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Interpreting Diplomacy: The Approach of the Early English School

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IAN HALL, FEB 14 2016

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In its first phase, which is normally dated from about 1959 to 1984,[i] the scholars who came to be labelled the early English School (ES), including Hedley Bull, Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, did not devote much effort to spelling out their preferred approach to international relations, let alone a research method. To make matters worse, the style and focus of their works varied, making it harder to distil an approach or method than it sometimes is when dealing with other schools of thought in International Relations (IR).[ii] But there are similarities in the essays and books produced by the early ES, and there were common commitments, and this chapter tries to tease them out.

In general, the early ES took an 'interpretive' approach that concentrated on the beliefs of individual actors in international relations, assuming that explaining and evaluating their actions depends on interpreting the meaning they had for the actors who performed them.[iii] This approach entailed, as Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight wrote in the preface to *Diplomatic Investigations*, a focus on 'the diplomatic community', which they – in contrast to some later ES thinkers – took to be synonymous with 'international society' and 'the states-system'.[iv] Butterfield, Wight, et al. were interested in 'the nature and distinguishing marks' of that community of individual actors, 'the way it functions, the obligations of its members, its tested and established principles of political intercourse', arguing that it carried with it 'an historical deposit of practical wisdom' called 'statecraft' that had 'lessons in relation to contemporary needs'.[v] And they were concerned 'to clarify the principles of prudence and moral obligation which have held together the international society of states throughout its history, and still hold it together'.[vi]

This approach was followed in *Diplomatic Investigations*, but also in a number of other contemporary works, including the early essays of Wight's erstwhile student at the London School of Economics (LSE), Coral Bell, as well as her brilliant study of American strategic policy debates in the 1950s, *Negotiation from Strength* (1962); Peter Lyon's *Neutrality* (1963), which also began life at the LSE under Wight's supervision; Butterfield's *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (1960); and Wight's essays in the *Survey of International Affairs* for March 1939 (1952) or occasional pieces like 'The Power Struggle at the United Nations' (1956), and of course his late 1950s *International Theory* lectures, published posthumously in 1990.[vii]

Underlying these works was an assumption that explaining and evaluating social behaviour depends on interpreting the meanings that behaviour has for actors and those with whom they interact. This entails a focus on social institutions, the bundles of norms and practices that have intersubjectively agreed meanings for actors in a given social group. In international relations, this involved a focus on the particular social institutions that have been emerged over time for the management of the interactions of states, or, to be more specific, for the management of the interactions of the rulers and representatives of states, as well as of their citizens. An interpretive approach also entails a focus on theories that espouse alternative norms and practices to those currently in operation, which some

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actors develop and utilise to contest the agreed norms and practices that make up social institutions. To explain and evaluate international relations, in other words, meant interpreting what key institutions meant to key actors, as their understandings and appraisal of the norms and practices of those institutions shaped their behaviour. And it meant interpreting the alternative norms and practices that at a given moment were being advanced by others, because they ideas can be taken up by actors and used to change key institutions, dispense with old ones, or create new ones.[viii]

This approach is neatly displayed by Butterfield and Wight's contributions to *Diplomatic Investigations*, and to a lesser extent in Hedley Bull's 'The Grotian Conception of International Society', as well as Wight's *International Theory* lectures. Throughout, as Bull put it, their object was to find, 'the essence of ... [a] doctrine' espoused by an individual actor – whether a thinker or a practitioner – and to assess its impact on political practices of politicians and diplomats in international society.[ix] Thus Butterfield, in 'The Balance of Power', scoured European intellectual history to locate the first iteration of the modern 'doctrine of balance', not merely to narrate the history of the idea but also to try to determine how it shaped the conduct of European statecraft.[x] In so doing, Butterfield inferred 'that an international order is not a thing bestowed by nature, but is a matter of refined thought, careful contrivance and elaborate artifice'.[xi]

These processes – and the international orders that have been and could be generated by them – were also explored in detail in Wight's three essays, 'Why is there no International Theory?', 'Western Values in International Relations', and 'The Balance of Power'. His opening observation in the middle essay that the concept of 'Western Values' was itself a contrivance and artifice clearly signalled the intent not merely to describe a school of abstract thought, but to show how it shaped the practice of 'statesmen' seeking to maintain an international society, keep order, and uphold certain norms and moral standards.[xii]

