Theorising International Society
Palgrave Studies in International Relations Series

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Theorising International Society

English School Methods

Edited by

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A consideration of English School methods may seem a contradiction in terms. The classical English School theorists generally disdained discussions of methodology. As for method, it is treated somewhat in the nature of underclothing—assumed to be there but scarcely discussed in polite society. In a recent commentary, the realist Roger Spegele observed a ‘methodological quietism’ while in a not so recent one, the institutionalist Robert Keohane regretted the School’s neglect of causal propositions (or, as he termed them ‘contingent generalisations’.) The constructivist Martha Finnemore, in a commentary intending to support the School’s orientation, complained that its members do not lay out their rules of evidence, that they neglect to specify their presuppositions, and that ‘simply figuring out what its methods are is a challenge’. These charges echo those of an early critic, Roy Jones, who went so far as to recommend the closure of the School on the grounds that, among other things, it encouraged a methodological sloppiness in its followers.

If these are its enemies, its friends do not much demur. In his introduction to *Thinkers of the Twenty Years’ Crisis*, Peter Wilson notes the ‘highly eclectic approach’ of his chosen thinkers, among them early English School theorists, and refers to the period as ‘golden age of the amateur’. Below in his chapter, he denies that method is an appropriate way of characterizing English School approaches at all. Robert Jackson goes further, seeming to hold that a concern with methodology is positively harmful to the School’s cognitive goals. (In Jackson’s view, these involve understanding social practices—see Navari as well as Jackson’s chapters—while ‘methodology’ in some views has the effect of distancing the analyst from ‘understanding’.) Jackson would probably consider the School’s neglect of methodology to be a positive boon.

These viewpoints encompass different notions of method. Wilson thinks method is something in the nature of a recipe, a set of instructions or rules applied to research, in the same manner as a set of rules might direct the playing of a game or the baking of a pie. (He is anti-method because he...
believes that to contain the study of international relations within the brace of a set of rules is to conceal the reality of those relations. He also clearly believes that the original English School theorists held similar views to his own; see Chapter 8.) Finnemore has a less restrictive view of method. In her view (and it would be the more general view), method refers to the choice of a body of empirical material—the subject of analysis—together with the process by which that material is to be examined. ‘Methodology’ consists in the explication of that choice—in formal terms, the justification of the hypothetical proposition—and the process for dealing with it, along with a determination of what would constitute proof. By either view, however, the English School is generally considered wanting.

It is true that both Martin Wight and Hedley Bull held methodology at arm’s length, partly because both shared in the British empirical tradition. British empiricists tend to associate methodology with Continental, and especially German, theorizing. More importantly, however, it derives from the association of methodology with positivism and the positivist quest to establish a science of international relations akin to the natural sciences. Both Wight and Bull were opposed to the positivist quest, albeit on rather different grounds. Bull’s quarrel was epistemologically based. In his defense of a ‘classical approach’, he argued that a positivist science of human affairs, in the sense of a science based on direct perception and deduction, was inadequate in explanatory terms. (Bull was a philosophical realist; for a philosophical realist, social inquiry must necessarily start from a theoretical perspective, not with direct perception. Wight never spelled out his objections fully, but we may detect an ontological objection. For Wight, international society was the product of both subjective and inter-subjective understandings, understandings generally excluded in the positivist agenda. In any event, he certainly regarded his own enterprise to be beyond positivism, and not capable of fulfillment in positivist terms.

If the classical school disdained methodology, we should not on that account suppose, however, that its members did not have method. Nor should we suppose that they did not puzzle over how to achieve their cognitive goals. Wight developed an historical comparative method, a method aimed at discerning large-scale, trans-national, social understandings, precisely in order to demonstrate that there was substance to the idea of an international society. Bull, who was concerned to demonstrate how order was maintained in such a society, employed a loose form of structural-functionalism, which he combined with a causal method. He deduced the purposes served by order, and then proposed the requisites of order, from which causes could be theorized. Other English School theorists have developed the notion of practice, involving the interrogation of the agents’ self-understandings, in order to flesh out the norms underpinning diplomatic conduct.
Defending these methods is not the primary concern here. They have been discussed, and defended, in other places. Rather, it is to explore the sorts of methods that are consistent with an English School understanding of its subject. In particular, it is to explore what a disciplined approach to the idea of an international society might involve. It follows Alex Bellamy's *International Society and its Critics* with a closer examination of the specific methods that would be appropriate to analyzing a collective enterprise of collectives, and to discerning its rules, its constitution, its political culture, and its mobilizing agents.

In undertaking such an enterprise, the editor has assumed that a unicity of method is not what is aimed at. The epistemology of the social sciences has, in any event, rejected the notion that the cognitive goals of the social sciences may be achieved in only one way. What she has done is to select among modern treatments of the classical English School the ones that seem to her the most illuminating of its methods. Secondly, she has asked contemporary scholars working within the English School tradition or sympathetic to that tradition to elucidate their own methods. A first set of essays deals with the methods of the classical English School thinkers and lays out the argument for methodological pluralism. A second set points to different methods as relevant to different issue areas. The introductory essay considers the limits of methodological pluralism, and its conclusion points to some ongoing lacunae in the English School approach.

**Methodology in the classical English School**

The first question concerns less methodology than ontology: the nature of the material that is of concern to the scholar and to English School scholarship in particular. Robert Jackson has identified that material as codes of conduct—for Jackson, the primary purpose of English School scholarship is to interrogate the practice of statespersons to discern its normative content, which he holds to be constitutive of international order. Jackson equates order with publicly endorsed common norms. Chris Reus-Smit contrasts the English School with constructivist thought and is in broad agreement with the Jackson position. He argues that constructivist thought is broadly sociological in orientation—it is concerned with identifying social structures, influence routes and popular discourses—and he outlines the different research strategies that are employed by the various schools of constructivism. He argues that the English School is, by contrast, more concerned with ‘practical reasoning’—with the ‘oughts’ of political life. He maintains that their sociological concerns are ancillary to their normative concerns. Richard Little has expanded those concerns to include the environment within which conduct is deemed proper. He argues that international system, society, and world society—the central concepts in English School thought—are not merely in the heads of the subjects. He maintains that
they are also different environments of action—different social realities or ‘structures’, which exist in a dynamic relationship with one another, and which require incorporation into the consideration of conduct.

Navari argues that in the degree to which English School approaches are concerned with rules of conduct, they must focus on agents. Unlike ‘behaviour’, rules of conduct must be consciously apprehended by the subject. In terms of the distinction between causes and intentions, English School theory will, accordingly, favor intentional forms of explanation at least so far as a society of states is concerned. As opposed to a system, which may be driven mechanistically, a society constituted by rules must be produced by rational subjects with intentions. Accordingly, causal analysis does not have much purchase for English School scholars.

She also observes the self-reflective bias of early English School scholarship. The classical scholars looked for evidence of an international society in the self-understandings of the participants in international life. In terms of method, this will incline them to a participant observer stance. Participant observation requires than the analyst position himself close to the subjects of the analysis, to understand their action in their own terms, but not so close as to be unable to reflect on the subject’s meanings and normative orientations.

In his essay that links methodology with method, Richard Little has defended a particular concept of methodological pluralism, one that resists eventual resolution. He relates different methods to different levels of analysis and to different forms of social structure. He argues that the classical theorists in the English School tradition identified the reality of international relations with a diversity of action arenas and with different forms of social action, as well as with different codes of behavior, and that these insights are embedded in English School theory. In consequence, he argues, methodological pluralism is a necessary consequence, and a necessary requisite, of the English School approach.

From English School theory, he draws three forms of structure, associated with international system, society, and world society, respectively. These may be considered as alternatives or as concurrent potential settings which are embedded in one another. But the main point he wishes to make, and it is critical from the viewpoint of method, is that each of these settings has different methods appropriate to its analysis—cost-benefit analysis in the context of a system; institutional analysis, and discourse analysis in the context of a society; and, among other approaches, normative argument in the context of world society.

In addition, there was the classical English School’s historical orientation, which eventually alerted its members to the different forms that international society had taken during its evolution. From an historical perspective, viewing a variety of international systems, the appropriate method would be a comparative method, which compares different state systems over time.
to identify their distinctive features. Little argues, in line with many other comparativists, that comparative method involves more than ‘thick description’. It also allows one to identify the different elements that motivate action.

Edward Keene moves more directly to the method he considers appropriate for such different action arenas. He argues that ‘international society’ and possibly ‘system’ and ‘world society’ are forms of ideal type in the Weberian sense. For Weber, ideal types are central explanatory devices for the study of societies, which try to unpack the motives for action. They do this through the identification of a social construction that is shaped by a value orientation, as in the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Keene argues that the English School is ‘tantalising on the edge’ of constructing a series of ideal types with the same intent—identifying motives for action. (One might note here the suggestive work of Alexander Wendt who identifies three different value orientations in three different ideal-type state systems; see also the editor who has done the same in considering the three major historical phases in the evolution of the Westphalian system.)

The limits of methodological pluralism

A plurality of methods does not imply a plurality of ontologies, much less epistemologies. So far as the English School is concerned, not everything goes. Central to the English School is the concept of international society. Little suggests that the concern with international society (as opposed to system or world society) was more or less accidental and that both ‘system’ and ‘world society’ have equal status with ‘international society’ in the English School repertoire. But his proposition is arguable. It was the idea of an international society that alerted the original English School scholars to the distinctions among the three types. Bull, for example, established the distinctions between a society and a system in attempting to define an international society. Brunello Vigezzi has also argued, convincingly, that the idea of an international society remained the focus of the classical theorists through the course of the British Committee meetings. Moreover, the concept of international society encapsulates the central insight of the English School that international relations constitute a set of social relationships.

On the status of this central concept, we may agree with Edward Keene that it is, among other things, an ideal type, and that it is used, in the manner of all ideal types, to ‘measure’ some actually existing reality. That reality is constituted by, among other things, rules of conduct, or ‘norms’ in some modern usages. These rules do not ‘cause’ things to occur, at least not in any direct manner. They do not cause things to occur, because in logical terms, they do not exist before being demonstrated in action. They cannot be construed as causes because, in a causal relationship, causes must come before
effects, whereas rules of conduct can only be demonstrated in their effects. In the language of cause and effect, they are effects; they are not causes. They are downstream outcomes; they are not upstream inputs.

This, at once, distinguishes the English School from the ‘normative concerns’ of contemporary American scholarship. The first wave of contemporary scholarly work in the United States on international norms posits particular norms or ideas as independent variables and international cooperative arrangements (regimes, treaties, etc.) as dependent variables. Much of this early work argues that the behavior and policies of states are shaped by norms. ‘Shaping’ is a loose way of referring to a causal relationship. Several different ways of shaping were identified: solving coordination problems; shaping political discourses; altering incentive structures within which states act; and more generally through the abilities of ideas and norms to influence state behavior at the international level.16 In the English School, such norms are not treated as ‘causing’, in a formal sense, anything.

From the late 1990s, a second form of norm literature began to emerge. This ‘second wave’ pays attention to norms’ abilities to ‘affect state behavior via domestic political processes’.17 Here, norms continue to be treated as independent variables, but via a different process. In this literature, international norms ‘invade’ the domestic sphere and influence the public, various social elites, and domestic discourses.18 Second-wave scholarship seeks empirical evidence of the domestic ‘salience’ of particular transnational norms.19 In this research, international cooperation results from a two-step process: norms influence domestic actors, which affects states, which in turn, produces international cooperation. Second-wave literature also postulates that continuous international cooperation within international organizations might strengthen certain norms and ideas. For example, Peter Haas has argued that the most significant impact of the series of United Nations Conferences on environment and development has been the construction and institutionalization of global norms, ideas, and discourses.20

So far as the English School is concerned, the Haas-type endeavor may have merit, since, in respect of Haas’ work, there are, first, conferences and then global discourses. In other words, there is a logical progression that satisfies the minimal requirements of causality. But it would treat the first phase of the project with the greatest circumspection. Norm-laden domestic constituencies might very well be influencing public policy. But to posit a causal relationship between international norms and a domestic constituency requires first establishing not only that such norms exist, but that they exist prior to their voicing by some domestic constituency. Unfortunately, much of the second-wave literature tends to offer as proof for the existence of an international norm, its voicing by some domestic constituency.

If English School scholarship tends to shun causal relationships in the consideration of norms, what is it for? It is important to recall something of the development of scholarly traditions in British international relations.
Charles Manning, the doyenne of the English School, who first established international relations as a discipline at the London School of Economics and who put the concept of international society on the intellectual map, was professor at the London School of Economics from 1930. His career coincided with the great period in the development of British anthropology. Radcliffe-Brown, to become professor at Oxford in 1937, had developed the notion of functionalism applied to tribal customs and mores, and the method was being widely discussed and applied, as well as being strenuously defended by its inventor. At the same time, Malinowski, professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics since 1927, was in the process of developing the new technique of participant observation. Anthropology was becoming the mapping of the self-conceptions of social formations as well as the anatomy of social ‘structure’—interdependent social institutions. Manning, following this anthropological model, saw as his task the initial mapping of the structure, the norms and the mores of an international society as evinced not only in the comings and goings of statespersons and other significant international actors but also in the increasing development of international laws and institutions.

The second generation of international society scholars was the group joined together in the British Committee, whose story has been ably told by, respectively, Tim Dunne and Brunello Vigezzi. Its agenda was derived from the experience of the total war through which Europe and Britain had just passed and the Cold War upon which it had entered. The individual research programs differed but were related by a concern with refining the concept of an international society and giving it an historical locus. Butterfield, for example, was concerned to theorize the balance of power as the ground norm of a society of states and to demonstrate that, qua norm, it had had an historical expression—that it had actually existed as a norm during particular historical periods. His concern with the ‘new diplomacy’ was the evolution of a new set of norms, together with their implications for traditional diplomacy and power politics. Wight was concerned to pin down the distinctively ‘Western’ (actually Christian) origins of not merely the norms of international society, but of the expectation that there should be norms at all. He was, accordingly, extremely gloomy about the prospects for shared social institutions in an increasing fragmented international order presided over by increasingly secular states. Bull was concerned to identify what remained of an international society, given the harsh ideological rivalry of the Cold War. What they were doing, in the first instance, was discerning norms in environments in which norms were being disputed.

A third generation was formed by those participating in the series of seminars on international political theory convened by Michael Donelan at the London School of Economics during the 1970s and 1980s. Here, the concern was to sustain, and develop, a tradition of theorizing against
the largely positivist agenda that was then dominating international relations scholarship. The first undertaking was a series of reflections on the Westphalian state, as opposed to the residual entity produced by the prevalent sociological approaches of the time, with their focus on classes, interest groups and social processes, and the realist *machtstaat* that was their major rival. *The Reason of States* was an exercise in exploring the symbolic and philosophical aspects of the state, as well as eliciting some of the empirical manifestations of that state. The second undertaking, *The Community of States*, was an empirical study of the contemporary state system in its communal aspects and was aimed at discerning the common understandings underpinning the international society of the 1980s, by which time the Cold War has ceased to structure international discourses. Its third undertaking, *The Condition of States*, was concerned to inquire how the concept of a society of states could be defended against the empirical fact of a wide post-colonial, and Cold War, variation in state forms.23

A set of specifically normative concerns became evident in the last volume, in the concluding essays of Frost, Brewin, and Donelan, on practical reasoning in respect of international relations, on the duties of liberal states, and on the obligations of states in respect of starvation, respectively. Christopher Brewin’s essay on the duties of liberal states anticipated John Rawl’s argument in *The Law of Peoples*.24 But a normative turn had already been accomplished by John Vincent in 1986 in his work on human rights in the international order, where he not only accounted for, but defended an emerging norm of internationally protected human rights. Nicholas Wheeler has carried this aspect of the English School forward in his work on the emerging norm of intervention to defend human rights.25

These cognitive concerns point in the direction of certain methods and exclude others. Historical methodologies which focus on deep forces and which exclude the self-understandings of the actors in the historical drama are not part of English school approaches. Equally, positivist methodologies which aim at identifying trans-historical explanatory factors, such as environmental risk, population growth or economic downturns in the causes of war, are of little concern, since such factors cannot throw light on the self-understanding of political actors at particular historical periods. Equally unwelcome are social process theories which ignore the state, or reduce it to a by-product of some more relevant social or economic agency, since the fact of stateness is generally held to have an independent effect on outcomes in English School thought.

