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## How Convincing is the Idea of an International Society at the Centre of the English School Approach?

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ADAM GROVES, DEC 3 2007

'The English School' initially consisted of an influential group of scholars from around the world who were working in prominent English universities such as Oxford and LSE. The School argues that states do not exist in an anarchic system guided merely by power-politics, but that they possess shared norms, interests, institutions and values which result in the formation of an 'international society'.

Chris Brown (2001) defines 'International Society' as being guided by two central principles. Firstly, states, rather than NGOs or universal categories such as 'humanity', should be the focal point of academic attention. Secondly, despite the absence of a central authority, when states interact they do so in a norm-governed environment within the restraints of globally acknowledged responsibilities. International relations still occurs under conditions of anarchy, and states are still presumed to pursue their interests, but not at all costs.

In this essay I will explore the notions of global-norms, the anarchical nature of the international system, international institutions and cooperation, and the lack of a central culture to secure the global-norms. Throughout the course of the essay I will refer to historic and contemporary situations that raise questions for the English School. I will contrast and compare the International Society argument with Realist perspectives and will conclude that the approach has numerous issues to address in the current political climate if it is to stand as a useful starting point for looking at International Relations.

### **Global-norms and Bull's Five Institutions:**

In his defining text, 'Anarchical Society' Hedley Bull argued that, 'a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they believe themselves to be bound by a common set of rules...and share in the working of common institutions' (1977: 3). Specifically, Bull identified five norm-

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governed institutions used within international society: the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war and great power management. In this sense, 'institutions' does 'not necessarily imply an organisation or administrative machinery, rather a set of habits and practices' which require an obligation to act in the interests of society as a whole (Bull, 1977: 74). The application of these institutions in coherence with global-norms is fundamental to the English School perspective; providing the foundation for the development of a society in what would otherwise be merely a system of states. I will address two central questions: Do global-norms exist within these institutions, and are they adhered to enough to maintain any true relevance?

English School writers have tended to focus on 'order' as central to society. Bull's emphasis on 'great power management' points towards the role of superpowers as guarantors of security, whilst simultaneously suggesting that to maintain their global acceptance they must adhere to certain values. Bull makes the case that often superpowers are not acting merely in their own interests by guaranteeing international security, and that they can be seen as 'trustees for mankind as a whole' (1977: 288). To support this argument he points towards the nuclear standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States. Moves towards cooperation were in the wider interests of society, since all states benefited from the avoidance of nuclear war.

Incorporated within this, is the idea that the balance of power provides a stable foundation for the building of International Society. However, the recent activities of the USA as a hegemonic state calls into question many of Bull's assumptions with regards to global-norms and institutions. This is especially evident when we look at war and international law.

The English School argue that war is an institution within International Society. For this to be true, war must exist comfortably alongside international law and the balance of power. Alex Bellamy has recently acknowledged that the 'seeming inability of internationally agreed norms and rules to constrain the world's most powerful actors' may pose a fundamental problem to the English School (2004: 1). In 2003 international law was broken by the US-led coalition that invaded Iraq, and by Israel during air strikes against Syria. Bellamy recognises that the increasing willingness of powerful states to resort to force, without necessarily gaining (or even seeking) international backing, brings the relevance of global-norms, and the institutions which they apply to, into question.

Tim Dunne recently made the radical proposal that the global structure of international relations has shifted away from an anarchical society. He argued that the anarchical system with its plurality of actors had been replaced by a hierarchical system, with the US as its hegemonic power. As a result of this, the US no longer necessarily believes it requires the approval of other states, and 'retains the option to disregard' the global-norms (Dunne, 2003).

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Although Bull himself recognised there were certain conflicts which may arise within the idea of global-norms and his five institutions, specifically between the themes of justice and order, the increasing inconsistencies and incompatibilities which are being recognised in multiple areas of the International Society argument are undermining it from the core.

## **An Anarchical System:**

Realists dismiss the idea of global-norms altogether and argue instead that leaders merely pay lip service to the rules of International society when it suits them. For realists, the International Society approach ignores key implications of anarchy, and in particular fails to recognise the inherent lack of trust which must dominate the international system if states are to safe-guard their own security.

