Review - An Introduction to the English School of International Relations

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An Introduction to the English School of International Relations: The Societal Approach
By: Barry Buzan
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.

It is widely recognized that Barry Buzan is one of the most prominent figures, if not the most prominent one, of the contemporary English School that he himself (with the assistance of Richard Little and Ole Waever) reconvened in early 1990s. Buzan's contribution to the international society tradition and the work of the English School ranges from the study of the evolution of the international system[1] to the study of the contemporary international society[2] to the study of international society at the regional level[3] to his pioneering work that seeks to link English School theory to the study of international security.[4]

Buzan's *An Introduction to the English School of International Relations* , was originally conceived as a teaching text. However, its final shape makes it more than that as it explains not only what the English School is and how it was developed over time but also the English School's standing as theory and what is distinctive about its key concepts and ideas. It does not introduce new concepts and arguments but it rather examines the main trends, identifies places where further work is necessary, and sets out the ongoing research program. As Buzan himself has put it, the aim of the book is to make sense of the existing literature rather than to try to extend it.

The book speaks to a variety of audiences. First, it provides a comprehensive guide to the English School's approach to international society that will serve the needs of both undergraduate and graduate students. Second, for those with some familiarity with the work of the English School, the book will place their knowledge into context. Finally, for those already very familiar with the English School, it will provide them with new questions paving the way for further research. To achieve its purposes, the book is divided into three (3) parts and ten (10) chapters.

Evolution, Concepts and Methods

The three chapters in Part I set the context for the more detailed examination of the English School theory in parts II and III by providing a general overview of the English School's history (Chapter 1), its main ideas, concepts and distinctions (Chapter 2), as well as its methodology and place within the broader field of International Relations theory (Chapter 3). Particular emphasis is placed on the discussion of the three fundamental concepts of the English School, namely international system, international society and world society, as well as the distinctions and relation among them. Two main points are highlighted in these chapters: first, the English School is a well-established approach to the study of international relations; and second, that unlike other theories, such as realism, liberalism and constructivism that claim a certain sector of the subject, the English School provides a way of approaching the subject as a whole. This is the reason for which there are many overlaps with other approaches to International Relations. It is this holism and methodological pluralism which allows the English School to integrate IR than to add to the field's divisions.

The Historical/Structural Orientation of the English School

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Part II provides a detailed look at the historical, regional and social structural strands of English School work. In this section, Buzan demonstrates how the English School's societal approach provides the fertile ground for the study of international and world history in terms of the social structures of international orders. This is not surprising given the presence of influential historians in the British Committee, such as Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, as well as Hedley Bull's and Adam Watson's sympathy towards a historical perspective. To avoid any confusion, it is worth mentioning that the English School generally rejects the view that history can predict or explain. Instead, history is seen as providing a perspective helpful to informed speculation about present and future events and processes. Moreover, the English School's engagement with history has been with the traditional, constitutional and diplomatic approaches to that subject rather than with the Marxist-like social and structural approaches to history.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the place of international society in world history and focuses on the English School's two main historical projects. The first project, which is associated with the work of Martin Wight[5] and Adam Watson,[6] has sought to compare how different international societies have evolved in different times and places. As Buzan shows, this work depicts international relations as a social order or structure and the specific nature and dynamics of this social order as the key objects of study. What is important in this comparative project is that it allows us to visualize what forms international society can take other than the Westphalian one. The second project, which is associated with the work of Hedley Bull and Adam Watson[7] focuses on the expansion of the European society of states and its gradual transformation to the contemporary international society. The two projects overlap during the early phase of the rise of the West (1500-1800) and merge into one when the West becomes globally dominant during the nineteenth century. As Buzan correctly points out, the study of historical international systems is necessary to grasp the normative dynamics of international societies and the roles that people play in making and maintaining them.

One of the most important points raised by Buzan in this section is the important link between the English School's historical projects and the development of its thinking about the institutions of international society as a way of understanding international social structure. For example, both the comparative and the expansion/evolution historical approaches make extensive use of the idea of primary institutions, such as diplomacy, balance of power, war, international law, great power management, nationalism and the market. These institutions provide a way of describing and differentiating international societies and tracking their evolution.

