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The English School as Global Crossroads: From Methodological Eclecticism to Cultural Pluralism

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/03/the-english-school-as-global-crossroads-from-methodological-eclecticism-to-cultural-pluralism/>

KEVORK OSKANIAN, AUG 3 2013

To some, International Relations (IR) might appear as a troubled discipline, in a perennial state of crisis. Is it a social science, an emancipatory project, a multi-disciplinary form of scholarship? Can its subject matter be adequately delineated from the realm of domestic politics? How can it ensure its relevance to policymaking or social change? Is it inherently Eurocentric, or can it be transferred and adapted across cultural divides? Diversity of thought, interdisciplinarity, and soft, permeable boundaries make maintaining a distinct identity among IR researchers an increasing challenge; not surprising, then, that some have proclaimed its possible death as a coherent discipline, at the hands of centrifugal forces – among others, “ideological, epistemological and ontological incommensurability”[1] – it will never be able to overcome.

IR faces multiple challenges, which are, at first sight, reflected in that peculiar – some would say eccentric – theoretical framework called the ‘English School’ (ES). Having emerged more than half a century ago, among others aiming to preserve a ‘classical’ mode of scholarship in a discipline that was, at the time, moving dramatically towards behaviouralist, social-scientific methodologies[2], this relatively small but conceptually productive approach to IR has always had a precarious identity, with some authors questioning its very existence. Its multiple, historically constructed genealogies ascribe its emergence to, varyingly, the London School of Economics, the British Committee on the Theory of International Relations, or, more diffusely, in terms of a loose collection of authors with a limited number of shared precepts; today, it is safe to say that the School’s only uniting factor are an at times vague commitment to an often considerably adapted conceptual framework made explicit by Bull in his ES ‘bible’ – ‘The Anarchical Society’ – and their loose combination of the power-political, legal, historical, and normative aspects of what Buzan calls ‘second-order societies’[3].

And yet, what some would see as a weakness might just as well be interpreted as a strength: as pointed out by Little, the ES ‘triptych’ provides a basis for investigating the multiple and complex interactions between power, law and humanity without conceptual isolation and self-referentiality[4]. Where positivists see a lack of scientific rigour and only impressionistically established, overwhelmingly non-causal truth-claims[5], others see a pragmatic eclecticism that acknowledges the ‘social’ as neither material, nor value-free, nor entirely scientifically explicable – as, in other words, ‘transcending the empirical’[6]. Where critical theorists can question its willingness to mix-and-match ‘problem-solving’ and ‘critical’ viewpoints, others can point to the advantages of exploring the complex interactions between the two. ES strength is precisely its pluralism, in its ability to step back and see the bigger picture.

ES exists where ‘pure’ positivists and post-positivists often fear to tread: at the complex intersections between the power, law and idea(l)s, order and justice, humanity and community, history and the present. To some extent, it is therefore reflective of the pluralism that today exists in the discipline of International Relations, broadly conceived. With its eclectic methodological outlook, it accomplishes much while avoiding the at times tedious meta-theoretical nit-picking that characterises the more extreme, focused forms of positivism and its counterparts. *It gets things done*, in a way that is very relevant for *all* aspects of IR. Whether Wheeler’s work on humanitarian intervention, Vincent’s on human rights, Keene’s on colonialism, Buzan and Little’s on ‘International Systems’, or its role as a conceptual forerunner of constructivism[7] – the ES is able to cross-pollinate with other, more expressly ‘scientific’ or ‘critical’ approaches to the discipline in innovative ways.

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Murray's concise volume[8] is a clear indication that reports of the demise of both ES and IR have, as in the past, been strongly exaggerated: it indicates that, despite the relative scarcity of its practitioners at a global level – with the small numbers of participants at ISA panels, and the most recent TRIPs survey as clear indications[9] – the approach most definitely has much left to say. Proponents of methodological purity on either side of the traditional, positivist/post-positivist IR divide will balk at the thought, but the ES – whose death has at times been prematurely advocated or erroneously prophesized – still has considerable life left in it yet.