Dale Copeland (2003) and Joseph Grieco (1988) have argued that state-leaders will worry about the intentions of their neighbours, and their possible manipulation of the global-norms to suit themselves. Copeland cites Hitler's principle of 'self-determination for ethnic groups' to justify the Nazi domination of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938 as such an example. Similarly, The League of Nations, one of the first international institutions, caused British concern that totalitarian states might one day capture the organisation and invoke article 16 of the Covenant of the League to justify their wars (Carr, 2001: 79). More recently, Laura Neack (1995) has suggested that Russian 'peace-keeping' is actually an attempt to increase regional influence, and again, the invasion of Iraq under the partial guise of 'humanitarian intervention' has provided evidence that global-norms can be manipulated for states' own ends.

Ultimately, the most extreme concern, which should occupy leaders, is that other states will launch pre-emptive and unprovoked attacks, such as that seen at Pearl Harbour. For realists, the global-norms of the International Society provide little security against an adversary bent on war. K J Holsti (1974: 429) observes that leaders are rarely restrained by boundaries of normal social or individual value systems when seeking war. Although writers such as Geoffrey Stern (1995, 137) point out that most states obey most international laws most of the time, for the leader dedicated to protecting and maintaining his state, it is the exceptions to the rule which pose a risk, and therefore the exceptions to the rule which must be focussed on. Tim Dunne (2003) argues that the USA's current foreign and security policy is being 'driven by the idea of exceptionalism'. The USA's use of pre-emptive strikes regardless of whether an imminent threat has been demonstrated, causes fear and insecurity, and as a consequence is detrimental to the international order. To argue that International Society works 'most of the time' is neither a sound basis to lead a country on, nor a solid platform from which to analyse the international system.

## Institutions and Relative Gains

Global-norms, the English School argues, have seen themselves formalised through international treaties and charters. However, thinkers such as Bull (1977: 42) and Dunne (1998: 99) believe that while the essence of International Society does exist in the activities of state leaders and the treaties they sign, it also continues even when diplomatic relations are broken off. International treaties, charters and institutions, by this reading then, are a representation of accepted global-norms, and so provide evidence for the existence of globally recognised values and an International Society.

Specifically, advocates of the English School like to point towards institutions including the International Criminal Court and the UN as evidence that states have identified and accepted certain global-norms. The UN charter is seen by many academics as a significant manifestation of international society's global-norms (Jack Donnelly in Dunne and Wheeler 1999: 73). However, the recognition (or creation) of these norms and values has caused unique problems and predicaments for contemporary world politics as states seek to align their states 'international responsibilities' with their political priorities (Robert Jackson in Baylis and Smith, 2001: 47).

Institutions have perhaps never been so prevalent in the international system. The UN launched more humanitarian operations towards the end of the last century than it had in any comparable time in its history (Neack 1995), and the International Criminal Court and Kyoto Treaty have substantial global support. However, simultaneously, powerful states such as the US, and numerous NICs (particularly in Indonesia) have shown a reluctance to sign up (or adhere) to some of these treaties and institutions, even though a vast majority of the world seems to have accepted them

The argument that such institutions provide evidence for an International Society and that actor's actions are shaped and determined by the generally accepted consensus at the conference table is weak and unconvincing. Just as the League of Nations was seen by Carr as a tool for the great powers (2001: 79), the UN, for many, is a reflection of the power-political realities of its day. It does not influence or affect the policies of states within an International Society; but rather is used by the great powers for their own ends when it suits them. The recent US-led invasion of Iraq, despite failure to gain UN approval, suggests that the realist interpretation of the role international institutions play is the more convincing. Both English School scholars (Wheeler, 2000) and realists (Neack, 1995) acknowledge that states rarely, if ever, engage in humanitarian intervention if it is not in their interests. Laura Neack however, goes on to argue that states may specifically avoid intervening in humanitarian crises if the current status quo leaves them in a beneficial position relative to others in the global system; a clear example of interests taking precedent over

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widely accepted values.

