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Pluralist Diplomatic Relations: COVID-19 & the English School's International Society

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CHARLES BAISTER, MAY 5 2021

What kind of international society ought we have? The pluralist-solidarist debate emerged within the English school to answer this question theorizing different conceptions of order within the international society (Bain, 2018). Hedley Bull's 1966 essay, "The Grotian Conception of International Society", preferred a Hobbesian international order whereby states are not capable of solidarity amongst international society concerning the enforcement of the law (Bull, 1966). Instead, as Bull argues, "states... are capable of agreeing only for certain minimum purposes which fall short of the enforcement of law" (Bull, 1966:52). Whilst Bull's pluralist preference of international society reflects a realist perception of international order, it departs from a traditional *realpolitik* state of nature absent of international law therefore accepting the existence of international society. The solidarist conception resembles a Kantian world society however also affirms international society's existence by acknowledging tolerated principles among its agents. Therefore, the pluralist-solidarist debate within the English school theory of international relations focuses on the degree to which international society *can*, and more importantly *should*, resemble either a traditional realist international order or a cosmopolitan world society within the framework of international law binding obligations of international society's agents (Bain, 2018).

Two common mistakes should be avoided when engaging in the debate. Firstly, it is not an 'either-or' proposition – international society is not either pluralist or solidarist. Rather, it is to what degree international society contains pluralist or solidarist aspects, emerging a pluralist-solidarist spectrum (Buzan 2004). What comes with greater contestation resembles realist, Hobbesian international order with a hierarchical structure to the system, but more agreement derives towards a liberal, Kantian world society in the spirit of *raison de système* over *raison d'état*. Subsequently, the pluralist-solidarist debate is attempting to uncover which type of international society leads to "good life" (Williams, 2005). A second mistake is to limit only considering normative and philosophical concerns when engaging in the debate. The English school is fundamentally an empirical theory evaluating historical evidence to explain why certain events/trends exist in international politics. Academic knowledge needs historical depth (Dunne, 2016). Moreover, when engaging in the debate philosophical values like the morality of intervention are not the only concern, but also practical elements of international politics should be considered to explain why international society has pluralist or solidarist dimensions. Other than ideology, what else can uncover why certain states opt for a *raison d'état*-inspired approach to a specific dimension, and why other states are more *raison de système*-influenced. A combination of these common mistakes of engagement help formulate the premise to which this essay is bound.

According to William Bain (2018), engagements within the pluralist-solidarist debate are deployed for three primary purposes: (1) to critique a conception of order within a normative framework, (2) a theory of change that explains transformation within a particular order, and (3) use of empirical evidence to explain this change. This essay will engage with these three principles through a contemporary lens to ultimately conclude that: (1) solidarist order within the English School's traditional institution of diplomacy (2) is subject to pluralist transformation caused by the advent of COVID-19, (3) which has stripped international summits of its constitutive performative ramifications. This conclusion is reductionism in its purist form and derives from analysis of micro-level interactions between state representatives at physical summits. Ultimately, the move to online summits in the wake of COVID-19 has stripped them of their ritualistic pageantry with pluralist consequences on a solidarist dimension of international society:

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environmental stewardship.

This essay proceeds in two sections. First, a brief critique of classical English school theorists and their conceptions of pluralist and solidarist international society regarding humanitarian intervention will be analysed. This section will then project this debate to the solidarist dimension of international society: environmental stewardship. Second, the essay will answer how the advent of COVID-19 has stripped diplomacy of its performative attributes endangering solidarist dimensions of international society; a particularly pertinent conclusion considering the current realms of international politics. By stressing the importance of micro-level interactions at summits constitutes an empirical assessment of broader international relations. Practical elements as little as handshakes can explain the perpetuation of solidarist or pluralist dimensions of international order. To some degree, these dimensions are difficult to empirically study. This essay therefore turns to practical elements as a methodological proxy to embody these dimensions of international society, giving them empirical weight.