Murray's plea for a clear research programme for the English School is one point that deserves further consideration: defining the ES' lack of specificity as a lacuna, he suggests the approach of Imre Lakatos as one that could offer one way of reconciling the school's traditional methodological flexibility with the modern-day requirement for falsifiable theoretical truth-claims. This may, indeed, be the case. The question is, however, whether adding such exactitude to an approach that has so far thrived on the opposite – methodological indeterminacy – would not risk doing away with a core part of ES identity. After all, *theory* has traditionally had two distinct meanings in scholarship: firstly, in its broad sense, as, in the literal, Greek meaning of the word, a '*way of looking at things*', a broad set of ordering concepts and assumptions that structure our views of social reality. Secondly, in its more rigid, scientific-philosophical, positivist sense, as a *set of causal claims*.

Throughout its history, ES has clearly laid claim to being a theory in the first, more general sense of the term. As an approach that concerned itself with ideas, histories and institutions, it was always about broad, historically and socially contextualised *constitution* rather than precise *causation*; hence its often-remarked status as 'constructivism before the fact'. What's more, attempts to introduce notions of causality, or methodological rigour, into its framework have always been half-hearted, and, from the point of view of ES proper, unnecessary: having partly emerged in reaction to such rigour, none its most influential works have taken methodology seriously, yet they have been able to influence broad IR thought nevertheless[10]. Thus, while certainly laudable, an attempt to fit the approach into a Lakatosian framework would have to take care to preserve the School's distinct identity, marked as it is by plasticity and openness.

In that sense, Murray's dismissal of the solidarist versus pluralist division within ES is telling: "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* [emphasis added], though how this is done is ambiguous". It is important to note here that this division is not about *explanation* but about *understanding*, and that it moreover refers to the highly productive normative element within the School. The pluralist/solidarist debates are often not about *what is*, but about *what ought to be*, just like several of the contributions to this collection of short essays: on human rights, on moral responsibility, on Eurocentrism. There often are no false/true answers to these questions of morality: they live – at least partly – in a realm of empirical non-falsifiability. It is precisely the ability of the English School to combine these realms – *what is/ought to be* – that emerges from its unwillingness to embrace rigid methodologies. Indeterminacy, and the refusal to be 'scientific' can be a blessing sometimes, and leaving out the normative 'World Society' aspect of the English School of its triptych could very well prove counterproductive.

But far from being a constraint on future growth, its conceptual plasticity and methodological openness may actually turn into a guarantee of the English School's success, and its continued relevance. The ES's ability to speak through cultural and civilizational boundaries may prove more significant to its continued dynamism than the introduction of a unity-of-science mindset into an approach defined by its very rejection. While the School's founding fathers were often accused of Eurocentrism, the very looseness and indeterminacy of their conceptual framework provides an 'open architecture' which makes the inclusion of much older non-European scholarly traditions – like China's, or India's, or Islam's – feasible. In fact, it is precisely its refusal to submit to the rigidities of the scientific method or the requirements of (Western) critical theory that enables it to move away from the (presumed[11]) Eurocentric attitudes of its founders: its flexible concern with ideas and institutions, its combination of history, law, philosophy is much more amenable to cross-cultural transfer than either that of its positivist or critical counterparts.

The ES's very eclecticism makes it a prime candidate in a move beyond the Western gaze that has so far defined – and hampered – a truly global, pluralist, multi-cultural discipline. The English School has often been accused of being full of 'blank spaces': but, to its advantage, these 'blank spaces' can be filled in culturally manifold ways. Perhaps, in

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addition to studying the historical contributions of non-European civilisations to current International Society – as Linklater suggests[12] – one should also encourage their age-old *systems of thought* to finally enter the still Western-dominated IR theoretical framework through the concepts already provided by the ES? This would not even require a major re-thinking of its basic precepts (at first, at least): simply, the slight adaptation of concepts that are already subject to broad interpretation.

In this vein, Epp's case in favour of the interpretive approach in light of the English School's emerging popularity in China[13] is reinforced by a recent overview of Chinese IR; it tellingly identifies ES as particularly attractive to Chinese scholars precisely because of "its emphasis on the pluralism of methodology" and "its efforts to analyse national languages as well as European history and culture". It moreover points to the "ideational ontology", and "epistemological inseparability of value and fact" as aspects making the approach particularly attractive within the rising power's scholarly community[14]. The ES has a proven ability to add history, law, philosophy to the discipline of IR; while, so far, this mix has been overwhelmingly *Western*, the door remains wide open for non-Western scholars to change this Eurocentric distortion, something already eagerly noted in China.