On the state, English School theorists are ‘state-centric’ in the loose meaning of the term, since they believe that state form has implications for action, and they share that loose definition with Realists. But there are critical differences, with important methodological implications. The English School considers the state in terms of a constitutional form whose laws, customs, and practices condition social action. It is not the ‘only actor’ and indeed
not ‘an actor’ properly speaking at all: the English School recognizes many actors. It merely insists that the fact of stateness qualifies their actions, just as the fact of an empire would or a tribe would. Realists, by contrast, developed from a Machiavellian tradition which sees the state as the power-gatherer among diverse social forces, and a power-gatherer that has a form of intelligence, for analytical purposes. In method, the English School primarily treats the state as a setting or structure, whereas traditional Realists tend to treat it as an actor.

Power holds an important part in English School explanations, but not as an independent variable. Herbert Butterfield established a critical, and by now, well-recognized distinction between the balance of power as a conscious device used by statesman—a device buttressed by a well-established set of theoretical precepts—and the balance of power as an objective feature of political reality.26 The first is a theory concerning proper action, to guide or not to guide policy according to the understanding of the statespersons at the time. (Presently, liberal thought disdains directing policy according to power balances.) The second is a calculus that seeks to expose the configurations of an objective reality. In respect of the latter, English School theorists spend little time engaging in power calculus’s or theorizing the objective qualities of power, since it is the perception of power that they deem to have explanatory efficacy, and perceptions are revealed by quizzing the actor, not the environment.27

On the positive side, actor-centred methods, methods which place the emphasis on actors in more or less rationally understood situations, continue to be relevant, since the English School continues to focus on the precepts for action (and the precepts require a conscious understanding among the actors). Among the different conceptions of rationality, ‘situated rationality’ would be the generally favored form. Between homo sociologicus and homo economicus, English School scholarship puts the emphasis on homo sociologicus. But the employment of un-situated rationality—cost-benefit analysis as well as game theory—is not entirely inappropriate. Hedley Bull’s work on arms control draws on, and indeed developed, game theory as applied to the nuclear arms race, not least because the nuclear arms race had some historically unprecedented features (that is, it was ‘un-situated’). At the same time, Bull related the arms race to an ideal-type conception of war (that defined by Clausewitz), and re-grounded it in historical developments.28 Where the situation is historically unprecedented, or appears unprecedented, game theoretical approaches will be useful, not least because they tend to pull the analytical problematic back unto a more familiar historical terrain and allow the analyst to identify ‘rules of the game’.29 Political theory, on the other hand, and the development of political thought—important elements in the development of new norms and practices—are most likely to be approached in the Quentin Skinner fashion, which looks to the development of theory in
particular political contexts and views theory in the context of debate and problem-solving.

If their focus on rules of conduct militates toward intentional explanation, it is also the case that their historical understanding initially militated against generalizations. The first generation of English School scholars were concerned to theorize what they understood as a unique set of international relationships. They held the European state system, then evolving into a global system, to be a unique type of international order. Uniqueness calls forth idiopathic explanations, since it is not possible to generalize from single cases. But Richard Little highlights the important subsequent work of Adam Watson, who was responsible for introducing the idea that international order was a general type of which there were several species. The ‘severalness’ allows for the sorts of comparisons from which generalizations can be drawn.

Since English School theories focus mainly on social man, the social context becomes important in understanding social action. Navari points out that the classical English School theorists were not deaf to the surrounding conditions that gave rise to the inclination to act according to agreed rules. And she agrees with Richard Little that ‘society’ and ‘system’ may be understood as different environments of action and, moreover, that they were understood as such, certainly by Hedley Bull and also by Martin Wight, who, if they did not fully theorize settings for action, understood that action was conditioned by its surroundings. This concern inevitably led them to causal speculations, albeit of a rather ‘soft’ variety.

Theorizing causes demands theorizing context, as well as the relationship of action to context. These may be theorized via ideal types in the Keene fashion. Or context may be apprehended, as the classical theorists first supposed, via an historical comparative method, currently recommended by Richard Little.

Methods and issue areas

In an important work which influenced Barry Buzan’s From International to World Society, Kalevi Holsti theorized the relationship between institutions and international order. There, he distinguished between foundational institutions and process institutions, and he plotted the interaction between foundation and process to provide an initial explanation of change. In Chapter 6, he defends a causal approach to the understanding of international order and relates causal efficacy to the emergence of and differentiation among international institutions. He argues that order is impossible without institutions. He also maintains that a causally adequate account of the emergence of the contemporary international order is possible.

‘History’ is classically considered an important element in the English School approach, but there is remarkably little agreement on what is meant
by history and historical approaches. Will Bain elucidates three different historical approaches, each of which would qualify as ‘English School’. There is Bull’s historical theatre, which treats history as a set of more or less self-contained lessons from which precepts may be drawn; there are Butterfield’s ‘mediations’, which are part of the historical process itself and critical in understanding the formation of intentions; finally, there is Oakeshott’s view of history, which Oakeshott argues is informed by contemporary understandings. For Oakeshott, history is a story told by historians to elucidate present concerns; it is not ‘fictional’, nor is it arbitrary, but it has little to do with what actually happened in history.

Among contemporary English School scholars, Richard Little argues for a comparative historical method, one that would allow the analyst to isolate the factors relevant in shaping particular historical state systems at different periods. He argues that comparison allows for different elements that characterize different state systems to be identified and their role in constituting particular international systems to be hypothesized. He looks precisely for those ‘contingent generalisation’ so wished for by Keohane. Will Bain draws on Michael Oakeshott to argue the contrary. According to Bain, the major use of ‘history’ is to allow for the identification, and comprehension of practice, and that this is not history in the historian’s sense of an explanatory narrative. Rather, he agrees with Oakeshott that history writing arises from present concerns, which orient the historian to his subject matter: the historian interrogates the past to throw light on present concerns. (The editor inclines to the Butterfield approach, and has identified the ‘mediation’ of the 1914–1918 progressives on the relation between social change and war as a crucial factor in the new attentiveness to international order and institutions which marked the post-war ‘new liberal’ movement.)

The English School keeps discovering international law, to which it generally takes a positivist approach, albeit from somewhat different epistemological and indeed ontological positions. Terry Nardin has distinguished between common procedures and common goals, drawing on Oakeshott’s distinction between a ‘practical’ association and an ‘enterprise’ association.

In Chapter 8, Peter Wilson outlines the English School approach to international law in terms of a continuum between those who support a focus on ‘hard’ law traditionally conceived and those who include more informal practices in their conceptions of law. Wilson suggests the appropriateness of classical legal positivism in identifying the most substantive or the ‘hardest’ international norms. But he also suggests that a ‘legal aspirational’ approach is equally consistent with English School goals. (Legal aspirationalism identifies quasi-norms that are struggling to take on a fully legal form; the approach allows the analyst to chart a progressive development in legal norms.) Barbara Roberson has identified legal reception, the entry into a legal order of laws and legal concepts from external sources, as a critical process. Legal reception has several aspects: influences that come from outside into
a normative or legal order, how that order receives and interprets the law, and how legal reform plays back into the international system. She argues that legal process has played a central role in the expansion of international society. The application of the approach is demonstrated by the case of the incorporation of Egypt into international society.

Exploring practice from an empirical standpoint

Among these writers, one should note the importance of empirical work as opposed to grand theorizing. If English School theorists wear their grand theory lightly, it is not least because they spend their time in archives getting their hands dirty. They become immersed in diplomatic archives, memoirs, and newspapers. They spend time in international institutions, listening to what international civil servants say and observing what they are doing. The notion of a ‘practice’ serves, among other things, to point the researcher in the direction of the practitioner. The sources for such an approach would include foreign office documentation, memoirs of the major political actors of the time, interviews, and historical archives.

What they are looking for in this material is the self-conceptions of the actors who are participating in the processes that constitute international life. Barbara Allen Roberson’s account of legal reception draws on the self-conceptions of a set of Egyptian legal officers in the processes that led to Egypt’s legal reform, central to its reformulation as a modern state. Richard Little locates the explanation of Britain’s decision not to exploit the American Civil War in the conceptions of sovereignty held by the officers of the Old Foreign Office. Will Bain, in his work on trusteeship, has looked to the practice of trusteeship, and trusteeship as understood by the actors at the time, to understand the institution, as well as the wider system of late colonial relationships of which it was a part. Recently, this commentator conducted a series of interviews among bureaucrats at the World Trade Organisation responsible for its development agenda on whether they conceived of themselves as innovators, pushing agendas ahead, or rather as executors, carrying out the wishes of other, political superiors. The question was meant to reflect on the locus of responsibility in the organization. (The interviews revealed that the WTO’s development bureaucrats had highly developed notions of duty, that they were very procedure-driven, and that they did not act outside of their legal remits, suggesting a dependence on constitutional frameworks for legitimation.)

Within the self-conceptions of the actors, of particular relevance are discourses of self-justification. It is within these discourses that the analyst will isolate most easily the prevalent norms that constitute international society. Discourses of self-justification are also a major resource for detecting norm change.
On the normative concerns of the English School, identified as definitional of that School by Chris Reus-Smit, it may be observed that explicitly normative theory, or ‘practical reasoning’ as Ruess-Smit prefers, is in fact not plentiful. Aside from John Vincent’s pioneering work on the development of an international human rights regime, that of Wheeler noted above and the final section of The Condition of States, there is little more than a clutch of significant articles. These would include the editor’s ‘Civic Republicanism and Self-Determination’; John William’s ‘Territorial borders, toleration and the English School’ (Review of International Studies, 2002); and Chris Brown on Charles Beitz; Peter Lawler’s ‘The Good State, in praise of “classical” internationalism’, and Peter Stirk’s ‘John Herz, realism and the fragility of international order’, all in the Review of International Studies for 2005. The notable exception is James Mayall’s World Politics: Progress and its Limits (Cambridge, Polity, 2000), which is a substantial argument on intervention and its limits and which may be regarded as equal in importance to John Vincent’s treatment of human rights.

The method employed by both Vincent and Wheeler is a form of legal positivism, akin to sociological positivism. Both detect emerging norms and assign value to those norms in the degree to which they begin to inform state practices and international legal regulations.

This method is sometimes referred to as the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. It is accused of conflating ‘is’s with oughts and is generally disdained by contemporary philosophers.

Less susceptible to such charges is James Mayall. Mayall grounds his normative arguments concerning intervention in Hume’s skepticism and on Hume’s form of critical history, which understands the complexion of a practice by discerning the inner relationships of its constitution. In Mayall’s case, it is the Westphalian order in its evolving shape that forms the foundation of his argument, and the inner relationships that constitute that order. His method of argumentation parallels that of Burke, who employed Hume’s critical history to create an understanding of, in Burke’s case, the British constitution. After analyzing that constitution, and considering the challenges to it, Burke asked his readers to consider (and reconsider) their own attitudes to the ‘connections’, or causal entailments, revealed therein.

Some continuing lacunae in English School approaches

Most writing on English School approaches will argue that English School theorists require more self-reflection concerning what they are doing, and the writers represented here are no exception. Kal Holsti has pointed to the historical lacuna in Bull (who, he argues, has in fact no very well-developed account of ‘international society’ and has under-theorized his concept of institutions). Keene refers to its methodological approaches as ‘notoriously difficult to grasp’ and requests greater precision in the use of such terms
as ‘ideal types’. Reus-Smit calls for greater sociological awareness among English School theorists. The editor has her own preferences, which revolve around ideal types as structures, the empirical evidence for what would constitute an international society and a clearer consideration of what would stand for practice.

Notions of structure are scarcely lacking in the English School intellectual corpus, with its distinction between system, society, and community, but their causal properties and their relationship to action were only loosely theorized in the classical writing. Bull found it necessary to accept Kenneth Waltz’s theory of international politics as the most complete account of the consequences for action of the purely systemic aspects of anarchical state relations. (Given his tripartite distinction, Bull found no difficulty in doing so; he also made clear, however, that Waltz had not theorized all possible forms of international relations.) Holsti argues that Bull’s own conception of international society was not sufficiently spelled out to identify its parameters or its consequences for action. He has placed the emphasis on institutions ‘necessary for the existence of order’, arguing that order is impossible without institutionalized relationships. Barry Buzan has argued in another place that global society, the third possible form of international order suggested by Bull, deserves much more in the way of explication.36

Useful as these suggestions are, they do not specify how action is to be related to structure. For example, Max Weber, by establishing that a certain value predisposition within capitalism was an integral part of the ‘structure’ of capitalism, succeeded in identifying certain motives for action within capitalism that were neither arbitrary nor subjective. Equally, democratic transition theory has identified, and in a similar way, a motive for action in liberal democracies which is at the same time part of the structure of liberal democracy (the inclination to trust democracies and to mistrust non-democracies). Keene argues that the English school is close to establishing a set of ideal types within which motives for action may be identified, but we are not quite there yet.

Some central English School concepts require not so much theorizing as more precision in the use of terms. One of these is the difference between a system and a society. This is a well-rehearsed issue, with Alan James and Barry Buzan tending to blur the distinction and Little and Dunne defending it.37 The question here is their respective empirical referents, rather ill-defined as Martha Finnemore has observed (noted above). In the classic formulation, an international society exists when ‘a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another’.38 Pace Finnemore, this characterization requires the following: (1) the demonstration of a self-conscious understanding, on the part of diplomats and state leaders,
of a social relationship existing between them; (2) a set of reciprocally understood rules of conduct; and (3) less articulated but rather assumed by English School writers, a minimally shared understanding among political elites in different countries of the role of the state in respect of citizens and subjects. (Wight drew attention to this latter requirement in his essay on international legitimacy and conceptualized the Cold War system as in fact two different systems on the basis of different conceptions of state-society relations. Its empirical manifestation would be a set of constitutive rules—the basic rules which define political agency as well as the reciprocal responsibilities among agents. These would concern the existence, coming into being and dissolution of the state, the definition of a state's responsibilities, and the rules on intervention, most obviously.

Bull, famously, distinguished that condition from a system on the one hand and a community on the other. In Bull's taxonomy, a system will display regularities and predictability, such that A will be followed by B. According to Bull, the Cold War displayed such regularities and can properly be termed a ‘system’. A community, by contrast, is when a group follows some common ends; that is, it shares the same goals and works for them together. Whether an international community ceases thereby to be an international society is not an irrelevant question, and Bull initiated a lively discussion on it (a slightly misguided discussion in the abstract, since these were ideal types—the more relevant question would be whether, for example, the European Union had ceased to be a form of international society.). Here, what is important to note is that Bull was trying to explain that a group of individuated personas, like states, did not have to share the same ends in order to have a social relationship. What such a relationship demanded was that they share some notion of proper procedures or ‘practice’ as defined by Michael Oakeshott. Robert Jackson, drawing on the work of Oakeshott and Nardin, has clarified this point.

A rather more interesting question is what would stand as an objective referent of an international society, as opposed to the often ambiguous self-understandings of the participants. When Finnemore complains that there is a lack of precision as to when a system becomes a society, she seems to want a referent that stands irrespective of the views of the subjects, and one that could be, if not precisely measured, clearly identified. The choice of an objective referent—and preferably one that is measurable—is the most sensitive of social science undertakings, since it is not merely the quality of measurability that matters, but also selecting among the many characteristics of any ‘social fact’, the one or several that most reflect its character. Indicators are not the thing itself, but rather indicate the thing, and connected with any social fact will be a wide choice of seemingly plausible indicators. The problem is to choose the one that indicates the social fact in question, and not anything else.
Barry Buzan has taken up this challenge and has chosen institutionalization, in particular a distinction between primary and secondary institutions. Primary institutions represent fundamental underlying norms, and are more evolved than designed, such as sovereignty, diplomacy, and international law. Buzan relates these to John Searle’s notion of ‘social facts’, social institutions that are kept in place by collective agreement or acceptance. Another term for this kind of social fact is a ‘practice’ and equates with Jackson’s notion of practices. Secondary institutions, by contrast, are relatively specific, concrete, and are usually designed (mainly intergovernmental organizations and regimes). Buzan suggests that different historical state systems may be characterized, and identified, by the nature and complexity of their primary and secondary institutions. (He also suggests that a focus on institutions, of both types, permits the identification of not merely historical but also regional state systems.)

