, as the practice of regimes and regional cooperations seem to suggest, into increasing degrees of harmonization and integration (thus the necessary link to world society), not to mention intervention?"[26] By cooperating, each approach could learn from and incorporate the lessons of the other in order to strengthen their internal dynamics and thus develop a greater understanding of the shape of international society and the behaviour of its actors.[27]

Another way in which the cooperation of these two approaches would be beneficial to each research agenda is to utilize the factors that are not common to each in order to develop the ability to explain and understand phenomena in international society. One critique of the constructivist approach has been that it does not possess the ability to provide a normative element to its discussions. By focusing on change it is forced to always be looking backwards. This is an area that cooperation with the English School can solve. Andrew Linklater has argued that one of the central questions to the English School has been whether or not it is possible to extend cooperation to prevent harms and/or create other ideal situations.[28] Linklater, along with Hidemi Suganami, recognize that "English School authors tend to think more about what states or governments could or should do to protect and enhance the quality of life internationally."[29] These are the normative properties of the English School and could be used, through theoretical cooperation, to assist the theorists with the lack of a normative element in constructivist thought. This lacuna of social inquiry was identified by Christian Reus-Smit in his 2005 comparison of the English School and constructivist thought. Reus- Smit found that "what constructivists have missed altogether is the English School's strong tradition of normative inquiry into the relationship between order and justice in international relations."[30] Accordingly, he believes that constructivist thought could be enriched by learning from the English School's normative element and could even be further enhanced by examining how these normative arguments have been sociologically constructed.[31]

The normative lessons taught by the English School could be reciprocated by constructivists in helping the English School to support the fragments of critical thought already present in its writings. Little (2000) claims that the English School "has taken on a critical theory dimension because the debate reflects a profound concern about the potential for human emancipation. The English School, therefore, is not only concerned about analyzing the history of International Relations, it is also concerned about the moral implications of current and future developments in the international arena."[32] One weakness, though, in terms of critical thought in the English School is the inability to explain both the formation of states, common ideas, norms and institutions that international society is based upon. As such, it is impossible to examine the way in which particular world-views are able to dominate discourses. Critical thought in international relations points to the necessity of examining the place that certain views take in state interaction or behaviour. Constructivists' focus on understanding how ideas, norms and institutions are formed would identify for the English School how certain views are able to dominate the way in which international society is

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shaped. This means accepting the idea that everything is part of an unfinished process. Linklater recognizes this need for this type of thinking because "the idea of an unfinished and unfinishable journey point to the need for constant attention to the danger that a particular world-view will be preferred and others marginalized by efforts to characterize ideal discourse."[33] The English School has tended to focus more on the ability of common (or dominant) understandings to be utilized by actors to create international societies rather than the results of this focus on this dominant discourse. Therefore, constructivists can help the English School to develop its critical thought processes by revealing the way in which actors and concepts are constructed and how these constructions are influenced by specific views, namely the views of dominant actors.

This section has looked to the future as a means of building the case for cooperation between the English School and constructivism. In looking at the individual research agendas of these approaches, there exist commonalities that these approaches can work together towards and learn from, in order to build better theories to the study of international relations. It is also evident in these research agendas that there are questions that one theory has to ask that the other has already addressed. Cooperation between the theories could help guide the theories as they address these questions, thus creating more useful conceptions of international relations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to examine a way to move beyond the discipline's reliance on synthesizing elements of other concepts to allow for our theories to account for changes in how we understand the world. The study of international relations can be served better in using theories cooperatively rather than building hegemonic theories that seek to accommodate for all circumstances in world politics.

The development of the English School of International Relations has often dealt with synthesis as a shaping factor. Created out of a rejection of the dichotomy between Hobbesian realism and Kantian revolutionism, the English School developed out the space created by the refusal of some theorists to accept realism and idealism as being the only views. It also draws from constructivist thought in the way that states use ideas and norms to create an international society. Since the turn of the millennium, however, there have been some attempts to synthesize these two theories. These attempts, though, have led to either confusing, overly broad syntheses of theories or selective readings of each theory's aspects which serves little purpose in deepening our knowledge of the politics that shape the world.

Based upon the similar premise that there exists an international order based on the social aspect of international politics, the English School and constructivism can instead work in cooperation to build deeper understandings of international society. Working in cooperation, each theory can use its strengths to complement areas where the other is lacking. Furthermore, both theories are faced with future research agendas that are tasked with reconciling divisions within them and addressing their inherent weaknesses. Cooperation will allow each approach to learn from the successes and mistakes of the other's attempt to resolve its issues.

