

Pluralism and International Society

Written by Tom Keating

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TOM KEATING, FEB 17 2016

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Much attention among English School scholars is devoted to developing the concept of international society through an exploration of its relationship with its alternatives: international system and world society.[i] One of the distinguishing characteristics of international society is its attention to a plurality of states operating within a mutually recognised society. The idea of pluralism and a pluralism based on autonomous states has thus been central to thinking about international society. Yet the idea and practice of pluralism has been questioned by a number of observations. One is a view that pluralism does not accurately account for an international society deeply embedded within Eurocentric practices and ruled by Western values that have been imposed on non-Western states through imperial practices.[ii] A second concern has been raised by Andrew Hurrell, who questions pluralism on the grounds that it is unable to meet the pressing needs of the global community from environmental threats to the complex web of global finance to demands emanating from economic inequalities and identity politics. 'The changes associated with globalisation and the increased interaction and connectedness across global society have therefore undermined both the practical viability and the moral acceptability of a traditional state-based pluralism.'[iii] Practices of economic globalisation and human security have generated a third set of observations about the extent of more intrusive forms of global governance – that now regulate or supersede the authority of sovereign states and diminish the extent and significance of state-based pluralism within international society. Matthew Weinert recounts that:

States increasingly face robust homogenizing pressures in the form of (a) transparent and accountable governance yardsticks; (b) conditionalities attached to development assistance and admission into international organizations; and (c) empowered citizens who make claims against states and international institutions that often echo (d) minimal standards of human rights.[iv]

However, others maintain that such interventions and restrictions on state autonomy have not gone far enough and that human rights and economic and religious freedoms need to be applied more vigorously and thoroughly in a manner that would trump principles of state autonomy and non-intervention. This view is perhaps most evident in the discussion surrounding humanitarian interventions and the idea of responsibility to protect. It has encouraged a more solidarist approach to international society, if not a desire to create a world society. Such views are, in part, an acknowledgement of developments in the arenas of globalisation and human security. They also reflect shifting normative concerns. Regardless of their origin they raise important questions about the nature and desirability of pluralism and the substantive content of the rules and institutions in existence among the state members of international society.

Hedley Bull first raised many of these same concerns in *The Anarchical Society* when he distinguished between pluralist and solidarist accounts of international society.[v] Bull's distinction rested on the normative content of the rules and institutions that demarcated international society and the degree to which they gave priority to order among states and the sovereign rights of these states as opposed to more substantive values such as human rights or

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justice that would limit these states' rights. Barry Buzan in reiterating the significance of these issues for the English School has also stressed that the pluralist-solidarist discussion is one that takes place within an interstate international society.[vi] Bull, for his part, urged caution in adopting more solidarist approaches lest they fail to reflect a consensus among all members of the society of states.[vii] This more cautious view has been shared and reiterated by Robert Jackson in part, in response to the interventions of the 1990s.[viii] Yet Bull also expressed concern about resistance to an order imposed with Western values that failed to acknowledge the concerns of many peoples and states with matters of recognition, economic justice, and cultural autonomy.[ix] Others, including Nicholas Wheeler and Andrew Linklater, have taken up the solidarist position emphasising themes of justice and human security and defending interventionist practices.[x]

The concern for human rights and human security that has been encouraged by developments both within and among states suggests a significant normative shift for international society as it extends the subjects of international society to include individuals and creates a tension between the state and other agents for the protection of these individuals. Much of this concern was evident in the alleged ascendancy of liberal values in the aftermath of the Cold War. Within English School accounts, much attention has been given to the discourse and practice of human security and responsibility to protect as evidence of this turn towards solidarism.[xi] The attention to human rights has been important in shedding light on abuses and strengthening the standards against which the practices of states are assessed. Yet as Jennifer Welsh reminds us and in spite of some hopes that this normative shift would lead to numerous interventions, such occurrences have been limited.[xii] While the promotion of these values and practices occurred both within and outside of regional and international institutions they have largely reflected the hegemonic position of the United States and a certain hubris shared by many of its allies. Additionally, none of this activity has moved very far from the particular interests of these states, as became clearer in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. Normative considerations gave way to security interests and what appeared to be a more solidarist international society or even emergent world society, returned to something which at best represented a pluralist international society of sovereign states, and at worst a new imperial order.