But there are other potential indicators. Historically, the classic one in the European state system was diplomatic representation. When consuls were raised to the level of political officers, and political legations were established, this was the sign that the political entity in question had ‘joined’ international society and was no longer a subject of it. When Britain raised the consular offices in Thailand and Japan to the level of political legation in the 1890s, this created a new set of social facts in Searle’s sense—Thailand and Japan had become equal members of international society and enjoyed different statuses (and different material conditions) in consequence. (In some cases, the status was ambiguous, as in the case of the Ottoman Porte during the 18th century, where France had ambassadors and the other European powers retained consuls.) Today, a possible indicator of shared practices might be adherence to a human rights code, since in the contemporary state system the measure of belonging would appear to be acceptance of the basic civil society conventions (such as the rule of law or accountable administration).

For a sociological indicator, one might consider Karl Deutsch’s nodes of communication. In *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area*, Deutsch identified two-way channels of communication between elites and the mass and among non-elites as the critical factor in a genuine social formation. He also identified the ratio between a country’s internal and external communications and transactions as an indicator of the degree of its self-preoccupation or self-closure over time.

What is important to grasp from an English School perspective, however, is that these are indicators only and *not the substance* of a social condition.

The second question concerns the pluralist–solidarist quarrel; that is, whether the essential nature of a state system is pluralist, or whether it may also move in a more solidarist direction, in which states share not only practices but also purposes. This question is not merely one of how to read ‘the facts’—the degree to which states (or ‘peoples’ in the solidarist view)
actually share common purposes. It is also whether the very nature of a state system implies pluralism and whether a state system loses its character as a state system when it begins to show solidarist tendencies. The latter is not a theoretical question alone: the institution of diplomacy, for example, would alter considerably if a global society were to be realized. What is important here is to separate empirical considerations from ontological ones.

At the empirical level, this question has come to be one of the most central in some contemporary English School scholarship. If one looks at the work of Paul Williams in consideration of contemporary security regimes, or Nicolas Wheeler in the establishment of trust and the responsibility to protect, in each the purpose is to discern the degree to which shared purposes are coming to dominate not only non-governmental organizations but also state agendas and collective security arrangements, and to accurately characterize those purposes. Robert Jackson has distinguished societas from universitas, the latter involving shared religious or political values and he characterizes NATO as a form of universitas ‘based on agreement among its members concerning the fundamental goals and values of democracy... open only to those who conform with its democratic norms’. (He is, it should be noted, not yet prepared to make such a statement concerning the European Union.) Such questions are quite distinct, however, from whether and in what circumstances we should value one over the other. Jackson makes his ontological stance clear when he states that the ‘domestication of religion and ideology arguably is the most significant historical achievement associated with [international] society’.

The third is the refinement of the concept of practice. The English School concept of practice is what Stephen Turner in The Social Theory of Practices calls a ‘telic’ notion. A telic practice is ‘an activity seeking a goal “which is conceived as a result of following certain general principles of procedure”’ (quoting from Kant’s ‘This May Be True in Theory but Does not Apply to Practice’). Examples of telic practices are playing a game of chess, holding a seminar, baptizing a baby according to the way it is done in some denomination, or going fly fishing. Such practices are carried out according to standards of excellence set forth in some tradition of interpretation. Maurice Keens-Soper has placed De Callières’ De la Manière de négocier avec les Souverains in a tradition of interpretation applied to diplomacy and one that set standards. A practice in the English School sense is not a private idea: a commitment to communal standards is required if one is to talk meaningfully of a practice.

A telic notion of practice may be contrasted with a causal notion. In the causal notion, a practice is a form of mentalist ‘object’ which impinges on other objects, in this case behavior. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, is interested in practices as hidden convictions or habits shared by a group; he has theorized something called a ‘habitus’ that informs social action. Whether conceived cognitively, as a kind of presupposition, or causally, as a kind of
mental trace, a practice in the causal sense disposes thought or action in a certain way. In this form, practices are not directly accessible, their existence must be inferred, and the means of accessing them are fraught with difficulties. A person engaging in a telic practice is *guided* by its standards rather than being *caused* to perform in some manner, and telic practices are directly accessible to empirical investigation.

Notes and references

9. A position he shared with Stanley Hoffmann; compare Hoffmann’s ‘The Long Road to Theory’, *World Politics*, xi (1959), with Bull’s ‘Case for a Classical Approach’; both reject purely deductive reasoning.
10. See Holsti, pp. below.
13. Navari believes that their normative concerns are sociological concerns, in the Durkheimian sense that a society is characterized by, though not caused by, its norms; see Chapter 2.
27. See, for example, Richard Little, The Balance of Power in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
40. The relevant influence is Terry Nardin’s Law, Morality and the Relations of States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Nardin’s own understanding of


Before undertaking an inquiry into the scholarly enterprise in the human sciences, it is necessary to understand the nature of the material that is the subject of study. The English School is a form of classical humanism, whose subject is human conduct. What we are concerned with in the English School approach is not technical facts but human relations, and human relations understood in terms of normative standards. Inquiry into world politics is inseparable from a normative inquiry. I refer to this as the classical approach, following Hedley Bull.1

Normative inquiry into world politics

There are five things to notice or keep in mind when it comes to normative inquiry into world politics. The first is the contradictory conceptions of norms that political scientists operate with: some conceptions cannot lead to normative inquiry in the meaning of that term in classical political science. The second is the fundamental difference between a detached and disinterested orientation to international scholarship and a politically activist orientation. The third is the dialogical modality of international ethics and political ethics generally: it is a world of human communication, of question and answer, of dialogue and discourse. The fourth is that international ethics is, by and large, created by statespeople: it is their normative equipment. The fifth is that theory is a creature of practice and not the other way about, as is often assumed.

The Study of Norms

Misunderstanding of normative inquiry is caused by the ambiguous meaning of ‘norm’ in social science discourse. Karl Popper has distinguished between nature and artifice, between ‘natural laws’—‘i.e., a law that is factual and can be tested to see whether it is verifiable or falsifiable’—and ‘normative laws’—‘i.e., such rules as forbid or demand certain modes of conduct’.2 Positivist social scientists could be characterized as those scholars who seek
to discover patterns of social behavior, conceived as an objective external reality, and to explain that reality in terms of falsifiable empirical propositions. By contrast, classical humanists could be characterized as those scholars who seek to discern, clarify, and elucidate human conduct: that is, human activity that is assessed by reference to normative standards of some kind. There can be no positivist explanations of human conduct. That would confuse these basic categories. There can only be history, philosophy, jurisprudence and related modes of understanding, interpreting, and elucidating its character and modus operandi.

One prominent meaning of norm is sociological: a norm is conceived to be a pattern of behavior—a norm is how people usually behave. That is a positivist concept of norm. In studying norms, positivists are studying behavior: norms are ‘recurring patterns of behavior’. That is not the meaning of norm employed here. Here the meaning is moral and legal: a norm is a standard of conduct by which to judge the rightness or wrongness, the goodness and badness, of human activity. In studying norms in the classical way we are studying conduct and not merely behavior. In studying behavior scientifically one could study animal behavior as well as human behavior. But it is impossible to study animal conduct in any recognized meaning of the term. Conduct (and misconduct) is exclusively a human activity that is judged by a moral or legal standard of some kind.

Political scientists, in conceptualizing norms, are sometimes prone to confuse, to mix up, to try to bridge, or to stretch this basic distinction. For example, it has been said that ‘Norms may “guide” behavior, they may “inspire” behavior, they may “rationalize” or “justify” behavior, they may express “mutual expectations” about behavior, or they may be ignored.’ To combine these different notions is to invite and perhaps commit a category mistake: for example, the mistake in this case of considering norms as both causes of behavior and standards of conduct. Some post-positivist analysis, particularly constructivism, is marked by such ambiguous conceptions of norms and normative study.

There is a distinction in positivist social science between empirical theory and normative theory which indicates that norms could not be candidates for empirical inquiry. That clearly is a mistaken way of thinking. The human world is significantly composed of norms—that is, standards of conduct. Those standards have a historical existence. When historians study the conduct required of Christian kings during the Middle Ages or that demanded of Roman governors during late antiquity or that expected of member states of the United Nations today, they are engaged in an empirical analysis of basic political norms. It would be impossible to make much sense of Latin Christendom or the Roman Empire or present-day international society or any other political world, past or present, without grasping the basic norms that the people of the day use to justify or vindicate their political conduct.
Standards of conduct are not empirical in the same (external) sense that perceptible objects are empirical. For example, we can see the car approaching on the other side of the road. But we cannot see the rules of the road that are supposed to govern the driver of that car. We can see the solid yellow line down the middle of the road, but we cannot see what it means. The line in the middle of the road is a normative—that is procedural—idea or concept. The rules of the road have an ‘existence’ in that human understanding sense of the word. Norms exist socially and historically in the sense that a certain set of people who are engaged in a specified activity are subject to them at that place and time. They exist as ongoing standards of human conduct. That empirical notion of a norm also applies to the particular set of people—that is, statespeople—who ‘drive’ the approximately 190 ships of state. They are subject to standards of conduct which are the equivalent of traffic regulations: that is international law, diplomatic practice, rules of international organizations, and so on. That latter meaning of ‘empirical’ as referring to norms that exist at a certain place and time in regard to certain activities is the meaning employed in the classical approach.

A related misunderstanding is the belief that normative inquiry is prescriptive in character. I am here referring to a recommendatory or policy analysis—rather than an interrogatory or expository analysis—which aims at giving advice or proposing a course of action to be followed. It is the usual outlook of foreign policy analysis. University scholars are not in a good position to offer policy advice because they lack the immediate experience and precise, up-to-date information which are crucial to successful policy-making. They are not where policy is made and they cannot therefore have a very good feel for the situation and its constraints and demands. Louis J. Halle, who spent a number of years in the US State Department during and after World War II and went on to become a distinguished professor at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva started one of his books with the following comment:

Anyone who has experienced international relations in a foreign office, on the one hand, and has taught in the universities, on the other, knows that they are not the same thing. The difference . . . is fundamental . . . The immediate presumption, especially in an empirical society like our own, is that the difference ought not to exist. International relations as practiced in foreign offices is the real thing, and the real thing is what ought to be taught.6

Halle’s point is that the practical world of foreign policy and the theoretical world of academic analysis are worlds apart and although ‘the one ought not to be without some relevance to the other’, to confuse them is fatal—for both parties.7 Theory and practice are categorically different modes of understanding. (This point is expanded below.)
A further confusion is the equation of normative inquiry with moralizing in which the professor turns his or her lectern into a pulpit and gives a sermon rather than a lecture. A normative analyst is here represented as somebody who is standing in judgment and rendering judgment. It may be worth repeating a few cogent remarks by Hedley Bull on this issue:

What is important in an academic inquiry into politics is not to exclude value-laden premises, but to subject these premises to investigation and criticism, to treat the raising of moral and political issues as part of the inquiry. I am no more capable than anyone else of being detached about a subject such as this. But I believe in the value of attempting to be detached or disinterested, and it is clear to me that some approaches to the study of world politics are more detached or disinterested than others.8

**Detachment or Engagement?**

The traditional academic study of norms is expository: it involves observation, discernment, interrogation, diagnosis, and explication. These are among the most important stages of classical normative inquiry, the goal of which is theoretical understanding. The purpose of a classical normative inquiry is exactly the same as Hedley Bull’s purpose in writing *The Anarchical Society*: ‘it is the purely intellectual one of inquiring into the subject and following the argument wherever it might lead’.9

Hedley Bull maintains that scholars should be as disinterested as possible in order to carry out scholarship that is properly academic and is not a vehicle of their own personal values or political ideology. He clarifies this important point in a defense of the classical approach:

The tradition of detached and disinterested study of politics is, I believe, a very delicate plant... Its survival depends on a form of commitment that is not political, but intellectual and academic: a commitment to inquiry as a distinct human activity, with its own morality and its own hierarchy of priorities, that is necessarily brought into conflict with the prevailing political values in any society.10

What Bull is referring to is the ethics of scholarship which is particularly important in political science for the obvious reason that partisanship in our field of study is always an immediate temptation. He sees partisanship as one of the big vices of academic life that scholars ought to do their best to resist. The endeavor to do that is for Bull not only a difficult academic challenge but also an essential responsibility of academic inquiry: it is at the heart of the ethics of scholarship.

Some scholars cannot accept Bull’s definition of academic responsibility. Currently, critical theorists are among the most prevalent of academic improvers. They have set themselves the ambitious task of reforming
international society theory to make it more relevant to improving human conditions on the planet. They are often inclined to see the state as Rousseau saw it: an institution that keeps people in chains. They see the society of states in a similar way and they seek to employ their critical knowledge to reform international society. In exposing the injustice of the current states system they are hoping to pave the way, in thought, toward progressive international change.

In the course of adopting that activist orientation, critical theorists criticize the classical approach for not facing up to the value implications of its mode of inquiry: that is, for accepting the historical subject it is seeking to understand. In other words, it is seen to underwrite the international status quo. Classical international society theorists are understood to be prejudiced in favor of past and present normative arrangements of world politics. They are criticized for not looking forward to the future in terms of the progressive change that might be possible and preferable to existing arrangements. In short, the classical approach hides a political conservatism.

But critical theorists of international society are not content with discerning and elucidating international society as a distinctive historical arrangement of political life. They are seeking to change it. Critical international society theory is an offshoot of neo-Marxist critical theory. Critical theorists are critical of modern international society, as they see it, for tolerating inequality on a global scale: allegedly by acquiescing to the political hegemony of the great powers, by ignoring the economic hegemony of world capitalism, and by upholding a doctrine of sovereignty and non-intervention which serves as a barrier to the rescue and emancipation of human beings trapped in countries with despotic governments and destitute economies. Emancipation conjures up an image of liberating slaves and thus it implies that the populations of many countries are, in effect, enslaved by the current state system. In defining the role of the academic in these terms critical international society theorists are declaring, in the manner of Karl Marx, that the responsibility of knowledge workers is not merely to understand world politics. Their primary responsibility is to provide knowledge to change the world for the better. That rejection of agnosticism in favor of activism places them in a very different position from that of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull.

The question of the scholar’s orientation to his or her subject is a fundamental question. How it is answered will shape the character of the resultant scholarship. Is it the business of academics to change the world for the better as they define that value—keeping in mind that there could be different and even contrary definitions which could pit one academic activist against another and might politicize academic life? Or is it the business of academics to render the subject they are studying intelligible in proper academic terms? As indicated, it was the view of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull that academics have the latter responsibility exclusively. For Wight that involved
the necessity of hearing not only the Grotian (rationalist) voice but also the Machiavellian (realist) voice and the Kantian (revolutionist) voice as well. As indicated previously, a voice is a distinctive and coherent expression of certain values and beliefs concerning world politics. To listen to only one of these voices is to close one’s mind to the other two and thus to engage in a one-dimensional and partial analysis.

The classical international society approach to normative inquiry is, accordingly, a pluralistic approach. By ‘pluralistic’ I mean that international human conduct, taken as a whole, discloses divergent and even contradictory ideas, values, and beliefs which must be recognized by our theories, and assimilated by them, if they are to be faithful to reality. If scholars of international society seek to carry out an empirical inquiry, they must allow for the tensions and contradictions of human experience in that sphere of human conduct: contingency as well as rationality, intentions and also unintended consequences, ours as well as theirs, right and might, prudence alongside procedure, humanity as well as sovereignty, desire and duty, virtue and expediency, goals and rules, ideals and practices, and the rest.\textsuperscript{13}

Values are of course the subject of normative inquiry. In the case of international society there is a family of important values including peace, security, independence, order, justice, human rights, environmental protection, and other values like them, which it is the business of scholars to inquire into and try to comprehend as fully as possible. Normative inquiry in the classical manner is the business of interrogating values and addressing value questions. That would include at some point, probably at the end of our inquiries, the assessment and justification of certain values if we were convinced that they were, on balance, of greater importance. We might end our inquiry by arriving at a view of the subject that gives moral priority to justice over order, or to human rights over sovereign rights, or more generally to solidarism over pluralism, or we might end by reversing that priority.