Classical pluralist-solidarist debate

A fundamental question attached to the pluralist-solidarist debate is whether we can have a durable and lasting international society. Bull concluded in his pessimistic piece of writing, "The Anarchical Society", that expansion of western European society to non-European states rendered international society unstable (Bull, 1977). A useful start to determining whether international society can be durable and lasting is to understand what caused expansion-*cum*-instability. Membership to the international society was defined in the nineteenth century by a 'standard of civilization' setting conditions for internal governance that corresponded with European values and beliefs. Countries inferior to this standard were relegated to a subservient status in international law (Buzan, 2014). As the non-European world met this standard, western European society expanded to the international, a global transformation of the nineteenth century. This is not only of historical significance but underlies the genesis of the contemporary society of states as a determining factor in the processes by which global society evolves. The expansion of international society is a story of shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Dunne, 2016). Membership of international society, although primarily based on reciprocal recognition of sovereignty, is also based on various types of deterministic values or pre-requisites.

Whereas the standard of civilisation was the norm in the nineteenth century, it is less clear what defines the twenty-first century. Ideational aspects such as human rights, non-intervention, environmental stewardship, national self-determination, and equitable distribution of economic wealth have all vied for acceptance as international norms. Whether we can have a durable and lasting international society is therefore a greater concern today than it was to Bull. Western European society was cohesive but as it has expanded globally it lacks universal agreement on substantive values, important to the English school is the absence of a universal human rights discourse whereby the procedural value of non-intervention restricts cross-border armed humanitarian intervention to rescue individuals from genocide or epidemic (Wheeler, 1992). To Bull, this has rendered the now global international society as inherently unstable (Bull, 1977).

It was humanitarian intervention which catalysed the pluralist-solidarist debate, particularly following the publication of John Vincent's 1986 book, "Human Rights and International Relations" whereby the language of 'pluralism' and 'solidarism' indirectly evaluates the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention (Bain, 2018). In Wheeler and Dunne's (1996) analysis of Bull's "Hagey Lectures" (1984), he responds to the pluralist product of justice being a domestic rather than international concern by conceiving humanitarian intervention as deepening international society's commitment to justice which transcends particular states mediating value rules of sovereignty and non-intervention transmit; "states that... violate human rights should forfeit their right to be treated as legitimate sovereigns, thereby morally entitling other states to use force to stop oppression". On the other hand, Mayall asserts that "pluralists still hold the ascendancy" (Mayall, 2000:14). In distinguishing the options between a minimalist pluralist order and a progressive solidarist order, Mayall, among others, opts for a pluralist conception to respect the coexistence of states that subscribe to different interests and values by stressing the importance of continuity over change (Mayall, 2000; Jackson, 2000). In doing so, pluralists recognise international society is subject to change.

This is clear when understanding the importance of institutions in international society. To distinguish English school

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theorists from neo-liberal institutionalists in this sense is through recognition of abstract institutions in serving a basis for tangible institutions to operate (Dunne, 2016). Traditional primary institutions as per Bull (1977) include diplomacy, international law, war, the balance of power, and great power responsibility, however, required amendments include discarding dynastic intermarriage, a bedrock of international society rendering a functional Western Europe for at least 1500 years, and a standard of civilisation where decolonisation forced expanding European society to become more accepting of non-European states. Additions include sovereignty (Wheeler, 1992) and, more relevant to this essay, environmental stewardship (Falkner and Buzan, 2014) to the school's pantheon of institutions which knit international order together.

Falkner and Buzan assess the impact climate change has had on the normative order of global international society, accepting environmental stewardship as a primary institution based on secondary institutions focussed on this norm (Buzan and Faulkner, 2014). Environmental stewardship is deposited as a recognizable solidarist primary institution of international society by the end of the twentieth century whereby "nearly all states... had accepted the need to participate and develop multilateral institutional infrastructure to discharge their duties as environmentally-responsible members of [global international society]" (Faulkner and Buzan, 2014:2, para. 10). Secondary institutions such as the Kyoto Protocol, Paris Climate Accords, among the numerous summits held such as COP support this argument.