Primary institutions offer a way of seeing international society as a form of social structure. In other words, any given international society can be defined in terms of the set of primary institutions that compose it. Moreover, the rise, evolution and sometimes obsolescence of primary institutions can be used to frame a historical account of how international societies evolve. As Buzan's work on regional international societies shows, this approach can also usefully be applied to differentiate regional international societies both from each other and from the global level. Moreover, drawing onto the pluralist-solidarist spectrum, a typology of international societies based on thickness and type of their primary institutions can be established. Buzan argues that such a social structural approach dissolves the necessity for a concept of international system by folding all into types of international societies.

According to Buzan, this kind of social structural approach to international society through primary institutions raises two sets of very important theoretical questions: First, how are primary institutions to be theorized? Are they just empirically observed, or is there some principle of differentiation, whether functional or something else, that can be used to put bookends around the possible set? Second, is it possible to create comprehensive taxonomies of types of international society? If it is, do we need the concept of international system that has been an important part of the English School's classical triad, or does the system element reduce to a mere rump of interaction capacity?

The Normative Orientations of the English School

In Part III, Buzan explores the normative side of the English School through an in-depth account and analysis of pluralist and solidarist orientations towards order and justice and how these play out in the evolution of primary institutions of the contemporary international society. As Buzan notes, English School's normative structure is a key feature distinguishing it from realism and constructivism.

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The four chapters in this part look at pluralism and solidarism in both theoretical and historical perspective. The aim here is to distil the essence of each position by looking at the literature advocating it and then to survey the primary institutions that represent them in the historical development of international society. Chapter 6 examines the pluralist position as this has been developed in the works of its leading proponents.[8] Chapter 7 interrogates the pluralist position in terms of a distinctive set of primary institutions, looking at these in the historical context of their emergence.[9] Chapter 8 reviews the solidarist literature, distinguishing between cosmopolitan and state-centric understandings of solidarism.[10] Chapter 9 extends the historical story of primary institutions, contending that the practices within many ostensibly pluralist institutions have evolved in solidarist directions (war, international law, diplomacy, colonialism, dynasticism) and that more purely solidarist institutions are emergent (human rights, development, democracy, environmental stewardship). In a structural sense, international society is highly dynamic implying that some old institutions die, new ones arise, and many of those that endure are internally transformed by changing principles of legitimation and changing practices.

The pluralist/solidarist debate is about how international/interstate society relates to world society or, to put it differently, how states relate to people. In practical terms, much of the pluralism/solidarism debate is about how to find ways of reducing the tension between the needs and imperatives of states and the needs and imperatives of humankind, both singly and collectively. Most English School writers operate within this debate, taking the tension between the imperatives of order and justice as the core problem to be addressed. Buzan correctly points out that this tension is what makes sense of the debates about human rights, international order, great power responsibilities, (non)intervention, the institutions of international society, and the rest of the English School's agenda.

Important to the pluralism/solidarism debate are questions about whether the international law in should include natural law (as it was for Grotius) or positive law (as it was for Bull). The key issue has been human rights[11] and particularly the question of humanitarian intervention.[12] In other words, the key issue is the tension between the states' claim to sovereignty, on the one hand, and the idea that universal rights are vested in people, on the other. According to Buzan, the states/people issue can be looked at in two ways. It can be seen in terms of the rights of states versus the rights of people or it can be seen more in terms of the extent and type of shared norms, rules, practices and institutions within interstate societies. In this view, there is no necessary contradiction between the rights of states and those of peoples if states deploy their sovereign right (pluralist view) and responsibility (solidarist view) to recognize and implement human rights. Buzan argues that if international society requires some degree of moral community among state leaders, then it is legitimate to ask how much that creates, or can create, a sense of moral responsibility towards citizens. According to Buzan, that is how international society links to world society. However, Buzan makes it clear that solidarism ranges much more widely than human rights and world society, also covering issues such as the global economy and environmental stewardship and reflection state-centric logics of cooperation and convergence.