But to arrive at such a considered evaluation after a lengthy inquiry is not the same as starting our inquiries with a view to promoting our values. That latter orientation is not an academic orientation. It is a political orientation. If political scientists adopt such an orientation to their inquiries from the beginning, they have, in effect, given up on academic study as a disinterested and detached study.\textsuperscript{14} The role of the political scientist, as I understand it, is to try to give a plausible and coherent interpretation of the political practitioner’s world: to construe that world in applicable academic terms in one’s teaching and writing. Once that is achieved one’s academic responsibility in that regard is at an end.

The Dialogical Modality of International Ethics

Normative questions, and questioning, are central to everyday political life and they are just as central to international politics as they are to domestic politics. Being in positions of responsibility and wielding substantial and
sometimes awesome power, national leaders and other people who engage in international relations cannot escape from such questions—even if they fail or refuse to answer them. At almost every turn they are confronted by normative controversies of one kind or another to which they must respond in one way or another. Responding means justifying their policies and the actions and consequences that flow from those policies. To ask for a justification is to call for a reasonable answer that invokes something more than narrow self-interest: a normative and not merely an instrumental response to the question. Thus a very important feature of world politics as indeed of all politics is the dialogical interplay involved in justifying policy—in this case foreign policy. And the justifications of foreign policy are the central material for those engaged in normative inquiry into world politics.

Behind the justificatory language of foreign policy, and central to the theoretical inquiry of the classical approach, are the great constitutive issues of the society of states. Normative inquiry into world politics seeks to come to grips theoretically with questions such as the following: Which groups of people qualify for recognition as sovereign states? Are the international responsibilities of all states the same or do some states have special responsibilities. Are there any circumstances under which a sovereign state’s right of self-defense could be legitimately infringed? Is international society responsible for providing personal security or is that an exclusively domestic responsibility of sovereign states? Is international society responsible for the governance of independent countries whose governments have for all intents and purposes ceased to exist? Must ‘ethnic cleansing’ always be condemned? Can the goal of spreading democracy around the world—in the perhaps reasonable hope of securing greater peace in the future—justify military intervention and occupation of a country in the present? Can we reasonably expect national leaders to put their own soldiers in danger to protect human rights in foreign countries? Is there any moral basis for justifying the use of force to change international boundaries or partition states? In short, these are some of the most difficult but also the most urgent questions that could be asked about contemporary world politics.

These questions are not purely philosophical questions. They do not address transcendental issues. This is an important point; there are philosophers such as John Rawls who would try to give eternal and general answers to such questions. But they are not amenable to that kind of treatment. Such questions are historically situated. They arise in the evolving historical context of the modern sovereign state. Most of them nowadays are questions about the morality of the society of states and the ethics of statecraft that have arisen in recent decades and particularly since the end of the Cold War. We cannot even attempt to answer these questions with academic conviction unless we are informed about the historical context, and the historical context leads us to a different sort of treatment from that involved in purely
philosophical inquiry. It leads us to contextualize our inquiry and to stay close to the reasoning of the participants, not to impose abstract standards upon them.

**An Ethics of Practitioners**

Even though international ethics is as wide-ranging as the subject of world politics itself, at its core it concerns the moral choices of a very select category of people. It is the distinctive ethics of the men and women who wield the power of states: it is a construct of statespeople. It is the normative equipment required for carrying out their responsibilities. The answers to international normative questions, such as those listed above, are provided in the first instance and most significantly by the practitioners involved. An important task in the academic study of international ethics is to interrogate those answers with the aim of spelling out, clarifying, and scrutinizing the framework of justification disclosed by them.

State sovereignty has long been and still is a towering feature on the landscape of world politics. The partitioning of the world into sovereign states, whatever we may think of it, affects profoundly the shape and substance of the practical ethics of world politics. The sovereign state defines not only the citizenship of people—that is, their basic rights and obligations—but very often also their political identity and allegiance, perception of friend and foe, conception of security, source of welfare, and much else besides. There is no longer a territorial sphere beyond international society that is occupied by parallel civilizations. The world is still divided among different civilizations but no civilization today is geographically outside the state system in the way that the Islamic world or the civilization of China in times past were outside the Christian world where the state system was originally located. Today everybody around the world is inside a particular sovereign state—that is, is a citizen or subject—and is thus also inside the society of states. That global political fact has profound normative implications and consequences.

Statespeople, like everybody else, operate in a flow of human activity that is particular to them. Nobody knows that experience in any intimacy except themselves and their immediate advisers and confidants. The stream of human activity that they are involved in is one of the most important currents of history; perhaps it is the most important. The main current of modern international history is the record of their activities. Statespeople are historical actors: their activities are a contribution to the making of international history in their own time of office. The main platforms from which they operate are the ruling offices of particular sovereign states: the states on whose behalf they conduct foreign policy and engage in foreign relations. There is a common humanity, of course, evident in the cosmopolitan discourse of human rights and humanitarian assistance. There are countless non-governmental organizations of one kind or another which engage in activities that cut across the boundaries of states. There is a vast international
marketplace that encircles the planet. But the territory and population of the world is still partitioned into sovereign states which are the primary right and duty-bearing units of world politics whose leaders are the principal international actors who carry the heaviest responsibilities for managing world affairs. They are the leading actors around which the political drama unfolds: they constitute the *dramatis personae* of history.

International ethics is shaped fundamentally by the heavy weight of state power, both military and economic, in the hands of statespeople: in no other sphere of human relations is organized power as consequential. Today the largest concentrations of power on earth are in the control of a few states: the five permanent nuclear-armed members of the UN Security Council (P-5) and the eight leading economic powers of the developed countries (G-8). Very significant state power is of course distributed far more widely. Indeed, organized power, both destructive power and constructive power, is greater than it has ever been. Some national leaders have it within their power to destroy life on the planet as we know it. And some also have the power to improve planetary living conditions and to protect the planetary environment. At base, therefore, international ethics is an ethics of responsibility because some very powerful players are involved who can do a lot of good and also a lot of harm. Indeed, their actions taken together affect virtually everyone on the planet, both for the better and for the worse.

This raises an important question: how can academics assess those actions in correct normative terms? International ethics is not an applied ethics: it is not thought up by moral philosophers or political theorists and then applied to politicians or other political actors. International ethics does not originate in the offices of university professors. There is no relevant moral standpoint outside international politics, such as John Rawls’ ‘veil of ignorance’, from which to impartially judge the conduct of international actors—not if we aim to capture the situational realities of moral choice in that demanding sphere of human relations. That would impose a standard of conduct on the subject that was not its own. University professors cannot determine the moral standards of politicians, at least, not outside the activity to which those morals apply.

Just like ethics in any other sphere of human activity, international ethics develops within the activity itself—in this case the activity of world politics—and is adapted to the characteristics and limits of human conduct in that sphere. International ethics is not *external* to the human activities and practices of world politics: it is not something brought in from outside. International ethics is *internal* to world politics: it is the moral standards worked out over time by the practitioners involved; it is the normative world within which they are obliged to operate; it is embodied in the practice of statecraft. To understand the practical ethics of world politics the scholar must be willing to enter imaginatively and with discernment, although not uncritically, into the situation of the people who make foreign policy and conduct
the relations of states, the most important of whom are national leaders. ‘Scholars must assess the conduct of statespeople by the standards that are generally accepted by those same statespeople.’ Otherwise our normative inquiries lose touch with political reality and become irrelevant.

**Practice and Theory**

The argument that international ethics is the handiwork of statespeople becomes clearer from a brief analysis of the distinction between theory and practice. They are different kinds of knowledge and their relationship is not quite what it is often made out to be. It is a common assumption that theory comes before practice: we contemplate and then we act. Academic political theorists are particularly prone to make that assumption. Theorists certainly can and do shape the world indirectly through their theories both when they are right and when they are wrong: the theories of Machiavelli and Marx molded the future to a significant extent. But theoretical knowledge usually cannot be converted directly into practical know-how because some usually indefinable insight rooted in particular talents and derived from relevant experience is also involved. Political science graduates are not guaranteed solely by their academic credentials to become successful politicians. That clearly is absurd, for they would still have to acquire practical political know-how which can be derived only from experience in a political role, such as serving an apprenticeship in the office of a political party or political official.

By political theory I do not refer to scholastic debates among political theorists and moral philosophers about a theorist and his or her theory. As indicated previously, by political theory I mean theoretical understanding of the existential political world, either contemporary or historical. That is, political theory in the classical meaning. That latter kind of political theory is parasitic on political practice: it is empirical in the classical meaning of seeking to give an account of the world of human experience. We need a historical event or episode—that is, a human activity, occurrence, or coincidence—before we can theorize it. Thucydides’ ‘realist’ international theory depends, for its existence, on the Peloponnesian war fought between Athens and Sparta from 431 BC to 404 BC, which provoked him to write it. Theory is the knowledge of the observer and is generally characteristic of academic subjects. Theorizing in the human sciences is discerning and interpreting intellectually whatever part or aspect of the world of human relations the theorist happens to be curious about.

Practice is entirely different. It involves knowing how to do something—for example, how to play chess, how to speak Russian, how to conduct a political campaign, how to command an armored brigade, how to present a legal argument in a court of law, how to negotiate a peaceful settlement of an international dispute, and an endless number of other practical activities that human beings manage to engage in. Practical knowledge is possessed by those who are able to engage effectively in an activity. Political practice is
an engagement: engaging a problem or situation which involves other people who are also engaging the same thing but not necessarily from the same angle or with the same interests or concerns in mind. Engaging in a practice is acting on something usually by trying either to preserve it or to change it but in any event trying to come to grips with it. Practical knowledge of human affairs ultimately is knowing how to put the human world into a better alignment with our interests and concerns.

Theoretical knowledge, as academically solid as it may be, is not a substitute for practical know-how. For example, we know that the Duke of Wellington led the Allied Powers to a decisive victory over the Grand Army of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815 and we have a pretty good idea that Wellington did this by making the most of his opportunities and the military means at his disposal before and during the battle. Maybe he also was lucky on that day. Yet, as much as we may discover and learn about that remarkable military achievement from our historical researches and reflections, we would not expect owing solely to our academic knowledge of the event that we could have pulled it off ourselves. That would call for talents and experience which scholarly knowledge alone cannot supply. It would not prevent us from recognizing the force and significance of Wellington’s achievement and communicating our understanding to others. But one cannot take a theory and use it to enter into the world of practice. Theorists cannot communicate with practitioners in the language of theory—at least not if they wish to be clearly understood; they can only communicate with other theorists in that language.

Theory is not a key to practice. A philosopher put that point as follows: ‘a soldier does not become a shrewd general merely by endorsing the strategic principles of Clausewitz; he must also be competent to apply them.’ Practical competency derives from talent and training honed by experience—which is why young officers who have just graduated at the top of their class at West Point or Sandhurst and possess the most up-to-date military education do not start their careers as generals. Practical manuals are, as a rule, no substitute for talent and experience although they are, of course, an excellent aid to them. Cookbooks undoubtedly have a practical use. However, even an excellent cookbook probably will not suffice for someone to become a chef. The cookbook is at best an abridgment or summary of practical knowledge and cannot begin to communicate everything that is relevant to the activity of cooking. We cannot say or write down everything we know about an art or a craft that we have mastered. Much that we know will remain unarticulated. Most people will acquire the culinary art only by carefully and repeatedly preparing different recipes, ideally under the supervision of an experienced chef. Even then some people may still not be very good cooks. Practice does not always make perfect. Talent is also required.

Machiavelli’s famous book *The Prince* offers what purport to be practical maxims concerning how to achieve political power and hold on
However, we could not become successful politicians by studying Machiavelli’s political maxims because, as indicated, we would still have to know how to apply them, and that know-how comes from gaining experience and not from reading books. The main value of *The Prince* is as an essay in political theory—one of the most important of such essays ever written. Machiavelli is famous as a theorist of politics and war, not as a diplomat or soldier. Practical knowledge is knowing how to get on effectively with whatever human activity one is engaged in. It is practical in that it is the crucial element that helps to get the job done. Otherwise it is impractical.

To sum up, practice and theory offer two different kinds of insight into human relations. The first kind of insight is the know-how of the participant who can make things happen or prevent things from happening or can at least influence, if not shape, the subsequent course of the human activity he or she is involved in: the player who can score winning goals; the politician who can conduct successful election campaigns; the soldier who can win battles; the lawyer who can defend clients; the diplomat who can defuse a situation and bring about an agreement. The second kind of insight is the knowledge of the observer—whose role is to construe the course and outcome of those same events by figuring out their point, discerning their deeper meaning, trying to grasp their significance, and generally by giving an academic account of the episode—in the classroom or in an article or book—which at least partly satisfies our aspiration to understand the subject in the most intellectually comprehensive way possible.

**International relations as a craft discipline**

The classical humanist approach calls upon the scholar to enter with imagination and insight into the roles and situations of statespeople not with the aim of advising them but, rather, with the hope of understanding their conduct. If we cannot talk to such people directly—which often is not an option—we can always fall back on the empirical method of historians. We can interrogate the evidence that statespeople leave in their tracks: the record of their policies and actions and the statements by which they attempt to justify them. The history of the public activities of statespeople and other political practitioners leaves a trail of evidence behind—like the tracks of a wild animal in the snow—which the international relations scholar can follow in the hope of capturing intellectually his or her quarry.

What is a craft discipline? It is not a scientific discipline that calls for knowledge of the philosophy of science or requires mastery of the best currently available techniques or methods of research. A craft is not a science or a technique. It is more like an art. Mastering a craft involves deep familiarity with the material that one is working with: its characteristics, limitations, and possibilities. A craftsman or craftswoman knows from experience what can be achieved by carefully working on the material with the proper tools.
and in the correct way. Craftsmanship is judged by its works. Crafts are the creation of craftsmen and craftswomen who work according to the same standards of excellence. Crafts involve proper ways of doing things based on past experience. Crafts consist in the established practices of the craftspeople. There are certain dispositions and skills—that is, certain virtues—that are conducive to certain crafts and are associated with them. A virtue is disclosed in performance: virtuosity is revealed in an excellent performance.

Virtues are centrally involved in the craft of political science even though they do not capture much attention from political scientists, as compared to methodology. Perhaps that is because research methods and techniques can be packaged and taught through textbooks and classroom exercises which are necessary for education on a massive scale such as we have today. But the virtues of classical political science cannot be taught that way. They can only be imparted in a teacher–student relationship that is akin to that of a master and an apprentice of a medieval craft.

Some political scientists are outstanding scholars and we make that judgment by reference to the excellence of their scholarship. An outstanding scholar is somebody who has a deeper and broader understanding of the most important and difficult subjects of his or her discipline. Only a very few political scientists achieve that high level of academic knowledge. That is not merely a question of good methodology. It is far more a question of academic virtue. All political scientists can be fairly judged by the academic virtues involved in the study of human affairs including, among others, mastery of existing knowledge, insight into the subject, creative imagination, discernment, detachment, judgment, even-handedness, and skepticism. When scholars of human relations write academic letters of reference for their students or colleagues, these are the standards by which they assess their scholarship. A craft discipline is mastered by degree and marked by degrees. Each subsequent degree recognizes a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of the same subject. That is a medieval notion and it is still the way we think about mastering academic disciplines in the human sciences.

