

# Introducing the English School in International Relations Theory

Written by Yannis Stivachtis

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The English school provides the basis for the study of international and world history in terms of the social structures of international orders. Unlike many theories that claim a certain sector of the subject of International Relations, the English school provides a holistic approach to the subject, attempting to see the world as a whole. English school theory is built around establishing distinctions between three key concepts: international system, international society and world society. By doing so it opens up a new space in IR theory and offers a middle ground between the opposing theories of realism and liberalism.

### The basics of the English school

The English school is built around three key concepts: *international system*, *international society* and *world society*. Hedley Bull (1977, 9–10) defined the international system as being formed ‘when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole.’ According to this definition, the international system is mainly about power politics among states whose actions are conditioned by the structure of international anarchy. An international society exists when a group of like-minded states ‘conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions’ (Bull 1977, 13). In other words, international society is about the creation and maintenance of shared norms, rules and institutions. Finally, world society is more fundamental than international society because ‘the ultimate units of the great society of all mankind are not states ... but individual human beings’ (Bull 1977, 21). Thus, world society transcends the state system and takes individuals, non-state actors and ultimately the global population as the focus of global societal identities and arrangements. It is important to note here that in the English school the term ‘institution’ is different to the term ‘organisation’.

According to English school thought, ‘institutions’ refer to long-term practices among states (such as diplomacy, law and war) rather than to international bureaucratic structures (organisations) that may be established to facilitate state interaction. To refer to international organisations, the English school uses the term ‘pseudo-institutions’ or ‘secondary institutions’ to show that the effectiveness of international organisations depends on the function of an international society’s primary institutions.

The distinction between an international *system* and an international *society* helps us distinguish the pattern and character of relations among and between certain states and groups of states. For example, historically there was an essential difference between the type of relations among the European states and the type of their relations with the Ottoman Empire. Relations among the European states reflected the existence of a European international *society*, while relations between the European states and the Ottoman Empire reflected the existence of an international *system*. Likewise, the interaction among the European Union’s member states reflects the existence of an *international society*, while the interaction of the European Union itself with Turkey (a non-member) describes interaction within a broader *international system*. Despite its usefulness, the distinction between an international

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system and an international society invited considerable criticism because even in an international system one could observe the existence of some rules and the operation of some institutions. This debate has resulted in the acceptance of the premise that an international system constitutes a weak or 'thin' form of an international society.

Throughout the bulk of history, there was not any single international system or society. Instead, there were several regional international societies, each with its own distinctive rules and institutions. All were built upon elaborate civilisations, including distinctive religions, different systems of governance, different types of law and different conceptions of the world. This, in turn, implied that relations between political entities that were members of different regional international societies could not be conducted on the same moral and legal basis as relations within the same society, because the rules of each individual regional society were culturally particular and exclusive. There was no single agreed body of rules and institutions operating across the boundaries of any two or more regional international societies to speak for a broad international society. Moreover, contacts between regional international societies were much more limited than contacts within them. Thus, the emergence of a truly universal international society would not be possible unless one of the regional international societies could expand itself to the degree that it could merge all the others into a single universal society organised around a common body of rules and values.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, international society came to be regarded as a privileged association of European and 'civilised' states, which had visible expression in certain institutions such as international law, diplomacy and the balance of power. There was a sense that European powers were bound by a code of conduct in their dealings with one another and that this code did not apply in their dealings with other societies. Nineteenth-century international lawyers perpetuated the cultural duality between Europeans and non-Europeans and between 'civilised' and 'non-civilised' peoples. The distinction between 'civilised' and 'barbarous' humanity meant that states belonging to either category were accorded different stages of legal recognition. As the European international society spread over the world, many non-European states sought to join international society. Thus, the European states needed to define the conditions under which non-European political entities would be admitted. The result was the establishment of a standard of 'civilisation', which reflected the norms of the liberal European civilisation.

The standard of civilisation included such elements as the guarantee of basic human rights and the maintenance of a domestic legal system guaranteeing justice for all. Thus, by definition, countries unwilling or unable to guarantee such rights could not be considered 'civilised'. Consequently, non-European candidate states were judged not only by how they conducted their foreign relations but also by how they governed themselves. The process also led to the creation of hierarchical relations between two new categories of states: the 'civilisers' and the 'civilisees'. Or to put it another way, the 'teachers' and the 'pupils'.