It is in the interest of this essay not to examine why environmental stewardship emerged as a solidarist dimension of international society, but to explain why it is losing this solidarist aspect in contemporary international diplomacy. The next section will uncover the increasing use of obfuscatory language as a tool by states to depart themselves from binding environmental agreements and excuse *raison d'état*-inspired destinations on the matter.

COVID-19 and international diplomacy

Amongst Bull's traditional institutions of international society was diplomacy, a procedural inclusion as the institution for bilateral and multilateral negotiation between states (Bull, 1966). While English school scholars sometimes attribute agency to states more generally, they believe agency should be accredited to diplomats and representatives who act on behalf of a state and institutions meaning. In a narrowly empirical sense, the diplomatic elite are the real agents of international society (Dunne, 2016). Historically, diplomacy predates sovereignty in international society as marked by Antoine Pecquet; "ministers formed an 'independent society' bound by a 'community of privileges'" (Pecquet, 1999:2). Therefore, true agency of international society is vested in diplomatic culture; "that realms of ideas and beliefs held in common by official representatives of states" (Der Derian, 1987; Neumann, 2012).

State-interaction is exhibited mostly in big showcases of international diplomacy and international summits are the greatest stage for a state to 'act' in these tradeshows of international society. As a result, ambitious agenda is often unveiled by state representatives to help justify the initial undertaking of the summit, its expense, and to respect the remarkable nature of the tradeshow, therefore it is international summits which help assess the level of forfeiture in particularist policies in favour of a solidarist perception of a substantive value (Naylor, 2020). Summits serve as focal points towards which energies of diplomats are directed to produce hallmark achievements, therefore, incentivising the development of ambitious policy and structure the architecture of such agenda in years to come (Naylor, 2020).

The advent of COVID-19 stripped summits of their secondary transaction, performative aura like formal dinners and gala performances, as well as informal interactions, projecting policy discussion, the primary transaction of summits, to offline replicates' sole purpose. Multilateral institutions like the UN, WTO, WHO, G20, G7 among others have momentarily moved online to help curtail international spread of the pandemic. A move to online meetings, through the lens of a liberal rationalist, has little consequence to policy outcome as these dimensions are epiphenomenal and the outcome is preserved regardless of discussion platform. This view overlooks the significant, constitutive effects of performative summitry; they are not "irrelevant vestiges of a bygone era" but are critical elements in helping project summits as sublime phenomena (Naylor, 2020). Additionally, it is these vestiges which act as methodological proxies for this essay to materialise ideational values of international society as they are more than mere aesthetics (Neumann, 2012). Assessment of micro-level rituals can explain the forfeiture of *raison d'état*-driven destinations in favour of *raison de système*. Two dimensions of summits are affected when moving online; (1) the role of summits in

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the international system and (2) the conduct of international society's agency.

The role of summits in the architecture of global politics is influenced by the dramaturgy of physical summits elevating the summit to authoritative heights where states are momentarily freed from the pretence of sovereignty within the international system (Naylor, 2020). What is directed from the commanding heights of a summit has effects on states beyond the meeting and the wider international society. Ritualistic performances are especially critical in the context of global governance because of the diverse level of abstraction and degree of complexity involved in managing modern international society (J. Alexander, 2011). The higher the abstraction and complexity, the greater the importance of ritual is in fostering authority, power and status from the present state representatives. Therefore, a summit stripped of its performative elements like those held online is submitting itself to a weaker role in international society. Online summits reduce the occasion to a mere meeting amongst states which lacks this momentary freedom from international politics rendering increased ignorance of states to respect solidarity resulting in self-inspired and subsequently pluralist definitions of international society.

