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The State of the Art of the English School

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2016 marks the 35th anniversary of one of the most famous antagonistic quotes in the discipline of International Relations (henceforth IR). In 1981, in the pages of the *Review of International Studies*, Roy Jones argued for the 'closure' of the English School, due to its lack of coherence as a research programme, the vagueness of its aims, the poorness of its methodology and the disputable status of the School as a 'theory'.[1]

Today, not only is the School still open but it has strengthened its position in academia and academies,[2] it is in dialogue both with other theories in IR and with other disciplines outside the domain of IR, it is becoming more and more fertile in terms of research programme and output, it is in tune with contemporary events and it is even rediscovering its original historical vein.

Proof of this may be found in the following elements: a compendium published for the International Studies Association (ISA),[3] a new introductory book published by Barry Buzan,[4] an increase in membership in the English School section of the ISA and the establishment of four fully operative working groups with world-wide membership: on the Institutions of International Society, on Regional International Societies, on Solidarism and Pluralism in International Society, and on the History of International Society.

Without neglecting significant criticism and legitimate disagreements on some of the tenets of the theory,[5] the turning point of the revitalisation of this school of thought (I have chosen this term to satisfy also those allergic to theory not concerned with strict causation) is a famous paper presented by Barry Buzan at the British International Studies Association (BISA).[6] Since then, the English School has engaged with numerous debates within IR and been able to provide insightful contributions and additional research material to both young and established scholars. In this chapter, I will focus on the most recent ones.

The first new research agenda, inaugurated in 2009 by Buzan's and Gonzalez-Pelaez's book on the Middle East,[7] is undoubtedly the regional one. Departing from the global level of analysis, dear to the first generation of scholars, English School research has recently focussed on the regional level of analysis, applying socio-structural theory of norms and institutions at the sub-global level. Insightful and innovative pieces of work have been produced by a variety of scholars on a variety of regions: Europe,[8] Scandinavia,[9] Latin America,[10] East Asia,[11] Eurasia,[12] African Union members,[13] the Arctic[14] and Central Asia.[15]

The merits of this agenda are evident. First, it contributes to a more refined and more theoretically grounded understanding of how norms and institutions are framed, localised and understood in contexts that may be markedly different from the solidarist, liberal Western 'global level'; in this respect, a much welcomed special issue of*Global Discourse* edited by Yannis Stivachtis critically considers the very existence of a 'global' international society.[16] Second, it brings the English School outside the domains of Eurocentrism. This is something to cherish, especially

given the Eurocentric character of its historical production.[17] Third, it adds to the wider academic field of comparative regionalism, emphasising neither institutional design[18] nor forms of cooperation[19] but primary institutions and socio-structural dynamics.

The second agenda inaugurated, coincidentally again in 2009, is the one on methods. As we have mentioned above, methods have been the Achilles heel of the School for a long time. However, the project convened by Navari et al. has systematised the methodological (dispersed) pluralism of the School into a coherent toolkit, with better specified epistemological and methodological assumptions and more refined methods of analysis.[20] This agenda is by no means exhausted, with works currently being produced on causation and even possible dialogue with process-tracing.[21]

The third agenda, which brings the English School 'back to the roots', is the historical one. English School scholars have (re)started exploring different international societies across history,[22] adding original research to the narrative of the 'expansion of international society',[23] focussing on world society and its impact on the normative structure of international society in given historical times.[24] This is a very welcome development of English School research as it positions the School as a valid platform (but by no means the only one) to facilitate dialogue between International Relations and History.

The fourth and last agenda, to demonstrate the vitality and fertility of the School, is concerned with the relationship between *primary* institutions (meant as durable, routinised practices such as sovereignty, diplomacy and international law) and *secondary* institutions (meant as international organisations, such as the UN or ASEAN). Following the work of Buzan[25] and Holsti[26] on how these two ontologies are related, Knudsen[27] and Spandler[28] have provided new theoretical insights insisting on the mutual relationship between these two categories: if primary institutions give birth and make possible secondary ones, it is also true that secondary ones may shape and modify primary ones. In this respect, Cornelia Navari has convened a research project studying international organisations through the theoretical prism of primary institutions called 'International Organisations in the Anarchical Society'.

All this is promising and certainly discourages new calls for closures. Nonetheless, it is important to discuss what the importance of the English School is. Why should a first-year student be interested in it? The answer lies in three of its features: holism, poly-methodology and a historical vein paired with normative reasoning and problematisation. I will dig deeper into each of these features.

By holism I simply mean the denial that either agency or structure have precedence in determining the course, the content and the characteristics of world politics. International politics, and especially international society, defined as an arrangement with which states regulate their relations through the use and the common understanding of norms, rules, practices and institutions, is the result of the co-constitution of the agents giving birth to the structure and the structure constituting the roles, the behaviours and the identities of agents. With its emphasis on institutions, the English School allows students and scholars alike to avoid the narrowness of reductionist theories and the deterministic fetishism of structural theories (mostly neorealism and neoliberalism).

The co-constitution of international society and its members, therefore, allows scholars to approach world politics both from the bottom up (how states and individuals sustain, challenge and modify the content and the practice of international society) as well as from the top down (how states and individual conform to and are constituted by the social web of norms, rules and practices informing international relations). This, as is evident, is a characteristic that the English School shares with constructivism, and parallels between the two have been already noticed elsewhere.[29] It goes without saying that this approach to world politics, relying on both structure and agency and on their co-constitution, is better equipped to explain 'change' in world politics: of identities, of practices, of values.