As Roger Epp has rightly argued, this approach to analysing international relations has 'strong resemblances' to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, which begins with the recognition that we are all located in traditions of thought that provide us with concepts with which to interpret the world around us, that past or different traditions need to be interpreted into our languages if we are to understand them, and that recognition that 'all understanding is interpretation'. Epp observes that the early ES also focuses on the languages of traditions because those scholars believes that they were 'constitutive rather [than] instrumental ... bound up with practices and institutions ... not simply the rationalisation or mystification of "interests"'.[xiii] Interpreting past and present languages of diplomacy was, for them, the core task of international relations theory, because those languages shaped the past and present conduct of their speakers and interlocutors. Or, as Epp puts it, this approach is necessary because, for the early ES, 'international society is a matter of intersubjective meaning embedded in practice'.[xiv]

This mode of explaining social behaviour – interpreting the beliefs of individual actors about the meanings of their actions – fell out of fashion in the later ES, as it did more broadly in the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century.[xv] It was utilised (albeit semi-consciously or unselfconsciously, and to a lesser or greater extent) in a series of works produced in the 1970s and 1980s by students or followers of the early School, but it was then set aside, for the most part, during the revival of the ES by a new generation of scholars in the mid-1990s.[xvi] This new generation maintained an interest in the history of ideas, but turned to other ways of explaining and evaluating the behaviour of actors in international relations more in keeping with their training as social scientists than those of the scholars in the early ES, who were mostly historians and philosophers.

In the new School, one wing has confined itself to evaluation and especially to normative theorising, drawing inspiration especially from post-Marxist critical theory. Andrew Linklater has been pivotal here, as he displaced Wight's earlier account of what he called 'revolutionism', associated with Immanuel Kant, but also with Karl Marx and even Adolf Hitler, with a positive 'revolutionist' vision of a cosmopolitan international society.[xvii] The aim of this wing of the School is to help realise this progressivist vision (or a version of it) by way of normative critique and prescription.

The other wing of the new School went in a quite different direction. It chose to explore the structure of international society, past and present, by utilising explanatory theories drawn from other social scientific traditions, notably

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functionalism, which is prominent in Bull's *The Anarchical Society* (1977), structural realism and neoliberalism, which play significant roles in Barry Buzan's work, and social constructivism, which is drawn upon by Tim Dunne.[xviii] These theories had a quite different orientation to the interpretivism of the early ES, focused as they all are on what Kenneth Waltz famously called the 'third image' of international relations (the international system) rather than the 'first image' (the individual actor).[xix]

Of course, these moves – the turns to critical theory and to alternative explanatory theories – have not disadvantaged the ES in the broader marketplace of ideas in IR, nor have they prevented the production of excellent work by scholars committed to it. The recent publication of an International Studies Association *Guide to the English School* (2013) is testimony to the success of the new ES; the production of excellent books and articles, especially on historical and non-Western international societies, continues unabated.[xx] But they do diverge in approach from that of the interpretive orientation of the early ES.

Given all that the new ES has achieved, it could be argued that the abandonment of the interpretivism of the early ES has paid dividends. But as Buzan notes in his recent overview of the School, it continues to be dogged by the criticism that it is complacent or even sloppy when it comes to matters of method.[xxi] To gain clarity, it may therefore be helpful to distinguish between different approaches taken by different parts of the ES, rather than arguing that the School as a whole embraces methodological pluralism, as some have suggested.[xxii] On the one hand, there is the approach of the early ES which insists that social behaviour can only be explained by reference to the meanings those actions have for those who perform them, and that this is done by interpreting the interpretations of the social world held by agents.[xxiii] On the other, there are the various approaches of the later ES, who maintain that social behaviour in international relations can be explained by focusing not on the first image but on the third, on the ideational and material structures of international society, which the later ES thinks determines or at least constrains the behaviour of individual actors.[xxiv]

Notes

[i] On this phase, see especially Brunello Vigezzi, *The British Committee and the Theory of International Politics (1954–1985): The Rediscovery of History* (Milan: Edizione Unicopli, 2005); and Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

[ii] See, for example, the contrast – made by Roy Jones in the article named 'The English School' – between Charles Manning's approach, shaped by idealist metaphysics, and Martin Wight's, shaped by historical modes of thinking derived from Herbert Butterfield, Arnold J. Toynbee and others. See Roy Jones, 'The English School of International Relations: A Case for Closure', *Review of International Studies* 7:1 (1981), 1-13.

