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The Concept of 'World Society' in International Relations

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CRINA IFTODE, MAY 9 2017

The English school theory is based mainly on the idea of society of states, society which exist regardless of the main realist and liberal assumption that the international system is anarchic. Wight (1991) gave three traditions for the English school theory: realism/international system, rationalism/international society and revolutionism/world society. This essay will critically discuss the English School concept of 'world society'. In the first part of the essay I will focus on the understanding of the English school's place in international relations theory and then it will move towards the world society concept. I will provide a brief historical background of the concept as well as a definition formed and based on several English school theorists' thinking like Wight (1991), Buzan (2004), and Williams (2005). Subsequently, I will give an explanation of the main issues that define it and also I will state its importance based on the affirmation made by Buzan (2004) that the concept of world society has been receiving very little attention from English school's theorists. I will highlight this point by looking at Hedley Bull's writings (1977; 1984) and how Wight named the concept of world society 'revolutionism'. The second part of the essay will prioritise the necessity of a critical analysis of the theory. Firstly, it will focus on the relationship between world society and international society – one of the most important theories in the English School. Explaining the relationship between the two theories will provide a better understanding of the 'world society' concept. In order to do that I will make use of one of the most popular tensions in the English School sphere: the debate between pluralism and solidarism. Then, I will provide a brief critical analysis from the realist perspective.

International Relations (IR) theories are divided between two main categories: positivist and normative theories. Positivist theories are based on science and facts; they express the rational, objective and explanatory theories such as realism or liberalism. They also focus on the existing reality, on what *is* rather than what *ought* or *should* be. On the other hand, there are the normative theories. These theories express different aims and focus on a more moral view of IR theory. Thus, normative in IR theory is characterized by concepts, norms and values; theories are reflective and subjective (i.e. social constructivism or idealism) and focus on what ought or should be. In other words, normative theories are based on the notion of the ideal standard, on what it is 'right' or 'normal'. They have a more optimistic view of the world and generally focus on human rights and human security.

English school theory is situated between these two categories due to its internal tensions between pluralism and solidarism, but I will develop the debate between the two approaches later on. World Society, or as Wight (1991) named it 'Revolutionism', is the third tradition in the English school. Revolutionists tend to be optimistic about human nature and share a passionate interest in the moral unity of the society of states. This theory is divided into three main historical categories: the religious Revolutionists, the French Revolutionists, and the totalitarian Revolutionists (Wight, 1991, p. 8).

The religious Revolutionists, both Protestant and Catholic, started their activity in the sixteenth century, activity which lasted until the seventeenth century. This activity is mainly described by their arguments against the existing society of states of that time. The Protestants criticised the society of states for being corrupt and depraved and 'through God's providence' (Wight, 1991, p. 8) – as they would have said it – were on the edge of starting a reform meant to eliminate the existing system and replace it with a new society of states. On the other side, there are the Catholics which emphasised the rebellious and unorthodox aspect of the existing international system. The French

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revolutionists started their activity in the eighteenth century, during the French Revolution and the totalitarian Revolutionists in the twentieth century, during both the First World War and the Second World War.

In other words, the historical background written above can be interpreted through a definition of the world society concept which was formulated by John Williams:

'World society is associated with a political system in which states are not the predominant actors, although this does not mean they disappear; where political activity is principally focused upon individuals, rather than institutionalised collectives; and where normative progress is understood in universal terms.' (Williams, 2005, p. 20)

What Williams is trying to highlight here is that Revolutionism focuses more on non-governmental institutions (NGOs) on individuals and their global identities, and eventually on the global population as a whole rather than on the state. In other words, Universalist cosmopolitanism is the main concept that defines world society (Buzan, 2004, pp. 7-8); this means that the significance of the world society concept is best described by the idea that all human beings belong to a single community formed and based on shared morals and values. Buzan (2004, p. 477) also describe the concept as 'the idea of shared norms and values at the individual level, but transcending the state'. To understand this better take for example the idea of a continent or even a country; an individual who lives in Romania will accept its personal identity as Romanian which connects him with other Romanians through norms and values created by the Romanian society. Additionally, he will also conceive of himself to be European, status which connects him with individuals all over the continent. This example can be applied to every single country in the world.

Despite the fact that we can depict a clear definition of the concept as well as an explanation of its characteristics, the notion of world society is vague and unstable. Even though the members of the English school struggled over the years to equally develop all three traditions and to make a clear distinction between the rationalist and revolutionist theories as well as explaining the relationship between the two, international society remained their main focus in building an international relations theory. Hence, world society received very little consideration. Many theorists – Little (2000), Williams (2005/2013), Buzan (2004) – argued that the English school can often be misinterpreted as a study of international society.

Williams (2013) tried to give an explanation to this situation, and it is concentrating on the period when these three traditions started to evolve: the Cold War period. A truly confusing period when the international politics sphere was hardly focusing on human needs; a period when even the international society concept was under threat and international relations theory needed to explain the events that were occurring. These circumstances meant an overwhelmingly amount of pressure on IR theorist so they could not risk to waste time focusing on a theory which purely did not suit that specific structure of the world (Williams, 2013, p. 130). This is the main reason Wight named the concept of world society 'revolutionism'. He believed it to be too revolutionary for the world to accept it as a fundamental international relations theory. It was hard, if not impossible, to focus on a normative, solidarist theory to explain or develop a clear understanding of the world in a context where the international system was clearly anarchic and where the threat of communism ascension was real. As a consequence, revolutionist tradition has a very vague definition and its principles and issues are unclear and they lack in focus.