A new international society emerged following the end of the First World War (1914–1918), watermarked by the establishment of the League of Nations in 1920. The latter's design for a new global international society incorporated almost all the rules and practices that had developed in the European international society, including its international law and diplomacy, as well as its basic assumptions about sovereignty and the judicial equality of states recognised as independent members of the society. The impetus for the League came not from Europe, but from an American president, Woodrow Wilson – signifying a change in the nature of the international order. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 interrupted the functioning of the League and consequently led to the destruction of that particular international society. The establishment of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 constituted the expression of yet another new international society. In fact, many principles and structures found in the League were replicated by the United Nations. Meanwhile, the standard of 'civilisation' was insulting to representatives of non-European civilisations since the privileged legal status which European states claimed for themselves meant not only the division of the world between 'civilised' and 'non-civilised' states but also the maintenance of a hierarchical relationship among states. Consequently, non-European states and colonised communities began campaigning against the 'standard of civilisation', which was eventually abolished when the decolonisation process commenced – heralding the end of the age of empire and imperialism. The emergence of the bipolar world of the Cold War (1947–1991), when two superpowers divided the world into their respective orbits, led to the division of the relatively 'thin' new global international society into two sub-global 'thicker' international societies: one associated with the United States and one with the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War in 1991 meant two things: first, the division of

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the global international society ceased to exist; and second, a set of regional international societies with different degrees of 'thickness' gradually emerged within the confines of the 'thinner' global international society.

A key debate within the English school revolves around pluralism and solidarism. Pluralism refers to international societies with a relatively low degree of shared norms, rules and institutions. Solidarism refers to types of international society with a relatively high degree of shared norms, rules and institutions. The pluralist/solidarist debate is basically about how international society relates to world society or, in other words, to people. The main question has been how to reduce the tension between the needs and imperatives of states and the needs and imperatives of humankind. These are regularly in conflict both in real world situations and in the theory. Most English school scholars operate within this debate, taking the tension between the imperatives of order and justice as the core problem to be addressed.

Important to the pluralist/solidarist debate are questions about whether international law should include natural law or positive law. *Natural law* is a philosophy that advocates that certain rights or values are inherent by virtue of human nature and can be universally understood through human reason. In other words, natural law refers to a body of unchanging moral principles regarded as a basis for all human conduct. Positive law, on the other hand, refers to human-made laws of a given community, society or state. This debate manifests most acutely between states' claims to sovereignty (via pluralism) on the one hand and the idea that universal rights are vested in people (via solidarism) on the other. A quick example to demonstrate this would be to use the case of Syria. A pluralist reading would state that despite terrible atrocities since 2011 as the state has collapsed in a brutal civil war, Syria is a sovereign country and responsible for its own territory and people. A solidarist position would stress the overriding obligation to protect human life and intervene in Syria's civil war. Both positions would suggest a very different type of international society. Pluralism and solidarism, while seemingly opposites, are the framing principles for a debate about the limits and possibilities of international society. This debate is mostly about how best to reconcile the desires and needs of both people and states. In this sense, the English school is an essential tool within IR theory that tries to find a working balance between how power, interests and standards of justice and responsibility operate in international society.

## The English school and the European Union

Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, six European states formed a regional international system in the sense that they had 'sufficient contact between them, and had sufficient impact on one another's decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole' (Bull 1977, 9–10). Applying Bull's definition of international society, relatively soon an international society was formed in the sense that 'they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions' (Bull 1977, 13). In other words, these European states that today are associated with the European Union (EU) created a set of rules and institutions to govern and manage their affairs. As time progressed, the integration process gained strength, breadth and depth, resulting in the creation of supranational institutions (legal powers existing beyond the state), law and policies. This, in turn, led, among other things, to the creation of an EU world society that underpins the EU international society. At the same time, EU law and policies seek to regulate the relations between the Union and, on the one hand, its member states and, on the other, its people. In this way, the tension between the needs and imperatives of states and the needs and imperatives of people, as well as the tension between the imperatives of order and justice, which constitute the core of the pluralist/solidarist debate, are addressed.