The study of international relations theory has been marked by different divisions over attempts to build hegemonic theories that seek to explain all occurrences in international relations. But, as the world becomes increasingly complex due to phenomenon like globalization, international relations theorists must come to recognize that the ability for a single theory to explain everything in international relations is growing ever smaller. They must realize that, as in international society, cooperation creates better rewards for all.

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[1] This triad was developed by Martin Wight (1991) and has been elaborated, since then, by authors such as Cutler (1991), Dunne (1995), Little (1998, 2000), Jackson (2000), Buzan (2004), and likely numerous more. Buzan (2004), though, offers the best model of the three traditions, advancing it to include the areas where these traditions blend and to include contemporary theoretical terms alongside Wight's concepts.

[2] Timothy Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 5. Dunne makes this argument in reference to the claim that the English School is merely a variant of realism, but the same conclusion could be utilized in reference to the other traditions.

[3] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-5.

[4] Emauel Adler, "Barry Buzan's use of Constructivism to Reconstruct the English School: 'Not All the Way Down," *Millenium – Journal of International Studies* 34,1 (2005): 171.

[5] Ibid, 171.

[6] Timothy Dunne, "The Social Construction of International Society," *European Journal of International Relations* 1,3 (1995): 374-379.

[7] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 31.

[8] Christian Reus-Smit, "Imagining society: constructivism and the English School," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4,3 (2002): 489-490.

[9] For example, Reus-Smit (2002) makes the argument that the English School's tendency to use (or over-use) Alexander Wendt's statist concept of constructivism could lead, for example, a newly arrived Martian surveying English School literature to assume that Wendt's ideas make up the bulk of constructivist theory, which is inaccurate.

[10] Reus-Smit, "Imagining society," 495. My argument here reflects Walt's 2005 argument that theories are more valuable when they are clear in what they argue. However, Walt's idea of completeness matters less because theories typically do not account for some aspect (e.g. realism ignores the role of social forces in creating value and meaning).

[11] Barry Buzan, "The English School: An Underexploited Resource in IR," *Review of International Studies* 17,1

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(2001): 477.

[12] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 13.

[13] Timothy Dunne, "The English School," in *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity* ed. Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 132.

[14] K.M Fierke, "Constructivism," in *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity* ed. Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 168.

[15] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Treaging International Institutions as Social Environments," *International Studies Quarterly* 45,4 (2001): 170.

[16] Timothy Dunne, "The New Agenda," in *International Society and its Critics* ed. Alex J. Bellamy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 69.

[17] Timothy Dunne, "The English School," 133.

[18] Fierke, "Constructivism," 168

[19] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 36

[20] This idea stems from Chris Reus-Smit (2002) where the author describes the "rich and varied tapestries" of the English School and constructivism. Reus-Smit, however, argues for the elaboration of each approaches' use of the other. The problem with this is that by blending such complex theories with different purposes, the outcome would be very complex and this would serve as a barrier to large-scale acceptance due to the difficulty that would likely ensue.

[21] Martha Finnemore, "Exporting the English School?" *Review of International Studies* 27,3 (2001): 512.

[22] Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001: pg. 397 Martha Finnemore & Kathryn Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4,1 (2001): 397.

[23] Buzan, "The English School," 479

[24] Dunne, "The English School,": 137

[25] Finnemore & Sikkink, "Taking Stock," 397-8

[26] Buzan, "The English School," 482

[27] This would not be synthesis, rather it would entail observing how the other theory attempts to address its issues and judge whether it can use similar methods to solve its own issues.

[28] Andrew Linklater "The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Implications for the Sociology of States-Systems," *International Affairs* 78,2 (2002): 326.

[29] Andrew Linklater & Hidemi Suganami, *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 107.

[30] Christian Reus-Smit, "The Constructivist Challenge after September 11," in *International Society and its Critics*,

ed. Alex J. Bellamy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 83.

[31] In Reus-Smit, 2005: pg. 83, and Reus-Smit, 2009: pg. 67, the author refers to the concept of morality that exists in the normative inquiry of the English School. He argues that constructivists have not been able to explore the potential for morality and justice to play a role in how states act to create ideal forms of international society.

[32] Richard Little, "The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations,"*European Journal of International Relations* 6, 3 (2000): 414.

[33] Andrew Linklater, "Dialogic politics and the civilizing process," *Review of International Studies* 31, 1 (2005): 148.

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