The craft discipline of classical international society scholarship involves the following main stages of research. First, it calls for attention to those theorists who have something to say which is not only sound or wise but also perceptive and precise concerning the subject at hand—or rather the human activities related to that subject which they are noticing, scrutinizing, reflecting on, and writing about. We should begin by reading the classical works that provide the foundation of learning upon which we can, hopefully, build. Classical commentators, past and present, who offer some of the most profound commentaries would certainly include Thucydides on political necessity, Augustine on the just war, Machiavelli on power politics, Grotius on natural law and international law, Hobbes on the state and the state of nature, Burke on prudence and civility, Kant on the human
community and the rule of law, J.S. Mill and Michael Walzer on freedom and nonintervention, Max Weber on the ethics of responsibility, Arnold Wolfers on statecraft and moral choice, Herbert Butterfield on the tragic element of international conflict, Hans Morgenthau on political wisdom, and Stanley Hoffmann on duties beyond borders. This is only a personal selection from a long list of outstanding commentators on international relations, past and present.

Second, as emphasized above, the classical approach involves paying attention to what statespeople and other important international players are doing, and saying, which includes scrutiny of their pronouncements and those of others with whom they are dealing. That requires a sharp and skeptical watchfulness for the justifications employed by international actors: those justifications, which abound in world politics, are the specific empirical subject that we are theorizing. These are usually recorded and reported, and that is what we interrogate when we engage in such an inquiry.

If we are studying contemporary international issues, we might be in a position to engage practitioners in conversation directly. Our aim would not be to report practical thinking on current affairs or to comment instrumentally on it: that is, the activity of journalists and experts. Our aim is to be informed about practical thinking in order to make our reflections more to the point than they might otherwise be. I once had a conversation in Vienna with an ambassador of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. She was concerned to discuss the violent secessionist conflict in Chechnya. She wanted to emphasize not only the OSCE’s humanitarian efforts to curb the violence by inserting peace keepers into the conflict but also the importance of having Russia’s consent, which was more conceivable and obtainable by that country’s OSCE membership. From a classical international society perspective, the OSCE’s involvement with Chechnya could be read as a small chapter in an effort to integrate a post–Soviet Russia into a human rights—protecting international society. Here was an instance of a recurrent theme of order and justice in world affairs and of the difficulties of promoting justice at the risk of instability and disorder.

Third, those justifications must be interrogated in the context of the situation in which they are made. By this I mean that the discourse of statespeople and other important international players should be scrutinized with a view not only to their explicit content and referents, but also to their discernible intentions and what they assume or take for granted about the conduct of international relations. Discerning this latter, often implicit, ideational context of international justifications is the most important theoretical understanding to be derived from the interrogative process. That is because it discloses the real, or lived, normative world of the people involved and is thus anchored in human experience and human history. An international relations scholar working in the classical tradition would seek to become conversant with the evidence of international justifications
surrounding a particular controversy to know what is going on and thus to acquire some sense of the practitioner's situation and what he or she has in mind and is prepared to disclose publicly. Public disclosure is important because it usually gives an indication of how a leader wishes to be seen in order to secure public approval for his or her policy.

Fourth, that interrogation should be carried out with the major normative preoccupations of classical scholarship in mind. The classical scholar should be able to report not only what is going on or what happened. He or she should also be able to interpret those goings-on in light of our inherited body of classical knowledge of the subject. What do the UN Security Council resolutions and the US Congressional debates on the Gulf War disclose about war as a normative idea? What do the justifications and condemnations of the UN and US operations in Somalia tell us about intervention as a normative idea? How do these episodes inform our normative theories of war and intervention? Unfortunately, many international relations scholars who are conversant with the goings-on of world politics, who even justifiably pride themselves on being well informed about current political events, often do not take that theoretical step. They do not connect their own otherwise excellent research to the larger classical tradition within which they might very well be working. They break off their scholarly hunt at the most critical moment and leave unanswered the most fundamental questions which are theoretical.

Of course, any theoretical conclusions are always bound to be provisional for they are connected, ultimately, with the historical events and episodes that provoked them in the first place. History rarely stands still and so we must be open to revising or changing our theories. But I take encouragement from the fact that some provisional statements about events that are very localized in space and time have a way of becoming long-standing theorems of international studies. Thucydides’ fascinating dialogue on necessity and choice in the Peloponnesian war, by our standards a minor conflict fought in a tiny corner of Europe more than two millennia ago, is the classic case in point. These theorems are always our main points of reference in theorizing new international episodes or problems. They are our academic inheritance. By taking them up as a theoretical point of departure our own work becomes part of the classical literature of international relations. When we take up the classical approach we are seeking to make a contribution to that literature.

Fifth, our theoretical writings should avoid academic jargon beyond the absolute minimum that is necessary for communicating with other scholars. Our academic inquiries should take up the living language of the subject: we ought to be at home with the practical discourse of international relations. That is because international relations—like all human activity—consists fundamentally of language which is a principal vehicle for its expression. In studying international human conduct we are in a basic sense studying
the practical language by which foreign policy, military affairs, diplomacy, international commerce, and so on are not only expressed but are also carried on.

That language contains many clues about our subject because, as indicated, it is fundamentally relational: that is, dialogical. Its vocabulary has been fashioned to facilitate communication, interaction, and exchange between statespeople and other important international players. It facilitates question and answer, address and rejoinder, offer and counter-offer, acceptance and refusal, agreement and disagreement, accusation and denial, condemnation and justification, and many other dialectical pairs. International relations, as indeed all human relations, is interactive and transactive: the expressions ‘international’ or ‘transnational’ are intended to capture exactly that characteristic. So when we theorize international relations we should always be alert to the ongoing dialogue of the political actors who are contemplating actions, initiating actions, or responding to actions which affect each other—and may also be of interest or concern to other people who are not directly involved but are also affected or might be affected. That dialogical activity is at the heart of our subject. By employing the literary device of the dialogue classical Greek theorists, such as Thucydides, in some ways get closer than modern theorists to capturing accurately the character and *modus operandi* of international human relations.

If we resort to a more theoretical terminology, as we must in order to connect our writings with the classical tradition, our terms should be a translation of ordinary language that expresses a more general idea but does not lose any of the original meaning. That is how the theoretical vocabulary of the classical approach is fashioned: it is derivative of and based on ordinary language. Thus, the origin or derivation of classical terms of art such as ‘international order’, ‘international society’, ‘Westphalia’, ‘rationalism’, and so on can always be traced to the practical discourse of international relations. Hedley Bull’s notion of international order is not far removed from the ordinary language of diplomacy. Martin Wight’s notion of ‘rationalism’ is traceable to the language of international law. Even in terminology, the theorist is always hostage to the practitioner.

Our theoretical language should therefore avoid stipulative definitions that have no reference to ordinary language. A stipulated definition is one that is made up by the researcher. Such definitions are arbitrary from the point of view of their subject. They are rejections of the language of experience and practice. They cut us off from the people and activities we are trying to learn more about. They have the unfortunate effect of alienating the world of political science from the world of politics. Such definitions are a currency of positivist and post-positivist political science and they have contributed significantly to the scholasticism of those approaches.

This discussion can be summed up as follows: first, the classical approach to the study of international relations is first of all acquaintance with the
literature on the subject to which we ourselves are seeking to make a contribution. Secondly, it is familiarity with the actors’ understandings of their world. In becoming conversant with the sayings and doings of statepeople the classical scholar thereby becomes vicariously conversant with the world of practice. Those sayings and doings are of course registered in almost endless speeches, policy statements, parliamentary debates, resolutions, declarations, announcements, press conferences, interviews, press releases, broadcasts, reports, and various other statements and commentaries that the real world of international relations not only leaves in its wake, like a great ship ploughing a furrow through historical time, but also employs as its principal *modus operandi*. The point of interrogating such evidence is not merely to be informed about what is going on—although that is undeniably important. The point is larger: if we are seeking theoretical knowledge about international relations, we need to be informed because we want to theorize from a basis of fact rather than fiction. The theoretical alternative is a dreamland.

Notes and references


9. Ibid., p. xv.


15. This ancient image of a world divided by incommunicable civilizations has been revived by S. P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). Huntington grossly underestimates the international society basis of world politics and the extent to which the political world today is globalized on that basis. Huntington’s argument is criticized in The Global Covenant, chapter 14.
17. Unfortunately, many political theorists are content with taking up the arguments of other political theorists in a seemingly endless round of self-obsessed scholastic agreement and disputation that is largely devoid of any curiosity about political experience and political history: that is, the world outside the academy. The recurrent debates surrounding John Rawls’ theory of justice is a case in point.
20. Ibid., p. 32.
The primary sources for English School methodology are *Diplomatic Investigations*, the collection of essay edited by Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, drawn from the meetings of the British Committee, and Martin Wight’s *Systems of States*, collected, edited and with an extended introduction by Hedley Bull. Bull’s own *Anarchical Society* draws upon and adds to the methodological corpus represented in these two works, which however it does not surpass. In addition, there is a growing secondary literature, much of which consists of exegeses of ‘the classic texts’, but which does not, with some notable exceptions, develop methods.1 *Investigations* and *Systems* in consequence remain not only fundamental but also something akin to holy writ: they are the sources for determining doctrinal correctness, as well as providing methodological guidance.

Of the relations between them, if *Diplomatic Investigations* represents the ‘broad church’ approach of the English School, then *Systems of States* must surely be its Canterbury. It is the fullest statement of the English School approach; and judging by Hedley Bull’s decision to publish Wight’s essays, and the degree to which he draws upon it, the most authoritative source of its insights.

In his introduction to the essays, Bull characterizes Wight’s approach to the study of international relations in terms of a distinction between ‘mechanical factors’ and ‘normative factors’.2 By mechanical factors, Bull intends explanation by factors external to the actors’ self-conceptions and that exclude self-reflective views. He writes, ‘by contrast with those studies of states-systems which view them as determined purely by mechanical factors such as the number of states in the system, their relative size, the political configuration in which they stand, he [Wight] placed emphasis on the norms and values that animate the system, and the institutions in which they are expressed’ (p. 17).3 For Wight, the character of a state-system is
determined by its norms and values. Bull’s distinction was meant to establish clear blue water between the then dominant aspirations for a social science that approximated the natural sciences, especially positivist methodologies that aimed to exclude the subjective views of the actors being studied, and a ‘human science’ that took into account the value orientations of actors and the norms embedded in institutions.

The approach involved a central focus on codes of conduct, codes that specify proper behaviour. According to Wight, the Hellenic system is a form of international society not only because ‘the Hellenes are related in blood and language’ but more relevantly, because ‘they have shrines of the gods and sacrifices in common, and a similar way of life’ (p. 46). Common gods and ‘sacrifices in common’ point to codes of conduct. The distinction between one state-system and another is determined by the behavioural norms of the respective systems. Wight writes, ‘Just war is the norm within the states-system, the Holy War the norm between states-systems’ (p. 34). He contrasts the eunoia, or good disposition, of the ancient Greeks with modern public opinion, arguing that the latter, in contrast to the former, ‘implies not simply benevolence, but adherence to some standard of action’ (p. 72). In the same vein, Herbert Butterfield views the balance of power in terms of a precept—‘an injunction to behave in one manner rather than another’. He differentiates ‘historical diplomacy’ from the new diplomacy in terms of maxims, a command or principle understood as a general rule of action. He characterizes the new diplomacy in terms of a requirement that it comprehend ‘the moral factor’, as well ‘the impression that it will make on public opinion’ (p. 187). He differentiates the old from the new diplomacy in terms of distinct sets of precepts.

Bull’s own focus is with rules, but these are not the behavioural patterns understood in game theory. They are ‘rules of conduct’ understood by the players. In his study of order, he defines the order of a society of states in terms of agreed forms of conduct. Indeed, the cohesive factor in international relations, the factor that turns a system into a society, is a rule code, a ‘common set of rules’ (p. 13). Great powers are not simply distinguished from other states by the quantity of power that they can mobilize. Rather they constitute a club, a ‘club with a rule of membership’ (p. 200).

The status of these codes is that they are in general self-reflective. Bull distinguishes order as a pattern or regularity from order as purposive. The order he has in mind is not purposive in the mechanical or functional sense (in the sense that a machine has a purpose), but purposive implying a conscious end or goal. The codes underpinning international society ‘promote certain goals or values’ (p. 4). When Wight, in his essay ‘Western Values in International Relations’, refers to a ‘coherent pattern of ideas’, he does not mean a pattern discernable to the analyst. Rather he means a coherent set of ideas in the heads of the participants. On the common culture underpinning the state-system of Hellas, he quotes Herodotus, a participant. In ‘explaining’
the state-system of Hellas, he observes that the Greeks had a fundamentally hegemonial view of the state-system and ‘no developed idea’ (my ital.) of the balance of power (p. 66). Butterfield identifies an eighteenth-century system in terms of its concept of the balance, which ‘was regarded rather as a law’. The borders of any state-system are conceptual borders, historically understood. Thus, the nineteenth-century state-system is a euro-centric system because it was understood in that manner at the time, whereas by the mid-twentieth century it had come to be understood in more universal terms.

Consciousness implies not only self-consciousness but also consciousness of others. According to Bull, powers are not just powers objectively, but also because ‘they are recognized by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties’ (p. 202; my ital.). English School theorists are interested not only in subjective, but in intersubjective understandings. The distinction is between the individualism of the subjective actor and ‘shared meanings’ in Wendt’s terms; English School theorists understood their subject matter as social and reflexive; its practices embody, in Dunne’s words, ‘highly developed forms of intersubjective identity’. Roy Jones is quite correct to detect a debt to phenomenology.

The two classic statements of the English School approach to the constituent features of a state-system follow accordingly. According to Wight, a state-system is maintained ‘by the tacit understanding that every member of the states-system in claiming sovereignty and political independence for himself acknowledges the same claim by every other member’ (p. 36). The conscious element is echoed in Bull in Anarchical Society: ‘A society of states exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society 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’ (p. 13; my ital.).

In terms of method, several principles follow. First, in identifying such codes, the sources are internal sources, what in the social sciences is referred to as the Participant Standpoint. In trying to determine whether a state-system can consist of only two members, Wight does not identify ‘trend correlations’ or seek common patterns among different state-systems (at least not initially). His first source is Theophylact of Simocatta as that historian reflects on the relations of Rome and Persia—‘the powerful monarchy of the Romans and the wisely governed Commonwealth of the Persians’. (‘By these two great empires the barbarous and war-loving nations are kept in check, and mankind given better and safer government throughout’; Systems, p. 24.) He locates the starting point of the balance of power as ‘modern doctrine and practice’ with Polybius, as that historian accounts for the stance of Syracuse during the Punic Wars. For evidence of the nineteenth-century conception of the state-system as a European system, his sources are the
positivist international lawyer Hall and the great natural lawyer Lorimer, contemporaries, who both identified the international law of their time as European in substance and concept, respectively. For the change in that conception, he quotes C. H. Alexandrowicz who, in 1967, emphasized a more universal system (pp. 117–18). For the clearest guide to international norms, he recommends the study of public opinion; that is, the public’s subjective views. (According to Wight, it is when IR concerns itself with public opinion that it comes closest to the study of ‘the general culture of the society of states’, p. 71.)

The Participant Standpoint involves paying close attention to the language of the actors and to the way they explain and justify their actions. Its historical sources are the statements and speeches of political leaders, and memoirs of public life, particularly justificatory statements and speeches. Its contemporary sources include interviews designed to elicit the self-conceptions of what the actors are doing. Their conceptions of what they are doing are, in turn, related to what Jackson has termed the ‘traditional normative concerns of classical humanism’; that is, questions concerning the status of the state, the bases of international order, and the obligations the states owe one another. It is the classic method of Participant Observation, where the observer immerses himself in the lived life of the subject, and then relates his observations to some standard determined by the theoretical objectives of the project.

Those objectives are not to be understood as purely descriptive. The objective is to gain what the American methodologists Glaser and Strauss refer to as ‘an active sampler of theoretically relevant data’, whether it concerns the legitimacy criteria of a particular set of states, or their conceptions of order, rather than an ethnographer simply trying to get fuller data on a group.9 Ole Waever has suggested that this approach shares an orientation with ‘semiotics’, a focus on ‘implicit cooperation (and thereby also dominance), the invisible non-questioned assumptions which impute “order” into politics exactly because they are not questioned and therefore not thought of as institutions’. He cites Richard Ashley’s work as the exemplar.10 But the understandings sought by English School theorists are not invisible and they do not lie beneath the surface of action—they are fully visible and contained within action itself. The closer model is Quentin Skinner’s concern with context and intent, with original meanings and concepts in context.