Take, for instance, Wight's distinction between realism, rationalism and revolutionism in the history of ideas on International Relations (alluded to as a 'provincialisation' of IR theory by Epp); or Watson's work on hierarchy in IR. These concepts that demonstrate the real value of the ES, its transferability to a broad range of cultural contexts, outside the European states system (and its current, global heir): as categories devoid of any positivist theorizing, they can function as conceptual templates, whose substance can be filled in historically and civilisationally varying ways. Wight's categories encompass age-old human dilemmas between power, immanent law/rights and transcendental idea(l)s that cut through particular cultural contexts; a link with some of Chinese IR's main concerns – the rise of China (power), China's rights (law), its activist-socialist inheritance (ideals) can quite conceivably be made. The same goes for Watson's historical work on hierarchy[15]: it is, of course, far easier to link Chinese notions of Tianxia ('all under heaven') to that part of the ES, than to the 'purebred' mainstream versions of positivist IR that stand and fall with the presence or absence of *anarchy*.

The ES is a jack-of-all-trades. In a world where IR is dominated by elegant theorizing that puts the complexities of human behaviour in a Westphalian, mathematical, causal-theoretical straightjacket, it is still very much an intriguing outsider. Neither does it emerge from broader social theory – like constructivism – or the continental philosophical tradition – like IR's critical or post-structuralist approaches. It arose from a practical attempt to preserve a – some would say outdated – *classical* tradition of scholarship that incorporates a methodologically pluralist, conceptually flexible and normatively sensitive approach to the discipline. Those who dismiss it as outdated or imprecise should consider its ability to grasp the multiple debates within IR without theoretical compartmentalization a blessing rather than a curse. But the ES is a crossroads in another sense of the word: its broad, template-like concepts and eclectic methodology cry out for cultural contextualization and historicity precisely because they are not fundamentally wedded to the universal truth-claims of positivists, or the emancipatory mission of critical theory, both grounded in inherently *Western* traditions. They may become the place where a Eurocentric IR gives way to something more inclusive. And that makes the ES more than just a minor approach to IR in need of constant re-statement and justification.

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[1] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'Why International Relations Has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do About It', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30/1 (2001), 19-39.

[2] Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), pp. 116-35.

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[3] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1977).; Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 26.

[4] Richard Little, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6/3 (2000), 395-422.;

[5] Dale Copeland, 'A Realist Critique of the English School', *Review of International Studies*, 29/3 (2003), 427-41.

[6] Peter Wilson, 'The English School of International Relations: A Reply to Sheila Grader', *ibid.* 15/1 (1989), p. 50.

[7] Christian Reus-Smit, 'Imagining Society: Constructivism and the English School', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4/3 (2002), 487-509.; Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).; Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).; R.J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).; Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[8] Robert W. Murray (ed.), 'System, Society & the World: Exploring the English School of International Relations', (e-International Relations, 2013).

[9] Daniel Maliniak, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney, *Trip around the World: Teaching, Research, and Policy Views of International Relations Faculty in 20 Countries* (Williamsburg, Va.: Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project, 2012).

[10] Tellingly, one recent volume on ES Methodologies starts with the assertion that "A consideration of English School methods may seem a contradiction in terms", very much illustrating their eclectic and implicit nature (Cornelia Navari, 'Introduction: Methods and Methodology in the English School', in Cornelia Navari (ed.), *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 1-20, p. 1.).

[11] As Little points out in his discussion of Bull and Watson's 'Expansion of International Society', which has often been accused of 'Eurocentrism', both founding fathers of the English School fully acknowledged the independent agency of pre-colonial states within independent regional international societies before the 19th century.

[12] Andrew Linklater, 'Civilizations and International Society', in Robert W. Murray, (ed.), *System, Society & the World*, pp. 25-28.

[13] Roger Epp, 'Translation and Interpretation: The English School and IR Theory

in China', in Robert W. Murray, (ed.), *System, Society & the World*, pp. 29-33.

[14] Hung-Jen Wang, 'Being Uniquely Universal: Building Chinese International Relations Theory', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22/81 (2013), p. 532.

[15] Adam Watson, *Hegemony and History* (London: Routledge, 2007).

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