The issue of 'relative gains' is another area which realists might argue the English School has ignored. The idea that an International Society will develop on the back of shared interests, institutions and values fails to address the concept of relative and absolute gains which can hinder cooperation in the international system. Whilst realists recognise that states will cooperate in a system for 'absolute gains', writers such as Joseph Grieco (1988) have emphasised the positional concerns that leaders hold. States will worry that cooperative arrangements will be more beneficial for their partners than themselves. The primary issue for Grieco is not whether all parties gain from cooperation, but who gains most. Copeland (2003) argues that a contemporary example of such a 'relative gains concern' is American policy makers' apprehension that China will use its participation in International economic institutions to develop its long-term relative strength compared to the United States. The naturally competitive nature of states is left unaddressed by the English School when they promote the role of common-interests in the International Society approach.

## **Culture as an Issue for the International Society**

As has already been shown, the idea of shared global-norms and values is key to the International Society argument. However, numerous academics (Watson, 1992: 318; Samuel Huntingdon, 1993; Brown, 2001: 55; Jackson in Baylis et al. 2001: 47-48) note a potentially problematic absence of underlying cultural unity to support such an International Society. There are states in East Asia and the Arab world which dispute some of the essential global-norms commonly accepted in the West (Norris and Inglehart, 2002; Mazrui, 2004). The International Society's global-norms appear not to be global at all.

Chris Brown suggests that despite the numerous contrasting cultures, which pose problems for the International Society argument, the globally accepted Western model of the nation-state can be cited as a binding factor in the international community. Yet Brown (2001: 55) also observes that the traditional idea of the nation-state is under threat in its continent of conception, whilst Jackson suggests that Russia may soon revert to a position at odds with Western ideals and interests (in Baylis et al. 2001: 47-48); an argument which current political commentators are attributing some weight to ('*The Independent*', November 1, 2004).

Hedley Bull (1977: 39) referred loosely to 'modernity' as the basic binding principle behind the International Society approach. Bull himself acknowledged that his case was fragile, and that in many states the roots of modernity are shallow, sometimes not stretching far beyond the existence of a government. Bellamy (2004: 1) shows that Bull's

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argument has suffered further setbacks in recent times, with the last decade seeing the re-emergence of anti-western religious fundamentalism in many parts of the Middle East, Asia and North Africa. David Lehmann (1998) has referred to this as the globalisation of fundamentalist religious thought.

Far from the 'preservation and extension of cosmopolitan culture', which Bull called for (1977: 317), there has been a backlash against a perceived Western-lead homogenisation of world culture. Robert Jackson (in Baylis et al, 2001: 47-48) argues that an International society could only survive if its core norms were representative of the vast majority. However, in stark contrast to Bull's view, Jackson believes that far from requiring an expansion of Western culture; global-norms would have to be 'distanced if not divorced' from Western values. Ali Mazrui (2004) takes a middle ground, arguing that the principles of the West and Islam will not converge until 'the power of the new American Empire is circumscribed, Western values become less libertarian, and Islam reconciles itself to modernity'. It seems clear that the English School have yet to convincingly address either the impact which regional variation in values is having on the prospects for a successful International Society, or how states should react to this diversity in the 'global' norms.

## **Conclusion:**

I have argued that the International Society approach faces problems on several fronts. Firstly, powerful states are increasingly willing to resort to war, often without the backing of the international community, and sometimes in complete disregard of International Law.

Secondly, the inherent mistrust, which must exist between states for security to be guaranteed, is left unaddressed in the International Society argument, and 'relative gains concerns' are not dealt with. Recent occurrences in world politics regarding the USA's pre-emptive foreign and security policies are exacerbating the issue of trust and security in international relations and have led to further setbacks for the prospect of an International Society.

Thirdly, international institutions, such as the UN, which embody core global-norms, are being used and manipulated by powerful states for their own interests. They are not influencing state behaviour, or diverting states from pursuing pre-decided foreign policies, as the invasion of Iraq (despite the failure to gain UN support) has shown. This raises issues not only about the influence of global-norms and values on state behaviour, but also aggravates the problem of trust between states.

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Finally, the international system seems to be culturally more divided than ever, with core differences in values emerging across the globe, specifically between certain Asian, North African and Arab states and the West. The English School has neither accounted for these differences nor decided upon an appropriate response to maintain their argument of an International Society.

The approach must address these problems before it can be seen as a wholly convincing argument and a useful starting point for looking at contemporary International Relations.

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