

The English School

Written by Stephen McGlinchey and Dana Gold

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This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.

The thinking of the English school is often viewed as the first attempt to establish a middle ground in International Relations theory, albeit in this case a middle ground between liberal and realist theories. The English school involves the idea of a society of states existing at the international level. Hedley Bull, one of the core figures of the English school, agreed with the traditional theories that the global system was anarchic. However, he insisted this does not mean the absence of norms (expected behaviours), thus claiming a societal aspect to international politics. In this sense, states form an 'Anarchical Society' (Bull 1977) where a type of order does exist, based on shared norms and behaviours.

The English school is useful to help flag up a general misunderstanding that students often have that anarchy means chaos. The work of Bull and others in the English school draws attention to how international anarchy has its own unique type of order. After all, the world is not in a state of perpetual chaos despite its state of anarchy. It is not unfair to describe this as *liberal realism*, as it essentially posits (in its basic form) that the global order – as anarchic as it is – is not as pessimistic as the realists make out, yet not quite as optimistic as the liberals assert. English school theorists continue to develop their arguments beyond these observations (see Murray 2015), but for our purposes the central importance was that it showed that theoretical development beyond realism and liberalism was both welcome and possible

Text adapted from McGlinchey, Stephen (2022) *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

For much more on the English school and other theories, you can download the free textbook *International Relations Theory*.

Below is a collection of freely accessible multimedia and textual resources that help unpack, and explain the importance of the English school to International Relations.

Introducing the English School in International Relations Theory – article

Interview with Barry Buzan – article

System Society and the World: Exploring the English School of International Relations – ebook

Theory Talk with Barry Buzan – article

The English School: an underexploited resource in IR (PDF) – article

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