This justification may explain the lack of interest of the English school's theorists for developing and actually using the world society concept as a fundamental theory of international relations during the Cold War era, but it surely does not explain why this concept remained so underdeveloped in the present. Based on a liberal assumption – that history is linear and change is possible – Buzan (2004) argues that after the end of the Cold War, the world entered in a new era of international relations. States are focusing more on human rights; there is a sense of unity between states through interdependence, trade and culture; we can easily talk about gender equality in global politics – even though the gap between male and female it is not one hundred per cent closed, it is achievable – because the world has changed and this new environment may actually allow world society to become one of the influential traditions in the English school theory. Despite of these reasons, in the twenty-first century world society is still 'the Cinderella concept of English school theory' (Buzan, 2004, pp. 10-11).

The underdevelopment of this concept brought a lot of criticism to the English school theory. Buzan (2004) also

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argued that since the English school is characterized by all three traditions it cannot develop until its members start strengthen the idea of world society too; 'it is mostly discussed in the context of other things and not systematically developed in itself' (Buzan, 2004, p. 44). What Buzan is trying to explain is that world society was often seen as an alternative to international society.

We can understand this point better by looking at one of the most important English school members, Hedley Bull and his writings 'The Anarchical Society' (1977) and 'The expansion of International Society' (1984) in collaboration with Adam Watson. In these books, his main focus was on order and justice and also on the first two traditions: international system and international society. Thus, he gives a very pertinent definition for the rationalist theory:

'a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which . . . have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements' (Bull and Watson, 1984, p. 1)

In other words, the states which form an international society are perfectly aware of their common interests and common values and make use of their shared rules and institutions to accomplish their common interest. He largely discussed the concept of international society in an anarchical international system and scarcely focused on the concept of world society individually. Even though his opinion about this concept was that it did not exist because it lacks in focus and understanding of the world, he gives an explanation of the solidarist international society, which can be thought as being the world society concept because of its characteristics. In the next paragraph I will talk about the pluralist-solidarist debate in order to strengthen the argument of a solidarist international society.

We can see the classical approach to pluralism and solidarism in Hedley Bull's essay 'The Grotian Conception of International Society' (1966). Pluralism is the realist or positivist side of rationalism; it sees the state as the principal actor in the international system and argues that the international law is made entirely by states. Solidarism, on the other hand, can be easily associated to normative theory because of its main supposition of 'solidarity, or potential solidarity, of the states comprising international society, with respect to the enforcement of law' (Bull, 1966, p. 52). Solidarity here can be linked to cosmopolitan assumptions its main focus being on human beings, human rights, human security and, more importantly, on individuals (Buzan, 2004, pp. 46-48). Having these definitions in mind and relating them to both rationalist and revolutionist theories, we may be tempted to assume that international society is pluralist and world society is solidarist, but it is actually not that simple. Making this assumption is dangerous because there is not enough evidence that can sustain this argument. Also, Bull's focus – as said above – was on international society when he developed these notions and he used these methods to describe the different ways in which the rational theory fits in the English school and IR theory. As a consequence, instead of developing the world society concept individually, Bull focuses only on international society by giving it two alternatives: the pluralist international society and the solidarist international society.

Even though world society has not received much attention and was taken as an extension of international society, there are still strong characteristics that can make world society an important, individual concept of IR theory. As said in the first part of the essay, world society was formed based on Kantianism. Just as world society, Kantianism develops the innovation of cosmopolitan law (i.e. the law of individuals) and this existed since the American and French revolution. One strong argument that can persuade a theorist to develop the concept of world society separate from international society is that the League of Nations and United Nations derived from Kant's innovation that the individual should be the main focus in IR theory and they still exist today (Habermas, 2013). Although, League of Nations and United Nations are two extremely important bodies in international relations, their failure in Rwanda for example leads to a sceptically thinking of world society.

This argument brings the essay to the realist critique of the concept. Realist theory agrees only with the first tradition of the English school, that of the international system and strongly disagrees with the idea that states do not necessarily exists in an anarchic system 'driven by material power structures' (Copeland, 2003, p. 429). Even though the English school theorists use anarchy as one of the leading concepts in creating the first two traditions, for the world society concept, they failed to see the true implications of anarchy in those societies due to their focus on societal dimensions. Anarchy is the most important assumption in realist theory and even though this theory is

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divided between two main camps – offensive and defensive realism – both agree that the English school scholars are naïve (Copeland, 2003, p. 435). The world society theory fails to see the real issues in the world, those being survival which leads to uncertainty.

Furthermore, realists criticise the solidarist call for innervation for the sake of universal human rights. Existing in an anarchical system which is dominated by uncertainty, it is impossible for a state to persuade other states that its intervention concern humanitarian objectives only. This leads us to the next realist principle that the English school fails to address: the security dilemma. If state A intervenes in state C then state B will automatically feel threatened by state A (Copeland, 2003, pp. 435-438).

In conclusion, in a world which still has the tendency to see international relations and the international system from a realist perspective, world society is a revolutionary concept in IR theory. The main points touched in this essay described the necessity for developing the concept of world society separate from the one of international society. The world is indeed changing, it is progressing and it would be a shame to consider that we are prompt to repeat the same mistakes all over again and not learn from history. By saying this, I am not excluding the first two traditions, but I do agree with Buzan's (2004) argument that the English school deserves much more attention and this cannot be accomplished with only two traditions developed. A clear distinction between the second and the third tradition must to be made and world society needs to be studied individually. Having said that, and by developing my arguments around theorists like Buzan, Williams and Little, I have reached the conclusion that world society it is a viable concept in the English school theory.

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