Pluralism and solidarism do not simply constitute opposed positions. They should be rather seen as constituting the normative framing principles for a debate within the English School about the limits and possibilities of international society. Both approaches express preferences about how things should be and thus they are practice-guiding theories. It is worth noting that global order has always been both pluralist and solidarist, which means that the practical aspect of the debate pluralist/solidarist debate is not about either/or but about how, as Buzan notes, to blend and mix the two qualities. In this respect, in the relationship between order and justice, as well as pluralism and solidarism each element/approach is a necessary presence in the other. The debate therefore is mostly about how best to blend the demands and needs for both order and justice. The pluralist/solidarism debate's distinctive focus is in applying those arguments to international relations, and how best to reconcile the desires and needs of both people and states. In this sense, the English School is about finding a working balance between how power and interest and standards of justice and responsibility operate in international society. Or, as Buzan has put it, how the ideal and the real meet up and how the normative and the empirical are intertwined.

The English School not only brings together international system, international society and world society but also keeps the normative and the structural approaches to these in continuous play. In doing so, the English School is better able than other narrower theoretical approaches to develop a holistic perspective on international relations. Thus, although pluralism and solidarism might at first sight look simply like restatements of liberalism and realism,

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this is not the case. Rather than being separate, zero-sum positions, pluralism and solidarism are two sides of an ongoing tension in the subject matter of International Relations around which the normative and structural debates of the English School are organized. As Buzan argues, this is what enables the English School to incorporate, and up to a point integrate, what most other approaches to IR separate, compartmentalize and put into zero-sum competition.

The theoretical debates about pluralism and solidarism and the empirical analysis of the evolving normative structure of international society point strongly to a complex blending and interplay of elements from both sides. In this respect, there is now room for thinking that primary institutions, like the market and multilateralism have taken over from war and the balance of power as the institutions that shape how sovereignty and territoriality are understood. In addition, these changes in international society are accompanied with some other important developments in world society. As Buzan notes, unlike in the past, now many more people know about what goes on elsewhere and they may care about it. Also, there has been a general acceptance that all humans are equal (even if this is still violated in practice in many ways and places) and this has led to a growing demand for rights. Yet, no matter where they are located, people now understand that they are embedded in a single global economy and to a certain degree that they are also embedded in a single global culture and a single global environment. Things such as nationalism and the market are now widely shared understandings while technology and social media are very widely shared practices. These developments provide the substance for the increased interplay between interstate society and world society. Potentially they contribute to the stability of international society by embedding ideas not just in state elites but in the minds of the peoples as well.

Ongoing Debates and Emergent Agendas

The concluding chapter looks at ongoing debates and at how the English School's research program is unfolding. Traditional debates pertaining to the system/society distinction, the expansion of international society, the English School's methods, as well as the pluralist/solidarist debate will continue to attract the attention of English School scholars as they will the newer debates focusing the primary institutions of international society, the types of international societies, and the study of regional international societies and their relation to the global international society. In terms, of emergent agendas, Buzan argues that it is time for the English School to focus more on the linkage between international society and international security. To this end, he posits three main questions that need to be investigated: first, what are the security consequences for insiders of being included within the particular set of primary institutions that defines any international society? Second, what are the security consequences for outsiders of being excluded from international society? Lastly, can international society itself become a referent object of security? This is a promising emerging agenda and some English School literature already goes in this direction.

Popularizing the English School

This is a very important publication. Buzan performs an invaluable task seeking to familiarize students and scholars with the ideas, concepts, methods and debates of the English School. This is part of the heritage he leaves to the English School which he has so proudly served and the ideas of which he has undoubtedly advanced.

For those aware of Buzan's writing skills and expression clarity would come to no surprise how well-written and well-structured this book is. As it was stated earlier, this volume could serve the needs of both undergraduate and graduate students (it can easily serve as a main or supplementary text) as well as any scholar interested in the English School, its evolution and its current and emerging research agendas.

Notes

[1] See Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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

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[3] See Barry Buzan and Anna Gonzalez-Pelaez (eds.), *International Society in the Middle East: English School Theory at the Regional Level* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) and Barry Buzan and Yongjin Zhang (eds.), *International Society and the Contest Over 'East Asia'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[4] See Barry Buzan, "International Society and International Security," in Rick Fawn and Jeremy Larkins (eds.), *International Society after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Barry Buzan, "The English School and International Security," in Muriam Dunn Cavelty and Victor Maurer (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[5] See Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977).

[6] See Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[7] See Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

[8] See Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Contact in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and James Mayal, *World Politics: Progress and Its Limits* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

[9] See Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan 1977).

[10] See John Vincent, *Nonintervention and International Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) and Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[11] See John Vincent, Human Rights and International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[12] See Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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