Secondly, a break from quotidian affairs not only affects a summit's role in the global governance architecture but also yields individual effects on state representatives themselves (Holmes and Wheeler, 2020). Participants in a physical summit, whilst holding their exalted rank, feel a sense of belonging to a group with exclusive duties in the stewardship of the international system rendering responsibility for the agents to act in solidarity when considering the ambitious agendas proposed at the summit. The importance of bodily co-presence in achieving solidarist political outcomes is the conclusion of Holmes and Wheeler's (2020) sociological analysis of interactions between diplomats and political leaders whereby summity is contingent upon for their case studies. Moreover, Naylor (2020) stresses the importance of "inter-moments" between political leaders in fostering relationships and discussing bilateral and multilateral agreements. Physical assembly of political leaders allows for informal interactions on the margins of formal meetings in which diplomats can engage and discuss policy, "often giving rise to significant breakthroughs in international affairs" (Pouliot, 2016). It is informal engagements between political leaders which encourages states to concede on individual particularist approaches in support of a wider, more global objective regarding more substantive values – the essence of a solidarist international society. "Most people see what happens in the conference rooms, but that is not the UN" as it is corridors, cafeterias, and stairways, among others, which determine a summit's outcomes (Pouliot, 2016). The advent of COVID-19 has eliminated the opportunity for formal engagements between political leaders and therefore increasing the likelihood of international society's stage for states to 'act' to advance a more pluralist approach.

When examining one of contemporary international society's solidarist dimension, the effects of online summits yield critical results. This was indeed the case with the recent One World Summit, hosted in January 2021 between heads of state and government, leaders of international organisations, financial institutions, private sector companies and NGOs, all of which can be regarded as actors in the international society as per the English school (Dunne, 2016). The advent of COVID-19 reduces environmental stewardship to the backburner of international society in favour of economic global recovery. This offline climate summit fully recognized the necessity of immediate multilateral action to combat climate change, in particular the importance of healthy biodiversity for a healthy planet yet failed to address unilateral failures in the pursuit of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) – the primary reasoning behind holding the summit. Instead, further ambitious environmental targets were flirted with and obfuscatory language like "consistent with the needs of our domestic goals" and "essential to our response to COVID-19" dominated discussions which grants cover for states to pursue particular national interests^[1]. Additionally, failure to address the environmentally destructive EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is further demonstration of lacking solidarist aspects of this online summit. It is this empty language and *raison d'état*-inspired policy which overall do more harm than good in the global environmental effort and which a solidarist international society seeks to overcome. Moreover, a US-representative was absent following former president Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement in November 2020, a further demonstration of rising particularist dimensions of one of international societies apparent solidarist safety-net. Other notable absentees were representatives of Russia, Brazil and India. Whilst this is a salient factor in explaining why international society can be deemed pluralist, it falls outside the realms of which this essay intends to interrogate.

Perhaps the importance of performative rituals can explain the surprising lack of progress made at this particular

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environmental summit. This is certainly supported when assessing the success of multilateral solidarity in other international summits. Naylor's (2020) examination of the G20 online summit hosted in March 2020 accredits the lack of 'sublime governance' and 'inter-moments' to an increased *raison d'état*-agenda, supporting the above arguments.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is correct to argue that online summitry conditions particularist behaviour in what is often regarded as contemporary international society's solidarist insurance policy: environmental stewardship. Classical English school empirically supports this argument through the institution of diplomacy; states 'act' through their diplomats and representatives. As a tradeshow of international diplomacy, a summit is therefore the greatest political stage for states to act yet the absence of performative summitry available in online replicates renders the positive effects of summitry *in absentia*, conditioning more of a pluralist international society – a practice theoretical and perhaps constructivist line of inquiry yet a relevant contribution to the pluralist-soliarist debate.

In reflecting upon the pluralist-soliarist debate in the English school, perhaps the application of a 'practice theoretical' lens to explain why states fail to act within a solidarist framework is more relevant today than ever before. The advent of COVID-19 has ironically exacerbated the effects of physical summits through their absence, sorely missed by solidarist advocates. This framework is reductionism in its purist form exhibiting a departure from Waltz' international relations empiricism; the opportunity for micro-level discussions and ritualistic pageantry impacts international society at the maximalist level. With international summits no closer to a return to physicality, the prospects for a solidarist international society are slim.

Notes

[1] Quoted from One World Planet summit recording provided by UN via YouTube, virtual summit, 11/01/2020 – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMQInK3cIUU>

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