In terms of international relations methods, it implies ‘understanding’ as that term is used by Hollis and Smith, who intend Verstehen or a kind of empathic understanding of social phenomena. But in the Hollis and Smith conception of understanding, it is not clear whether the analyst must understand precisely as the participant understands or that the analyst and the participant (technically speaking, the analysand) should share a common understanding. When traditional English School theorists set out to explain the norms of any state-system, they did not restrict themselves to categories
identical to the categories of the participants. Rather, they used terms that would have been recognized by the participants. This is referred to as ‘subjective adequacy’ in the methodological literature. It means that the analyst may (and indeed should) abstract from the categories employed by the analysand, but not so far that the analysand would not recognize his own actions, or the meanings behind them. Wight, commenting on relations among the city-states of the ancient Greek world, observes that there was certainly a potential balance among the city-states, viewable by the analyst, but ‘the Greeks had no notion of it’. Accordingly, he refused to attribute to the Greeks a policy of balancing power. On the other hand, it is not necessary that Polybius, who does have a concept of balancing, have precisely the same understanding of the balance of power as a modern practitioner for the practice to be assigned an explanatory role in Roman diplomacy.

The Participant Standpoint involves not only attention to words, but also the identification of practices in the sense recently highlighted by Robert Jackson. Practice is more than words; it is theory influencing action, or praxis in the Marxist sense. Bull speaks of ‘understandings which are not embodied in a treaty, and which may arise from reciprocal declarations of policy, or simply from behaviour of the parties which is as if in conformity with a rule, even though that rule is not agreed, not enunciated nor even fully recognized [ital. in original]’ (p. 223). Praxis recommends attention to the action behind the words insofar as there seems to be a rule guiding the action. Thus, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States ‘did not . . . break off diplomatic relations, withdraw recognition of one another’s sovereignty, repudiate the ideas of a common international law or cause the break-up of the United Nations into rival organizations’ (p. 43). In other words, there appeared to be a rule of limitation in the conduct of their conflict and some shared standard of proper behaviour. In distinguishing between the Western Powers and the Third World during their confrontations of the 1960s and 1970s, Bull similarly locates standards of behaviour. He notes that ‘whereas the Western powers, in the justifications they offer of their policies, show themselves to be primarily concerned with order, the states of the Third World are primarily concerned with the achievement of justice, even at the price of disorder’ (p. 77).

Practice is not always identified in the same way in English School writings. Wight recommended evidencing practice in the history of ideas rather than diplomatic behaviour, since actual diplomatic practices could diverge and were ‘contingent’. He felt more comfortable with the notion of a diplomatic tradition, and he identified a Western tradition (offered as evidence of a distinctively Western practice in diplomacy), which he characterized as a Whig or ‘constitutional tradition’. He lists, among his sources for the existence of such a tradition, Burke, Tocqueville, and Gladstone. Through thought, they informed a tradition of diplomatic understanding that resonated in action. (Wight identified such a tradition by moving back
and forth between diplomatic *consensus* (as opposed to behaviour) and the practices recommended in and theorized by his ‘Whig’ authorities, a good example of Dilthey’s ‘hermeneutic circle’, moving back and forth between individual practices and social ‘texts’.14) Accordingly, for Wight, the test of such a ‘tradition’ is consensus, constantly reappearing and reasserting its authority. But his notion of a diplomatic tradition is not divorced from the idea of praxis. Both imply behaviour that is theory informed.

A more serious divergence concerns the conception of the ‘participant’ or subject. Ole Waever asks, ‘are we talking about beliefs that are in the deepest sense shared, or about conventions that are followed because this is deemed rational’.15 The distinction here is between *homo sociologicus* and *homo economicus*; between man as a cultural product and man as a rational agent. On this critical question, English School theorists held divergent views. Martin Wight conceived his subjects primarily in social and cultural terms— as *homo sociologicae*. They were imbued with beliefs and cultural practices. Hedley Bull, by contrast, tended to view his subjects as rational agents; they are primarily interest oriented. Sheila Grader is correct to observe some important ontological differences among members of the School.16

Whatever differences in the conception of human agency, however, there is a shared rejection of the notion that an international society can be produced by forces that exist outside of individual human agents, such as ‘the balance of power’ or ‘globalisation’ understood as processes that happen irrespective of human intention. In his role as historian, Butterfield emphasized the critical role played by ‘mediations’ in the historical process. These were the understandings that one historical period had of the past, a central factor in understanding motives for action. Bull, on the view that there is ‘an automatic tendency for a balance of power to arise’, the view propounded by Kenneth Waltz, insists in *Anarchical Society* that ‘[t]his is not the case’. He argues that ‘[s]tates are constantly in the position of having to choose between… maintaining or extending their international power position, and devoting these resources and energies to other ends (p. 111; my ital.)’. He attributed the Cold War balance to ‘an element of contrivance’, notably the rational pursuit of a balance between the US, the USSR and China, and on ‘the agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union on the common objective of maintaining a balance between themselves, at least in the limited sphere of strategic nuclear weapons (p. 114)’. Mutual deterrence was not the same as a fortuitous balance. It was ‘an institution or quasi-institution’, and a conscious policy, not the happy (and automatic) outcome of a balance (p. 117). (This idea led Bull into sharing many notions with the emerging American deterrence theorists, especially in this regard, Albert Wohlstetter.17)

Third, evidencing the ‘fact’ of international society requires evidencing human engagement in, and human understanding of, such a society. As to whether the Chinese Central Confederacy’s regular assemblies, apparently
well-established by the seventh and sixth centuries BC, amounted to a permanent conference, and an ‘inclusive international institution’ (as, for example, the League or the UN), Wight is negative, and on the grounds of the intentions of the Confederacy, since ‘its aims seem to have been defensive against other Chinese powers, and not inclusive’ (Systems, p. 32; from this we may also conclude that for Wight, inclusiveness is a necessary feature of an international society.) Bull, using Vatels’ understanding of a balance as ‘a state of affairs in which no one power is in a position where it is predominant and can lay down the law to others’, notes in Anarchical Society that ‘it is not sufficient for [such a] balance to exist objectively but not subjectively’ (pp. 101 and 103). In accounting for present stability, he notes that the ‘United States and the Soviet Union now each recognize a need to limit the power of the other’ and ‘a need not simply of theirs but of international society at large’ (p. 110; my ital.). In discussing the applicability of the ‘radical Salvationist model’, he notes that ‘the prospects of movement towards a more centralized global political structure, based upon a process of consensus, appear slight’ (p. 305; my ital.).

Bipolarity might produce ‘stability’, but not society. Wight took it for granted that there was no ‘common culture’ between the West and Communism and mostly described their confrontation as a conflict between two states-systems. Bull would produce the famous distinction between a ‘system’ and a ‘society’. A system might produce some regularity of behaviour, but it alone could not produce a society. He noted no ‘common culture’ in the Cold War balance although there was some ‘common stock of ideas’ (p. 115). But he also insisted that mutual deterrence ‘is essentially a state of belief (p. 123)’ and not merely a mechanical outcome. Butterfield would conclude in his famous essay on the balance of power that ‘an international order is not a thing bestowed upon by nature, but is a matter of refined thought, careful contrivance and elaborate artifice’.18

International society is also, accordingly, a product of conscious intent. In English School thought, a society is generated intentionally and consciously. Describing international society as ‘the habitual intercourse of independent communities’, and noting its manifestation in the diplomatic system and in the conscious maintenance of the balance of power, Wight insists that ‘[a]ll these presuppose an international social consciousness’.19 A society (at least a society of states) exists when its members consciously recognize their dependence on one another, and on the institutions and rules of international society, for their mutual well-being.

In her comments on the English School, Martha Finnemore complains that there in no clarity on the markers for when a system becomes a society, and little explanation of the processes.20 The first raises the very pertinent question as to whether there are any positive signs of the transformation from system to society. To be sure, there are. One sign would be the development of regimes, and in particular the cumulative effect of rule making; that
is, the tendency of rules to produce more rules. Another would be institutionalization. Barry Buzan has attempted to, in effect, ‘positivise’ the English School through plotting the development of secondary institutions. But one should be cautious about such ‘signifiers’ from an English School perspective. The ultimate test of such a society is evidence that the agents feel that they are members of such a society and in particular that they feel that they are obligated by social rules.21

In recounting the history of the emergence of such a society, or the forces that changed it, they will accordingly tend to prefer intentional explanation; that is, explanation by reference to the intentions of specified agents. In accounting for the rise of Athens against Sparta, Wight sources that rise in the ambitions of Pericles: the Athenian League is his brainchild, and the League is wrecked by the actions of Sparta. If the subsequent dualism is to be understood as an unintended outcome, it is the unintended outcome of intentional action. In accounting for the defeat of Athens in the second Peloponnesian war, the reasons are ‘that she failed in her grandiose attempt to conquer . . . Sicily and because Sparta called in . . . Persia’ (Systems, p. 61). Dating the origins of the modern or Westphalian system, he cites the Congress of Mantua, 1457–60, on the grounds that it was the first of the medieval congresses ‘to be frustrated by the national egoism of the powers’ (p. 111). In accounting for fractures across states-systems, Wight quotes Burke: ‘the warm parties in each state were more affectionately attached to those of their own doctrinal interest in some other country, than to their fellow-citizens, or to their natural governments’ (p. 36). On the democratic tendencies of the contemporary states-system, he notes that both international system and domestic government ‘have been made matters of ideology by apostles of homogeneity within the states system’, citing Mazzini and Wilson as exemplars of such apostles (p. 41). The outcome in each instance is explained by reference to the intentions of specified actors at specified times.

Bull spent a good deal of time in Anarchical Society assessing the prospects for the Cold War international system, prospects that he rested primarily on the agency of the great powers. These included ‘maintaining and extending the consensus about common interests and values that provides the foundation of its common rules and institutions’ (p. 315), and, unlikely to be achieved, ‘a radical redistribution of resources and power in favour of . . . the Third World’. Observing that ‘the revolutionary model’ provides an ‘alternative route’ to redistribution, Bull’s account of that model is one in which revolutions are made by revolutionaries, not by deep forces (pp. 312–314). In discussing Kothari’s Footsteps into the Future, a plan for reconstructing world politics on regional lines, Bull praises Kothari for addressing his plan to ‘a group of powers with certain concrete common interests and a capacity for action’, noting that ‘[m]ankind as such is not a political agent or actor, and it is inevitable that prescriptions about its future be addressed
to particular groups that are politically competent’ (p. 311). Assessing the possibility that increasing interdependence might ameliorate the Cold War struggle, he notes that mutual sensitivity ‘can be exploited by each actor for its own purposes’ (p. 280) and will fail to have the generating effects claimed for it on those grounds.

In an agent-centred approach, the focus will naturally fall on ‘practitioners’—those involved in international decision-making processes. This will include political leaders, to be sure, but also international lawyers, diplomats, foreign service officers, consultants from specialist institutes, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and even ‘the public’ in the degree to which it may be deemed to participate in the processes of norm and regime evolution. If by ‘second order activity’ Roy Jones means scholarship remote from abstract philosophical speculation, he is quite correct in his characterization of English School ‘science’. It is practitioner-oriented. Where he is not correct is in rendering it ‘utterly dependent on what politicians do for its material’. The *dramatis personae* of English School accounts are not limited to politicians, or even to official diplomats but to those who affect outcomes.

The focus on intentional explanation is accompanied by a studied aversion to causal propositions. Bull denies that there is ‘any automatic tendency for a balance of power to arise’ (p. 111). He also denies that interdependence, understood as an independent variable, ‘in itself generates a sense of common interest, let alone of common values’ (p. 280). He observes that the existence of nuclear weapons ‘has not robbed war of its historic political function’; that is, caused war to become an irrational act (p. 194). (Bull maintained that despite the tendency of nuclear weapons to induce constraints, or alternatively to negate the political calculation that had hitherto informed war’s purposes, war would remain an instrument of policy.) Wight, for his part, hesitates to generalize about any ‘external’ conditions that may lead to the formation of a state-system. His features of a state-system: sovereignty, diplomacy, shared culture, and so on are definitional and taxonomical, not causal, and they are synthetic concepts, not separable ‘facts’.

At one point in *Anarchical Society*, Bull does seem to endow rules and institutions with causal ‘effects’. Early in the essay, he speaks of rules and institutions as being part of the ‘efficient causation of international order’ (p. 74). Suganami takes this statement as central evidence that English School theorists had a genuine interest in causality. But Suganami is not paying sufficient attention to the care with which Bull expresses what he means. First, Bull defines ‘causation’ in very general terms—as specifying the ‘necessary and sufficient conditions of its [an event’s] occurrence’. Such a definition includes intentional as well as causal explanation. More importantly, it also includes *syllogism*, a logical statement in which the whole is contained in the parts, by definition. In fact, Bull is calling on
syllogistic reasoning at this point, not causal inference. He is observing
that there would be no society without rules and institutions (since ‘soci-
ety’ implies rules and institutions), and that the rules and institutions of
international society ‘explain’ (in modern terms, constitute) the compass
and nature of that particular society. He is making a logical point, not an
explanatory one.

In his introduction to *Thinkers of the 20 Years’ Crisis*, Peter Wilson has
suggested that the generation of scholars that composed the English School
may have taken the explanatory routes they did because they were ama-
teers and accordingly methodologically naïve, as noted in the Introduction.
Clearly, one possible explanation for their eschewal of causal connections
could be naivety concerning the requisites of an explanation in the scientific
sense. Concern with methodological specificity in international relations
scholarship is largely a product of the positivist–anti positivist debates of
the 1960s and 1970s.

But Wight clearly understood the difference between causal and other
forms of explanation. At one point he observes the tendency, which he
believes history has confirmed, for a state-system to lead ‘fairly directly’ to
the establishment of a world empire’, and he asks, ‘What can be said about
the possible causal connections?’ He goes further to propose a causal expla-
nation: ‘that the balance of power is inherently unstable, and that sooner or
later its tensions and conflicts will be resolved into a monopoly of power’
This causal proposition drew upon Toynbee’s view of the direction taken by
most historical state-systems—a trend correlation. Not necessarily a correct
one—it would be disputed by Kenneth Waltz, who postulates, on the con-
trary, that one aspiring hegemon will be countered by an emerging coalition
to balance it. But it is certainly a causal postulate in that it isolates a rele-
vant operator and is amenable to refutation. Wight was well aware of the
difference between causal propositions and the understanding of intention.
As for Bull, his work on arms control is scarcely naïve. It builds on a series
of rational choice postulates, in the formal manner that rational choice is
generally understood.

If they ignored causality, it was not out of naivety. Rather it was because
causal propositions could not deliver what they expected of a body of
knowledge concerned with the generation of an international society. In
English School thought, a society is generated intentionally and consciously.
It is conscious engagement that creates a society. *But causal propositions as
understood in science are proposition about things that happen irrespective of inten-
tions.* Paraphrasing Bull, we might say that while a system may be causally
produced, a society is intentionally produced.

To be sure, there is not a simple distinction between causes and intentions,
not least because intentions may become genuine causes. An example is the
peace movement during the 1930s that contributed so much to appease-
ment. (In one interpretation of the causes of appeasement, governments
were pushed into appeasement policies in part because of the strength of public opinion, a ‘normative’ factor and a product of intention. This operated in conjunction with the independent and ‘mechanical’ factor of electoral politics.) There is also the distinction between ‘push’ propositions and ‘pull’ propositions. In the social sciences, causal propositions come in two forms. The first form pushes behaviour, as in, for example, the theory of interdependence. Interdependence is commonly understood as pushing states into cooperation, even if they would prefer not to cooperate. But there is also another form of causality in which the causal factor merely inclines agents to cooperation (the ‘pull’ factor), and in which cooperation will not happen unless conscious engagement is also present. An example of ‘pull’ would be global warming conventions. Global warming, understood as a process occurring irrespective of intentions, may be required to lead people to adjust their energy usage. But adjusting energy usage also requires a conscious engagement, in the sense of an understanding of, and a deliberation to avoid global warming, to actually produce a global warming agreement. In pull propositions, both intentions and causes are required to produce the desired outcome. (We shall consider the relevance of ‘pull’ in English School theories below.)