Moving to the issue of methodology, the English School's renovated interest for methods has already been noted above; nevertheless, it is important to specify that given the plurality of methods available to English School scholars, any research programme conducted using English School theory will inevitably benefit from a polyphony of sources and data, not necessarily available (or, even worse, interesting) to other theories. As a postulate, it follows that such variety of methods encourages, by definition, a dialogue with other disciplines outside the IR ivory tower but

nonetheless tangential, such as history, sociology, international political economy, security studies,[30] linguistics[31] and anthropology.[32] There is also an aspect related to cultural sensitivity, particularly in Asia, where the School is diffusing: despite criticism to its Eurocentric epistemology and overall an expression of Western (theoretical) domination, the English School is considered also open to non-Westphalian politics and is, therefore, anti-hegemonic.[33]

The third aspect of the English School that makes it appealing to young students and established scholars working in this tradition is its sensitivity to history, the relationship between history, the present and normative reasoning. Unlike realism, which studies history to find and prove recurrent patterns of states' behaviour in world politics, and differently from liberalism,[34] which tends to study history in a progressive and teleological way, the English School studies history in its own right, focussing on orders, patterns of relations, practices and institutions as arising, deceasing and evolving over time.

This historical sensitivity is always accompanied by a desire, a need, an impulse to trace the normative foundations of (historical) international societies. Attention to the values, the priorities, the moral philosophy underpinning relations between states has always been a feature of any English School research programme (and, again, one of its peculiarities as compared to realism and liberalism in their neo- variants and constructivism, which are much more interested in epistemological questions than in normative ones).

In fact, the recent research on regions and non-Western international organisations outlined above has shown how values, political priorities and conceptualisations of legitimacy vary across cultures, regions and social systems. Yet, discussions on human rights,[35] humanitarian intervention,[36] the benefits of a pluralist order[37] and the ethical consequences of borders and territoriality[38] signal that:

The English School is grounded in the practical, in the real-world tussle of power and interests, while at the same time it works through what is possible to say about the nature of obligation and moral responsibility among international actors. This is where ethics and practical interest meet, and it represents the unique contribution of the English School to contemporary normative IR theory.[39]

Indeed, an English School approach to the study of the Global Financial Crisis, the massive influx of refugees in Europe and the expansion of the Islamic State/ISIS illuminates important questions concerning the legitimacy, the viability and the practicality of the practices sustaining contemporary international society, with a specific emphasis on the institutions of sovereignty, borders, the market, humanitarian intervention and the protection of the state system itself.

The road ahead

From what was discussed above, it is clear that the English School has resisted well to criticism and calls for closure over the years, refining some of its under-specified aspects without losing its central identity. Not only is it an ecumenical school of thought able to dialogue with several disciplines and other schools of thoughts in international relations, but it has also been able to bring about a coherent and multifaceted research programme thanks to its ontological and methodological pluralism, as well as thanks to the fruitful synergy between senior and junior scholars.

Yet, as Jorgensen has astutely observed, 'the English School is currently in an interregnum between orthodoxy and innovation',[40] and therefore challenges still lie ahead. For example, the School has yet to provide for what really counts as a primary institution of international society. This is, in fact, a largely under-researched aspect of English School theory, albeit work on this has recently commenced.[41] Also, the study of interregional societies remains largely unexplored, despite tentative initial research.[42]

The next years will test the School's ability to live up to its new, promising research agendas. Yet, the sizzling community that is forming across the globe, paired to innovative and fresh theorisation well in tune with a solid tradition of thought, is certainly reason for hope, as this book reflects.

Notes

1. Roy E. Jones, 'The English school of international relations: a case for closure',*Review of International Studies*, 7, 1 (1981), pp. 1-13.
2. Tim Dunne asserts that three indicators demonstrate that the English School has been taken increasingly seriously in the global IR epistemic community since the publication of his 'Inventing International Society': influential textbooks on IR theory now include a chapter on the ES (pedagogical indicator); leading IR journals, notably RIS and Millennium, and the influential CUP/BISA series have consistently published increasing number of works on the ES (editorial indicator); and the fact that 'beyond its heartland, there is significant interest in its [ES] work in continental Europe as well as the USA, Canada, Australia, China and India (epistemic/academic indicator). Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (St. Martin's Press, 1998); Tim Dunne, 'The English School' in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Tim Dunne, 'The English School' in *International Relations: Discipline and Diversity* ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
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6. Barry Buzan, 'The English School as a Research Program: An Overview, and a Proposal for Reconvening', paper delivered to the panel 'A Reconsideration of the English School: Close or Reconvene', BISA (Manchester, 1999).
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14. Robert W. Murray, *Arctic International Society: Applying the English School to the High North* , International Studies Association (New Orleans, LA, 2015).
15. Filippo Costa-Buranelli, *International Society and Central Asia*, PhD thesis (London: King's College, 2015).
16. Yannis A. Stivachtis, 'Interrogating Regional International Societies, Questioning the Global International Society [Special Issue]', *Global Discourse*, 5, 3 (2015), pp. 327-517.
17. Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
18. Amitav Acharya and Alastair Iain Johnston, *Crafting Cooperation: Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
19. Philippe De Lombaerde and Michael Schulz, *The EU and World Regionalism: The Makability of Regions in the 21st Century* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2009).
20. Cornelia Navari, *Theorising International Society* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009).
21. Charlotta Friedner Parrat, 'Changing before our eyes and slipping between our fingers: international organisations and primary institutions', International Studies Association, Annual Conference (Toronto, ON,

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42. Thomas Linsenmaier, 'The interplay between regional international societies', *Global Discourse*, 5, 3 (2015), pp. 452-66.

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