The process of the EU enlargement as it went from six members in 1951 to 28 in 2013 is not very different from the process of the historical expansion of European international society. As in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, EU member states had to define the conditions under which they would admit candidate states. As a result, European states that aspire to EU membership need to meet specific political and economic criteria. Like the historical standard of 'civilisation', the EU's membership conditions are an expression of the assumptions used to distinguish those that belong to the expanding Union from those that do not. Those that fulfil the political and economic conditions set by the EU states will be brought inside while those that do not conform will be left outside. Like the non-European states before, EU candidate states had to learn to adjust themselves to new realities, sometimes at significant cost to their own societies.

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The EU's membership criteria include both economic and political conditions. Because the EU started as an economic organisation, the definition of the economic conditions that prospective members must meet was in place from the beginning. On the other hand, the formulation of political conditions has undergone considerable evolution. At its Copenhagen Summit in June 1993, EU norms and values were clarified under the following criteria:

1. Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for the protection of minorities.
2. Membership requires the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union.
3. Membership presupposes the candidate's ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

The EU's potential for impacting on candidate states varies between two broad stages: first, pre-negotiations (when the Copenhagen criteria must be satisfied before negotiations commence); and second, actual negotiations (when political conditions are monitored regularly). During the first phase, negotiations may be blocked by a country's failure to satisfy the political conditions, while during the second phase, negotiations may be interrupted or terminated if a negotiating country reverses its fulfilment of the political conditions or violates any of them. Here the case of Turkey comes to mind, considering its authoritarian power shifts and troubled human rights record – which may explain why its path to membership has gone unfulfilled since it first applied to join in 1987.

The process of EU enlargement, steadily growing to cover the bulk of the European continent, demonstrates how a 'thick' regional international society expands outwards, gradually transforming the much broader international system in which it is embedded into an international society. But, as noted earlier, the international system itself represents a 'thin' form of an international society.

However, the expansion process does not end with the entry of candidate states into the European Union. In fact, elements of order present in the EU and which are associated with international society and world society are exported beyond the Union's boundaries in three additional ways. First, states located around the EU's borders are encouraged to adopt norms and practices compatible with those of the European Union. Second, to access development assistance or aid, states must fulfil certain political and economic conditions that reflect EU norms and values. Third, asking trading partners to adhere to certain norms, rules and practices have become EU conditions that have shaped the Union's trade policy and its relations with external states.

If the study of the EU enlargement is important to understand how regional international societies expand outwards, thereby slowly transforming the much broader international system in which they are embedded into an international society, the investigation of what happens to them if they contract is equally important. For example, what would happen to the EU regional international society as a result of 'Brexit' (the United Kingdom leaving the European Union) and the possibility that other states may also leave? There are two possibilities. First, if core members of a regional international society depart, then this society may be gradually transformed into a 'thinner' international society, which is equivalent to an international system. Second, the regional international society may continue to exist, but the states that leave this society would move into the broader international system in which the regional international society is embedded.

For example, despite Brexit, the EU regional international society will continue to exist but the United Kingdom would move into the broader international system in which the EU regional international society is embedded. But if other EU member states follow the same path, then the EU regional international society will be gradually transformed into a 'thinner' international society, which is equivalent to an international system. Unless the EU member states come together to commonly confront its challenges (of which Brexit is only one), we may gradually see a decrease in the EU's 'thickness', which implies a movement from the world society end of the spectrum to the international system end of the spectrum.

## Conclusion

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Two important debates have taken place within the English school. First, whether the distinction between an international system and an international society is valid and, if yes, then where does the boundary line between the two forms of international order lie. The second turns on pluralist versus solidarist understandings and the relationship between international society and world society. The first debate has resulted in the acceptance of the premise that an international system constitutes a weak/thin form of an international society. Although the pluralist/solidarist debate is still ongoing, one should recognise that certain changes in international society (e.g. a shift from a world of perpetual war pre-1945 to a world of relative peace post-1945) are accompanied by some other important developments in world society. For example, there has been a growing demand for human rights as people increasingly understand that they are embedded in a single global economy and a single global environment. At the same time, technology and social media enable widely shared experiences. These developments have led to an increased interplay between international society and world society that has the potential of stabilising international society by embedding ideas not just in the minds of political and economic elites but also in the minds of ordinary citizens.

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## About the author:

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