For the English School, however, consciousness is definitional of society, and consciousness of society is central to there being a society. The states that make up international society recognize one another and share some common values. It is their recognition of one another and their sharing of common values that make it a society. Moreover, English School analyses are directed towards analysing the historical consciousness of specific historical periods, as that consciousness relates to the international society of the time. The historical consciousness of the particular period is presented as the explanator (and indeed the sufficient explanator) that ‘explains’ the shape of the international society at any given time.

Since the nature of an historical consciousness is at the centre of the English inquiry concerned with the existence, stability, or durability of international society, causal explanations generally fall outside of their purview. Bull’s insights are the most relevant here. He denies that interdependence can ‘in itself generate a sense of common interest, let alone of common values’. Writing during the 1970s, he notes that, at the time of writing, the ‘element of society’ enjoyed ‘only a precarious foothold’, and that the ‘consensus necessary to such a society’ was simply not present (my ital.). The reasons he cites, moreover, are all rooted in historical consciousness. These include the ideological divisions set in train by the Bolshevik revolution, the ‘post colonial situation’, and ‘the revolt of non-European peoples and states against Western dominance’.

The question is whether English School theorizing is completely antithetical to causal theorizing. And the answer is ‘No’, with important qualifications.
In the first place, the classical theorists were sensitive to the conditions under which a human understanding conducive to the creation of international society might arise, and their works are peppered with insights on such conditions. At one point in *Systems*, Wight comments on the conditions for the growth of international law as that relates to the number of states in a state-system. He observes that ‘the society which is to give birth to law must contain a sufficient number of members for the questions which arise among them to be viewed in a general light’. (‘Between two or three individuals particular interests determine and general rules do not arise’; the question was intended as a reflection on bipolarity and was meant as a warning to those who sought to use Rome and Persia as ‘a historical precedent for peaceful co-existence between world-dividing giants’; the giants of his time being the Soviet Union and the United States; pp. 24–25.) In accounting for the rise of a form of state-system in the Near East during the Armana period, Wight cites the revolution in communications that preceded it, a revolution due to the introduction of the horse and the invention of cuneiform. Most importantly, the ‘greater the cultural unity of a states-system, the greater its sense of distinctness from the surrounding world is likely to be (p. 25).’ Bull, in *Anarchical Society*, dates state-systems from the ‘time there is interaction between them sufficient to make the behaviour of each a necessary element in the calculations of the other’ (p. 10).

Some of these conditions are understandings that have become instantiated in institutions. Wight proposes that the most important difference between the Western state-system and that of its rivals is that it developed ‘out of the theoretical institutional unity of the *Respublica Christiana* with its diarchic structure of Sacerdotium and Regnum’. He means by this that the ideas of state and state-system grew together in the Western thought and are, to a degree, mutually constituted, as opposed to other state-systems where the state is conceived as having developed entirely independently, and out of internal forces only. Another example he proposes is the territoriality of the modern territorial state—also an idea that has become institutionalized. In recounting the origins of the modern state, Wight is concerned to pin down that moment when *thinking in territorial terms* becomes prevalent, since that indicates institutionalization.

Such institutionalized understandings will be condition creating and can be said to constitute an environment that *inclines* actors in a certain direction and, accordingly, to have genuine causal properties. In the Western state-system, for example, Wight observes that the ‘theoretical institutional unity’ of state and state-system creates a environment sympathetic to communal ideas. It provides a grounding for the general receptivity of the idea of a community of states. This would be a cause in the Weberian sense. Another example may be found in Bull’s discussion of rights espousal; according to Bull, the modern state institutionalizes an obstacle to the idea
of internationally guaranteed human rights: ‘if it is chiefly through the views of states, and of states assembled in international organizations, that we have perforce to seek to discover the world common good, this is a distorting lens’. For Bull, the balance of power is also condition creating, and in a very fundamental way—it provides the basis for all the other institutions of international society. He writes that ‘both general and local balances provide the conditions in which other institutions … have been able to operate.’

One especially critical connection between ‘general propositions asserting a causal connection between one class of social events and another’ and the order with which he was concerned was identified by Bull. This was the kind of scientific law ‘that afford[s] a basis for predicting future behaviour’. This sort of law will begin to appear ‘when the primary goals of social existence are consistently upheld’. The resultant will be firm expectations about future behaviour. And these will feed back into support for the rules in a form that produces predictability. In other words, for Bull, rules of the game, consistently observed, can become patterns of behaviour, and these can have independent effects; that is, effects separate from the particular attitudes or orientations immediately in the heads of the participants. (The model here would be the rules of mutual deterrence that, after awhile, became self-enforcing rules and provided the basis for a series of more or less secure predictions about super-power behaviour.) Rules of the game that produce patterns of behaviour change the explanatory field. They convert intentional explanation into causal explanation.

Institutionalized understandings that have causal properties can be understood as soft structures, in the way commonly identified in sociology; that is, as social products (or social facts) that ‘socialise’ or affect behaviour. They are causal because (and in the degree to which) they have become sufficiently embedded in the cultural fabric that individual choices can do little to affect them. Timothy Dunne emphasizes ‘the danger of obscuring the important distinction between the constraining nature of intersubjective practices…and the enabling role of individual agents in instituting those practices’. Practices that constrain are indistinguishable from causes; here, the distinction is between ideational (or ‘soft’) and material (or ‘hard’) causes.

But English School understandings also include ‘material’ conditions, ‘mechanical factors’, and even ‘hard’ causes. Butterfield was well aware that intentions could not explain everything and recommended attention to ‘deep forces’ in his methodological essays. These included economic forces, the material aspects of communication systems, and even realist power quantums. Bull himself observes that ‘if the subjective element of belief in it is necessary for the existence of a balance of power, it is not sufficient’. At one point in Anarchical Society, he refers to ‘a power…in a position to gain an easy victory over its neighbour, even though it is generally thought to be balanced by it (p. 104)’. In the same passage, he observes that both will (that
is, intention) and capacity (that is, material capabilities) are required to maintain a power balance. Secondly, there is ‘the possibility of finding conformity to scientific law in social conduct that is disorderly’ (p. 8). An example of this kind of scientific law, with which the English School had no quarrel, is the ‘security dilemma’, a decidedly mechanistic operator. Richard Little has gone so far as to suggest that ‘like the neorealists’, the ‘English School’ accepts that states get pushed and shoved this way and that by the structure of the international system; and Little identifies structure with mechanistic and material forces.31

Little has also suggested a schema by which material and cultural factors may be integrated in English School theorizing. Drawing on the notions of international system, international society, and transnational community, he has suggested that ‘system’ is the mechanistic or causal level of analysis; that transnational community is the cultural, or identity or self-understanding aspect of analysis; and that the international society of rules and institutions is the explanandum or resultant. International society does not cause things to happen, not in the first instance at least. Rather, the process of push and pull between material and cultural factors causes international society.32 (International society may also ‘cause’ things to happen, in that, once codified, its rules may serve as confining structures; evidence for this, however, derives ultimately from the actors’ understandings of what they are doing. For this important point, see Little’s chapter.)

But the ‘classical’ method, the one employed by the classical English School theorists to pin down causes, is comparative analysis. This appears in two forms. On the one hand, there are different historical forms of state-system, identified by geographical extent, power configuration, and common understandings. Thus, English School theorists distinguish between the early modern system, the European systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the contemporary system, on the basis of identifiable features. These historical forms provide a taxonomy from which there may be extracted some causal propositions. For example, Wight, Bull, and Butterfield each at various times proposed that the ideological features of the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century international systems produced more violence than the non-ideological nature of the eighteenth-century system.33 This is a hypothetical postulate in which a certain factor, in this case an ideological factor, is causing something, notably more violence; the postulate, moreover, is derived from historical comparison.

These historical state-systems should be distinguished from ideal typic state-systems, another form of comparative analysis. Bull is the clearest exemplar here. He set up three ideal types of state-system: ‘the state of war’ (which may rise to the level of a complex ‘system’), international society, characterized by consensus among states, and transnational solidarity, characterized by consensus among peoples across national boundaries. Historical systems may be compared directly. Thus, again, in Bull, the European system
of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had a common culture ‘both in the sense of a common intellectual tradition and stock of ideas and common values’, while the Cold War system displayed only ‘some common stock of ideas’. But, equally, different historical systems may be characterized in terms of how closely they approximate to one or other ideal type. The latter type of treatment allows for the identification of factors that have to be present in order for international society to exist, generally. On the basis of ideal-type analysis, the classical theorists postulated that ideological fissures impede international society, generally. The first is a form of ‘weak’ cause; that is, a cause connected to simply one event; the second is strong cause or cause proper—a cause that covers all events of the same type. These two forms of causes are sometimes referred to, respectively, as historical (or idiopathic) explanation and nomothetic (or cover rule) explanation.

Hidemi Suganami has criticized the classical English School theorists for ambiguity concerning their thinking about ‘History’ and its relations to international relations. He asks, ‘how far, according to them is IR to be idiopathic and how far is it to be nomothetic?’ (and how far, indeed, historicist?) only to respond that the place of history remains ‘uncertain . . . in writings of the English School’. Whether many schools of thought have sorted out this puzzle is a moot point; Little observes that tug ‘between the desire to understand both the particular and the general is not . . . peculiar to the “classical approach” but “is an endemic feature of the social sciences”’. But there are particular reasons why the classical English School theorists might have had an especial difficulty with ‘weak’ causes and idiopathic explanations as opposed to ‘strong’ causes and nomothetic explanations. We must recall that for the English School the international system is an historical product. Moreover, it is the result of one critical and indeed momentous transformation. This was the movement from the ancient to the ‘modern’; that is, the development of the modern state as a sovereign state within a system of sovereign states. There was no precedent for this momentous event; accordingly, the explanation of this transformation must be necessarily idiopathic (since there is only one such transformation), if not indeed speculative. At the same time, there may be some historical parallels, sufficiently close in some features, to allow of some generalizations. Dunne observes a ‘second phase’ in the development of the British Committee when ‘the grand theoretical question of the nature of international society mutated into a comparative history of earlier states-systems in the expectation of deepening the Committee’s understanding of how states-systems are formed, and the means by which they are sustained or transformed’.

To sum up this part of the argument, despite their apparent disdain for causal propositions, English School theorists were led into causal theorizing, and not merely accidentally or unintentionally but as a logical resultant of their historical vantage point. If the international system is an historical system, then there must be historical conditions for its emergence and
maintenance. This insight led them into theorizing not only those conditions but also theorizing some of the causes of them, and even generalizing causes where the historical evidence seemed to support general propositions. What they disdained was a-historical causal theorizing—identifying causes that did not respect time and place.

One can, of course, quarrel with the particular ‘ideal types’ outlined in English School writings. Mervyn Frost, sometimes associated with the English School, in fact rejects its state-centredness. He maintains that a form of international society does exist, but on the basis of individuals as rights granters, not merely states who mutually recognize one another. This leads him to identify the scope or ‘realness’ of international society on quite a different basis from the state-centred orientation of the English School. It also leads him to quite different ‘causal conclusions’ as to how to change or reform international society. (English School theories of change will generally start with practitioners encountering tensions in normative practice; see Barbara Allen Roberson’s chapter. By contrast, Frost’s theory of change starts with undifferentiated individuals—you and me—encountering moral dilemmas.38)

One can also quarrel with the very conception of international society as an ideal type. When Max Weber theorized the ‘ideal type’, he intended a social construction of reasonably unproblematic identity, such as capitalism or democracy, and a social construction that had clear independent effects. It is not clear that ‘international society’ has yet to achieve this same level of unproblematic identity. Moreover, the classical theorists did not strain to establish beyond doubt that the norms and institutions of international society have ‘independent’ effects. Morton Kaplan has complained that English School theorizing is inductive, not deductive; that it postulates effects and then goes looking for them, instead of setting up hypotheses for testing.39 This is the challenge that Stephen Krasner has thrown down in postulating sovereignty as ‘organised hypocracy’, a challenge to English School theory in particular.40 He wants it demonstrated that rules and norms, such as sovereignty, have independent effects—that they can cause things to happen—and moreover the sort of independent effects associated with English School claims; that is, effects arising from value orientations.

One question, by way of conclusion, that might be worth considering is whether an English School theorist can take up Krasner’s challenge and still remain within the compass of English School theory. Can she still be an English School theorist who determines in a ‘scientific’ fashion the consequences of such constructions as sovereignty and a norm of non-intervention? Or would she be bowing to the reign of positivism in proposing tests for the causal force of her particular social constructions?

The answers are yes, and no, respectively. An English School theorist would certainly be interested in evidence that ‘international society’ has the kind of causal properties that are proposed in the theory. That is, she would
be very interested in the sort of studies that demonstrate that sovereignty has the kind of force that leads states to be necessarily self-regarding, or rule enforcing. She would also be interested in learning of the causal properties of social phenomenon that incline states towards mutual recognition and rules of conduct. But she would reject any theory that proposed that such ‘mechanical factors’ could, of themselves, be sufficient to produce an international society. In other words, the causal element cannot be the sole explanator. Her subject is international society, and her theory is that conscious engagement is a central element in the production of such a society. The evidence she seeks is, finally, evidence of such a conscious engagement. This evidence may be in the form of expressive utterance or in the form of practices. In either case, the requirement for this sort of evidence keeps the English School analyst not only outside the reign of positivism, but opposed to non-subjective approaches generally.

Notes and references

3. Page numbers in parenthesis signify reference to the previously mentioned work.
7. Ibid., p. 147, my italics.
9. Glaser and Strauss are the gurus of interpretive methods in American sociology, where the quarrel is not so much with positivism as epistemology; rather as methodology; their approach is called ‘grounded theory’ and sometimes ‘the Chicago School’; see B. Glaser and A. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

11. ‘…those who are subjects of the study must understand the concept’; Derek Layder, Sociological Practice: Linking Theory and Social Research (London: Sage, 1998); Layder's is a widely used account of participant observation and the requirements of subjective adequacy.


14. See ‘The Western Tradition’; in a hermeneutic circle, individual instances are conceived as parts of a whole and each is treated as throwing light on the other.


16. ‘The English school of international relations: evidence and evaluation’ Review of International Studies 14 (1988), pp. 29–44; she also claims methodological divergence, but the chief methodological difference she observed was in fact an epistemological difference; between Bull's philosophical realism and Manning's idealism (pp. 32–33).

17. See Wohlstetter’s 'The Delicate Balance of Terror', Foreign Affairs 37, 2 (1959), which shares Bull’s notion that there is nothing automatic about deterrence; Bull hosted the Oxford Conference on the new thinking in nuclear strategy in 1960, which united American and British civilian strategists on the conceptual requisites of a stable deterrent.


19. Systems of States, pp. 96–97


21. Ole Waever makes the very important observation that much of the matter of international politics does not so much take place within rules, as it is a struggle about the rules; ‘International Society—Theoretical Promises Unfulfilled’, pp. 108–109, and he wonders if this is also ‘international society’ as understood by English School theorists. The answer is no, except in the degree to which the struggle is itself rule-bound.


25. Hollis and Smith have, of course, contrasted explanation with understanding. But intentional explanation (‘understanding’, in their terms) is a genuine form of explanation, so long as the intentions precede the outcome. The contrast is with causal explanation and also, not discussed here, functional explanation. (For a definitive discussion of the differences between causal, intentional, and functional explanation, see J. Elster, Explaining Technological Change (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).


27. In the same sense that the Protestant ethic is a necessary condition for some forms of capitalism; see Edward Keene’s chapter.


32. ‘Neorealism and the English School’, pp. 14–18. He suggests, but does not develop, the idea that cultural factors may lead actors to interpret mechanistic forces in different ways.


34. Anarchical Society, p. 115.


36. ‘Neorealism and the English School’, p. 15.

37. ‘International Society—Theoretical Promises Fulfilled?’, p. 132.