[iii] On interpretivism in the social sciences, see especially Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes, 'Defending Interpretation', *European Political Science* 5 (2006): 69-83; and for a critique, see Colin Hay, 'Interpreting Interpretivism Interpreting Interpretations: The New Hermeneutics of Public Administration', *Public Administration* 89:1 (2011): 167-82.

[iv] Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, 'Preface', in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays on the Theory of International Politics*, eds Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 12.

[v] Ibid., 12-13.

[vi] Ibid., 13.

[vii] Coral Bell, 'The United Nations and the West', *International Affairs* 29:4 (1953), 464-72; Coral Bell, *Negotiation from Strength: A Study in the Politics of Power* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962); Peter Lyon, *Neutralism* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1963); Herbert Butterfield, *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century: A Christian View* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960); Martin Wight, 'The Balance of Power', in *Survey of International Affairs: The World in March 1939*, eds Arnold J. Toynbee and F. T. Ashton-Gwatkin (London: Oxford University

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Press, 1952), 508-31, Martin Wight, 'The Power Balance at the United Nations', *Proceedings of the Institute of World Affairs*, 33rd session (Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California), 247-59; and Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, eds Brian Porter and Gabriele Wight (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990).

[viii] The case for using interpretivism in international relations is put well by Mark Neufeld in 'Interpretation and the 'Science' of International Relations', *Review of International Studies* 19 (1993), 39-61.

[ix] Hedley Bull, 'The Grotian Conception of International Society', in *Diplomatic Investigations*, eds Butterfield and Wight, 51.

[x] Herbert Butterfield, 'The Balance of Power', in *Diplomatic Investigations*, eds Butterfield and Wight, 132-148.

[xi] *Ibid.*, 147.

[xii] See especially Martin Wight, 'Western Values in International Relations', in *Diplomatic Investigations*, eds Butterfield and Wight, 89-90.

[xiii] Roger Epp, 'The English School on the Frontiers of International Society: A Hermeneutic Recollection', *Review of International Studies* 24 (1998) (Special Issue), 49-51.

[xiv] *Ibid.*, 55.

[xv] This is not to say, however, that it completely disappeared or that it did not have powerful and influential exponents. See especially Charles Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', *The Review of Metaphysics* 25:1 (1971): 3-51.

[xvi] See, for example, Michael Donelan, ed., *The Reason of States* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978); Murray Forsyth, *Unions of States: The Theory and Practice of Confederation* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1981); Alan James, *Sovereign Statehood: The Basis of International Society* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986); James Mayall, *The Community of States* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982); James Mayall, *Nationalism and International Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Cornelia Navari, *The Condition of States* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991); R. J. Vincent, *Nonintervention and International Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974); and R. J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[xvii] See especially Andrew Linklater, 'Men and Citizens in International Relations', *Review of International Relations* 7:1 (1981), 23-37, as well as *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990) and *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998). For Linklater's views on the ES, see Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[xviii] See Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 1st ed. (London: Macmillan, 1977); Barry Buzan, 'From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School', *International Organization* 47:3 (1993), 327-52; Tim Dunne, 'The Social Construction of International Society', *European Journal of International Relations* 1:3 (1995), 367-89.

[xix] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

[xx] Daniel Green and Cornelia Navari, eds, *Guide to the English School of International Studies* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2013). See also, *inter alia*, Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Perez, eds, *International Society and the Middle East: English School Theory at the Regional Level* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2009) and Barry Buzan and

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Yongjin Zhang, eds, *Contesting International Society in East Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[xxi] Barry Buzan, *An Introduction to the English School of International Relations: The Societal Approach* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 170-71.

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

[xxiii] On this point, see also Cornelia Navari, 'The Concept of Practice in the English School', *European Journal of International Relations* 17:4 (2011): 611-30.

[xxiv] The best expression of this approach is Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For a much more thorough exploration of ES methods than is provided here, see also the various essays in Cornelia Navari, ed., *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).

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