In spite of former UN secretary general Kofi Annan's claim that the aim of the UN Charter must be to protect individual human beings, it is clear that it lacks the capacity to do so on any sustainable basis. It is also clear that there is as yet no consensus among states about how best to do this. This has led to suggestions, such as that of Allan Buchanan and Robert Keohane, for legitimating alternative and more exclusive mechanisms for intervention.[xiii] Such alternatives, however, present a challenge to international society especially as they tend to serve the interests of more powerful states as much as they might solidarist values. Thus while the interventions of individual states and collectivities such as NATO have been designed to provide a degree of protection for individuals facing harm in places such as Kosovo and Libya, these have been undertaken at the lowest possible risk and cost to the intervening party and in the absence of any consideration of the longer-term and multidimensional needs of the populations involved.[xiv] Additionally, the diplomatic activity surrounding this increased activity has yet to demonstrate a deep commitment in support of an inclusive consensus. This is reminiscent of the exclusionary practices of European governments in the late nineteenth century, so thoroughly analysed and critiqued by Cemil Aydin.[xv] At that time, Western powers, in their eagerness to impose standards of civilisation often riddled with racial and cultural biases, failed to acknowledge the extent to which non-Western states were seeking legitimacy and recognition so that they could participate more fully in international society. Instead, then as today, the concerns of these dominant powers have often reflected their own particular interests. From an English School perspective, attention to the practice of states and to the intention of those who Jackson describes as the diplomatic community is critically important in examining the substantive character of international society.

The arena of economic globalisation, while less widely discussed within the English School literature, is also of interest, for here there is much greater evidence of a body of substantive rules and a more robust governance framework in the form of the institutionalisation of these rules embodied, for example, in the European Union and the World Trade Organization.[xvi] In this arena as well, the commitment to a common set of values and practices is often compromised in response to local or national interests. Member governments regularly and repeatedly seek exemptions to rules or behave in ways that reflect a stronger commitment to local interests over shared values. Additionally, the significant transition in the international distribution of economic power with the emergence of more active and influential emerging powers, including China, India, and Brazil, has added a new set of interests and

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values into the governance process that has only partially been reflected in changes to governance structures and decision-making councils. It would seem from the diplomacy of these states in arenas including the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organization that their interests and aspirations for international order are not incompatible with a pluralist international society, even as they differ over some substantive values.^[xvii] To ignore differences over substantive values in an effort to construct a solidarist international society that entrenched cosmopolitan principles at the risk of alienating these emerging powers might impede an opportunity to strengthen the fabric of a vibrant pluralistic international society.

In contemplating the future balance between a more pluralist or solidarist international society, attention to the practice of individual states is of critical importance. Welsh, and R.J. Vincent before her, remind us that state practice provides the clearest reading on the acceptability and meaning of these solidarist principles that have become more commonplace in contemporary international society. State practice may reveal a profound level of scepticism towards principles that impede the sovereign authority of their own national governments to resist the homogenising practices of entities such as the EU and the WTO or from a NATO vision of R2P that they seek to impose on others. Often the pressures for solidarist values emanate from dominant powers with less regard for the concerns of lesser powers and with the ability to reject such values when desired. Such practices have reinforced the view that international society is inherently Eurocentric and has failed to adapt to a truly international society. Continuing such practices carries the risk that a normative concern with a progressive agenda gets diluted with national interests and hijacked by power considerations such that a move towards economic or political justice becomes the latest iteration of imperialism.

A truly inclusive form of pluralism needs to recognise and legitimise the autonomous rights and culture of different communities. In view of such a possibility, support for a more pluralist international society is understandable. Failure to move in this direction poses a risk to the advances that have been made through international society. This was indeed Bull's primary concern. As Welsh notes, it was also a concern for Vincent, even as he tried to extrapolate a more responsive approach to human rights. 'In the end, he could not accept a normative approach to international relations that would allow the strong— who were both "untrusted and untrustworthy"—to impose justice as they understood it.'^[xviii] Perhaps this lies at the root of concerns about the future direction of a more solidarist international society. Alex Bellamy and Matt McDonald maintain that 'the key challenge' for English School proponents of a more solidarist approach 'is whether practices of security can emerge that are sufficiently solidarist to have real impact [...] whilst sufficiently pluralist to meet Hedley Bull's concerns about the dangers of undermining international order.'^[xix]

The dilemma that confronts the globe is the difficulty in overcoming states' interests to devise programmes of progressive change to address the problems emanating from environmental degradation, economic inequalities, and identity politics, balanced against relying on seemingly more 'universal' approaches that are primarily imperial projects serving the interests of dominant powers. Hurrell is right to stress the limitations of a state-based pluralism as the world confronts the myriad of problems involved in managing the environment, the global economy and its plurality of identities. To identify the limitations is not to offer an acceptable alternative. The states that comprise international society show little inclination to move along a common path to a more effective governance of the existing global order. There are few signs that powerful states are going to abandon their privilege and interests easily. It remains necessary to recognise the continued importance of state-based diplomacy and state-supported order to make the necessary transition to the more effective governance that these modern challenges demand. As Turan Kayaoglu writes in his critique of the Eurocentric character of parts of the English School, such an effort must be truly pluralistic:

By acknowledging the importance of the values, norms, and institutions that states share, and theorizing how values, norms, and institutions shape international relations, the English School has advanced our understanding of international relations and created a vision for a more stable and peaceful international system. However, the commitment of English School scholars to the Westphalian narrative prevents them both from exploring the contribution of non-Western normative and historical sources adequately, apart from passing references to these contributions, and from theorizing about cross-cultural interactions in contemporary international relations.^[xx]

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An international society rooted in a more inclusive form of pluralism that gets over its Eurocentric biases has the opportunity to offer a path through diplomacy and institutionalised consensus building to constrain the dominance of power and national interests and move, however incrementally, towards addressing some of these concerns. The pluralist cornerstone, one that respects and protects state sovereignty even as it acknowledges the enhanced concern for rights or the shifting demands for a more integrated global economy, remains a critical foundation for international society.

Notes

- [i] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- [ii] Turan Kayaoglu, 'Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory', *International Studies Review* 12 (2010), 193–217.
- [iii] Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 297.
- [iv] Matthew, S. Weinert, 'Reframing the Pluralist-Solidarist Debate', *Millennium* 40:1 (2011), 33.
- [v] Hedley Bull, 'The Grotian Conception of International Society' in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, eds Martin Wight and Hubert Butterfield (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).
- [vi] Buzan, *From International to World Society*, 139.
- [vii] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 157.
- [viii] Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- [ix] Hedley Bull, 'The Revolt against the West' in *The Expansion of International Society*, eds Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 217-28.
- [x] Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community* (London: Macmillan, 1998).
- [xi] Wheeler provides among the most extensive discussions in his *Saving Strangers*; also see Alex J. Bellamy and Matt McDonald, 'Securing International Society: Towards an English School Discourse of Security', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 39:2 (2004), 307-24.
- [xii] Jennifer Welsh, 'A normative case for pluralism: reassessing Vincent's views on humanitarian intervention', *International Affairs* 87:5 (2011), 1193-204.
- [xiii] Allen Buchanan and Robert O. Keohane, 'The Preventive Use of Force: A Cosmopolitan Institutional Proposal', *Ethics and International Affairs* 18:1 (2004), 1-22.
- [xiv] Aidan Hehir and Robert Murray, eds *Libya, The Responsibility to Protect and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- [xv] Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
- [xvi] Barry Buzan, 'International Political Economy and Globalisation', in *International Society and Its Critics*, ed. Alex J. Bellamy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115-34.

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[xvii] See, for example, Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walker, *China, the United States, and Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Shogo Suzuki, 'Seeking "Legitimate" Great Power Status in the Post-Cold War International Society: China's and Japan's Participation in UNPKO', *International Relations* 22:1 (2008), 45-63; Jonathan E. Davis, 'From Ideology to Pragmatism: China's Position on Humanitarian Intervention in the Post-Cold War Era', *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 44:2 (2011), 217-83; Allen Carlson, 'Moving Beyond Sovereignty?' *Journal of Contemporary China* 20:68 (2011), 89-102.

[xviii] R.J. Vincent cited in Jennifer Welsh, 'A Normative Case for pluralism: Reassessing Vincent's Views on Humanitarian Intervention', *International Affairs* 87:5 (2011), 1202; see also R.J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[xix] Bellamy and McDonald, 'Securing International Society: Towards an English School Discourse of Security', 309.

[xx] Kayaoglu, 'Westphalian Eurocentrism', 209.

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