39. ‘The New Great Debate: Traditionalism vs. Science in International Relations’ World Politics 19, 1 (1966), pp. 1–21, with which Butterfield had in part to agree; in the introduction to Diplomatic Investigations he notes that ‘the procedure has been… empirical and inductive’, p. 12.

40. Krasner names the English School as one of his five basic models of international order, and it is the one most closely associated with his rule-maximizing model (the model he seeks to refute); Sovereignty: Organised Hypocrisy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
Constructivism and the English School are often said to bear striking family resemblances, a view encouraged by their mutual concern for the social dimensions of international life. Realist critics have been quick to tar both with the same brush, criticizing them for overemphasizing ‘logics of appropriateness’ in relations between states. ‘The English School and some other constructivist analyses’, Stephen Krasner contends, ‘understand institutions as generating agents that reinforce or enact, as a result of normative socialization into a common civilization, a particular set of principles, norms, and rules’. This sense of a common orientation has been promoted by constructivists and English School scholars themselves. When plotting international relations theories against individualist/holist and materialist/idealist axes, Alexander Wendt places constructivism and the English School in the same holist/idealist quadrant, subsuming all theories in this quadrant under the general rubric of ‘Constructivism’. Tim Dunne, prominent among the new generation of English School theorists, argues that there is ‘an affinity between the international society tradition and the work of constructivists like Alexander Wendt. Both assume the centrality of states, and both interrogate the meaning of international system/society according to the intersubjective practices through which it is constituted’.

There is much that is intuitively plausible about this discourse of convergence. It is true that constructivism and the English School share much in common; particularly interests in the cultural bases of state identity, the rule-governed nature of international society, and the variable forms of life under anarchy. None of this should be at all surprising, as constructivists have explicitly drawn inspiration from Wight, Bull, and others, and new members of the English School have often self-consciously aligned with constructivism to invest the old lineage with new theoretical credibility. This having been said, though, the discourse of convergence has, in large measure, been based on a series of partial or distorted representations. Scholars on both sides have read the literature of the other to find what is both

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1 Constructivism and the English School

Christian Reus-Smit
comfortable and convenient, consciously or unconsciously ignoring other significant strands of thought.

When referring to the English School, constructivists focus narrowly on its core ontological propositions. We learn from constructivist depictions of the English School that states can come together to form international societies, and that international life is norm- and rule-governed. In the words of Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, from the perspective of the English School, ‘the international system is a “society” in which states, as a condition of their participation in the system, adhere to shared norms and rules in a variety of issue areas’. Martha Finnemore reiterates this representation when she notes that although members of the English School ‘vary in their claims about the “thickness” and content of international society, these scholars agree that at its core lies some principled rules, institutions, and values that govern both who is a member of the society and how those members behave’. In outlining the intellectual roots of my own work, I too have claimed a motivating ‘interest in Hedley Bull’s idea that sovereign states can not only form international systems but also international societies’ and in the notion that ‘modern states share certain elementary interests and values and have constructed rules and institutions to express further those goals’.

While these representations are accurate—in the sense that the English School does indeed stress the existence of society among states and the importance of norms and rules in structuring state identity and conduct—they are partial at best. Obscured altogether is one of the most prominent aspects of English School scholarship—the normative inquiry into the relationship between order and justice in international relations. From Bull’s and Vincent’s foundational writings to recent works by Robert Jackson, James Mayall, Nicholas Wheeler, and Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, scholars of the English School have consistently explored the potential for moral action in a world of sovereign states, fueling an ongoing debate between pluralists and solidarists. Despite the fact that many constructivists situate their work within the broad church of critical international theory, a hallmark of which is a strong commitment to combining sociological, normative, and praxeological inquiry, and despite the clear cosmopolitanism that motivates much constructivist work, until recently little if any attempt has been made to recognize or engage with the normative aspects of English School theory. Finnemore notes that much of Bull’s work ‘stems from his philosophical examination of the moral implications of order’, but this is a notable exception to the rule and Finnemore herself fails to explore it further.

Unfortunately, this practice of selective representation has been more than reciprocated by English School theorists. A newly arrived Martian, busily surveying English School writings, could easily be excused for thinking that Wendt’s articles and major book constitute the bulk and essence of constructivist scholarship. For instance, in seeking to cast the English School
as constructivist, Dunne draws exclusively upon Wendt’s understanding of what this might mean. Even though Wendt’s state-centrism, systemic theorizing, and scientific realism are hotly contested by other constructivists, Dunne uncritically treats Wendt’s writings as indicative of ‘the key elements of constructivism’. Similarly, when characterizing and critiquing constructivism, Jackson refers solely to Wendt’s writings, arguing that he ‘captures the mood of constructivism in the study of international relations’. Wheeler engages with Friedrich Kratochwil’s seminal writings on norms and practical reasoning, but still identifies Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics* as the ‘key text on constructivism’, and on this basis aligns himself ‘with the view that the English School and constructivism occupy the same terrain’. Ole Wæver challenges this view on convergence, but he makes exactly the same move in focusing on Wendt while bracketing the work of other constructivists.

None of this is meant to suggest that serious consideration of Wendt’s corpus is unwarranted, that English School scholars are alone in focusing on Wendt, or that they never mention other constructivists. Wendt is rightly considered one of constructivism’s leading thinkers, and references to other constructivists (such as Ruggie, Kratochwil, Onuf, Finnemore, and Katzenstein) pepper the margins of English School commentaries. The problem is that there is a tendency to conflate Wendt’s writings with constructivism more generally and to treat other constructivists as a chorus amplifying Wendt’s central themes. Just as the constructivist focus on the ontology of international society obscures much of the richness of English School theory, particularly its normative dimension, the concentration on Wendt homogenizes what is actually a very heterogeneous body of constructivist scholarship. What emerges is a mistaken view of constructivism as state-centric, systemic, structuralist, positivistic, and oriented toward comprehending continuity rather than change. This easily leads to erroneous conclusions, such as Jackson’s claim that constructivists ‘see themselves as involved in building a scientific discipline of international relations in a positivist sense’ and ‘do not see themselves as accepting the more modest goals of a humanistic science of international relations’. A broader reading of constructivist work shows, to the contrary, that positivism is rejected by many if not most constructivists. As John Ruggie wrote in his celebrated 1993 article, grasping the transformations he sought to understand ‘requires an epistemological posture that is quite different from the imperious claims of most current bodies of international relations theory’.

**Rich and varied tapestries**

The first step in moving beyond this dialogue of stereotypes is to recognize the inherent complexity and diversity of both constructivism and the English School. This is not, of course, something that comes easily for
international relations scholars. More than most other social sciences, international relations scholars have constructed their intellectual world along lines of paradigmatic engagement. We parcel up knowledge into contrast groups, or paradigms, and then construct scholarly dialogue along lines of similarity and difference. This does have benefits. It helps to clarify lines of debate, to establish solid piers for bridge-building, to draw out the propositional differences between approaches, to structure research designs, and so forth. But it inevitably has the unfortunate consequence of encouraging the simplification of schools of thought, their reduction to relatively unproblematic, internally coherent sets of key tenets. As we have seen in the dialogue between constructivism and the English School, this can result in significant aspects of each school of thought being lost from view, which greatly reduces the scope for engagement. Much is to be gained, I suggest, by expanding our understandings of constructivism and the English School, by moving from simplification to elaboration. This is best achieved by recognizing that each school encompasses significant lines of debate, which make them far richer and varied than the current discourse of representation suggests. This may well undermine their status as coherent ‘paradigms’, but as Albert Hirschman observed in the 1970s, and as Peter Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara reiterated recently, this is often necessary to think creatively and to understand complexity.20

Constructivism

Various attempts have been made to capture the diversity of constructivist thought. Ted Hopf draws a distinction between critical and conventional constructivists; Price and I have contrasted modern with post-modern constructivism; and Immanuel Adler, following Lynch and Klotz, distinguishes between modern, legal, narrative, and genealogical constructivisms.21 Each of these categorizations is an effort to bring order to a series of significant differences, but focusing on the differences themselves may do greater justice to the complexity of constructivism. Three debates are particularly noteworthy.

The first is between constructivists inspired by sociological institutionalism, Habermasian communicative action theory, and Foucauldian writings on knowledge and power, respectively. The roots of much American constructivism lie in sociological institutionalism, an approach originally identified with the work of John Meyer and ‘the Stanford School’ of sociology. Meyer’s core proposition is that ‘world culture’ constitutes social agents, affecting how they define their identities and interests. In Finnemore’s words, ‘the social structure is ontologically primary. It is the starting point for analysis. Its rules and values create all actors we might consider relevant in international politics, including states, firms, organizations, and even individuals.’22 In constructivist theory, this idea is translated into the proposition that ‘norms’ constitute state identities and interests. Two of the key ideas animating the chapters in Peter Katzenstein’s edited volume, *The Culture of National*
Security, are that norms ‘shape the national security interests or (directly) the security policies of states’ and also that they ‘shape state identity’. This strand of constructivism has been rightly criticized for being overly structuralist, not because its exponents deny that agents ‘reproduce and reconstruct’ their cultural environments or because they fail to describe such processes in their empirical analyses, but because this aspect of their work is largely untheorized.

If this first variant of constructivism emphasizes ‘logics of appropriateness’—the constitutive power of norms over interests and behavior—the second, ‘Habermasian’ variant stresses ‘logics of argument’, or the role of communicative action in mediating between agents and intersubjective values. Norms do not constitute identities and interests in any straightforward or uncomplicated way; in many situations, actors encounter multiple norms of behavior, open to varied interpretations, some of which contradict one another. Contrary to Krasner’s claim that in such situations actors simply revert to self-interested, power-maximizing behavior, Habermasian constructivists hold that actors generally engage in argument, ‘they try to figure out in a collective communicative process (1) whether their assumptions about the world and about cause-and-effect relationships in the world are correct (the realm of theoretical discourses); or (2) whether norms of appropriate behavior can be justified, and which norms apply under given circumstances (the realm of practical discourses)’. Such communicative action is never random, actors reason out from agreed upon precepts of action to establish collectively acceptable rules of conduct for the situation at hand. ‘Contestants enter the discourse with different values and they all try to justify their values (as right and true). They do this by resorting to values higher than those which they want to justify, by proving that the latter are but an interpretation of the higher values, or that they can be related to these values without logical contradiction.’

The third variant of constructivism draws inspiration from Foucauldian arguments about knowledge and power. ‘For Foucault’, Richard Price argues, ‘the production of discourses is a form of power, as it constructs categories that themselves make a cluster of practices and understandings seem illegitimate or even inconceivable. This disciplinary power defines what is normal and natural and what is unthinkable and reprehensible.’ The implications of this for the study of norms and their impact on the self-understandings and preferences of actors are profound, as it suggests that the origins of norms, and the meanings they acquire at particular times and in particular contexts, are discursively, and hence politically, contingent rather than the product of rational evolution. For this reason, exponents of this form of constructivism employ a distinctive ‘genealogical’ method in their inquiries, a method that ‘is strategically aimed at that which looks unproblematic and is held to be timeless; its task is to explain how these present traits, in all their vigour and truth, were formed out of the past’. 
This first, largely ontological debate is paralleled by a second line of difference between constructivists, that concerning levels of analysis. Wendt is one of the few constructivists to espouse pure systemic theorizing, drawing a sharp distinction between the international and the domestic realms and explicitly bracketing the latter as theoretically irrelevant. He distinguishes between the social and the corporate identities of the state: the social referring to the status, role, or personality that international society ascribes to a state; the corporate referring to the internal human, material, ideological, or cultural factors that make a state what it is. Just as a theory of the market does not require a theory of the firm, or that of society one of the human body, Wendt argues that a constructivist theory of international relations can focus just on the social identity of the state and ignore the domestic realm. This approach contrasts sharply with that of unit-level constructivists, who concentrate on the relationship between domestic social and legal norms and the identities, interests, and actions of states. For instance, in seeking to explain differences in Germany’s and Japan’s responses to domestic terrorism, Katzenstein argues that the former’s ‘strengthening of state power through changes in legal norms betrays a deep-seated fear that terrorism challenges the core of the state’, while the latter’s ‘close interaction of social and legal norms reveals a state living symbiotically within its society and not easily shaken to its foundation’. A third group of ‘holistic’ constructivists have discarded the dichotomy between the international and the domestic and tried to bring them together into a unified analytical perspective that treats the internal and the external as two faces of a single social and political order. This work is exemplified by John Ruggie’s study of the rise of sovereign states out of the wreck of medieval Europe and by Rodney Hall’s work on the emergence of ‘national sovereign identity’ and the constitution of the modern international system.

The final axis of difference between constructivists concerns methodology. Early constructivists insisted that studying the role of ideas, norms, and culture in world politics demanded an interpretive methodology, as the actors under investigation attach meanings to their actions; these meanings are shaped by a pre-existing field of intersubjective meanings embedded in language and other symbols, and the effect of such meanings on human action cannot be understood objectively by treating them as measurable variables that cause behavior in any direct or quantifiable manner. An interpretive methodology requires scholars to grasp ‘the relationship between “intersubjective meanings” which derive from self-interpretation and self-definition, and the social practices in which they are embedded and which they constitute’. Under this interpretive umbrella, however, lies considerable diversity. Habermasian constructivists tend to focus on the reconstruction of the meanings social actors use to interpret actions and contexts, while those who follow Foucault tend to concentrate on explicating the discursive structures that constitute social power. This argument that an ontological
emphasis on ideas, norms, culture, discourse, and argument requires a distinctive methodology has been challenged more recently by ‘methodological conventionalists’, who claim that their explanations ‘do not depend exceptionally upon any specialized separate “interpretive methodology”’.38 Most of these scholars are driven by simple pragmatism, by a desire to move beyond meta-theoretical debate to concrete empirical analysis.39 Wendt, however, devotes considerable space to elaborating (mistakenly some would say) an epistemological posture of ‘scientific realism’ that will support his methodological commitment to conventional, positivist social science.40 The differences between interpretive and positivist constructivists are most apparent in the contrasts between those studies that employ quantitative methodological techniques and those who adopt a genealogical approach.41 These three axes of debate belie the English School’s ‘Wendtian’ representation of constructivism. Although Wendt addresses the linguistic dimension of social life, his work is grounded principally in sociological institutionalism. He is virtually alone in espousing third image, systemic theorizing. And his enthusiastic embrace of positivism places him at odds with the large number of interpretive constructivists. If English School scholars had used Onuf’s, Ruggie’s, or Kratochwil’s writing as reference points, the bridges they have sought to build with constructivism would have had to be designed and constructed differently, and some of their criticisms of constructivism would have had to be recast.

The English School

Recent attempts to revive the English School as a dynamic perspective on world politics have provoked ongoing debate about who were the School’s canonical figures, about the meaning of their writings, about what constitutes the School’s core ideas, and about how it ought to evolve from now on. Should E. H. Carr be included in the pantheon? Were Bull’s writings becoming more cosmopolitan, perhaps even critical, at the time of his death? Was the English School’s central proposition really that states can form societies, or was it something else? Can a new English School ever be more than an umbrella for a broad but loosely defined range of antirationalist, anti-positivist scholarship? Here is not the place to canvass the full spectrum of these debates, but three axes of difference warrant attention.

The first is between solidarists and pluralists. Bull laid the foundations for this debate in his early chapter, ‘The Grotian Conception of International Society’. There is a fundamental distinction, he argued, between those who see international society as bound together in solidarity by common values and purposes and those who hold that states have a plurality of different purposes and that international society rests solely on the observance of common rules of coexistence.42 This distinction has since provided the basic framework for debate within the English School about the scope for, and desirability of, moral action in international relations, a debate which
itself marks the School off from parallel trends in American thinking. Wheeler’s impressive book on humanitarian intervention, *Saving Strangers*, is not only built around the distinction between solidarism and pluralism; he searches for evidence of a new solidarism in international relations of the last decade, and when he finds only partial movement in this direction, he marshals a strong normative argument for greater solidarist consciousness and action. This contrasts with Jackson’s recent work, *The Global Covenant*, which identifies two enduring forms of pluralism in contemporary world politics. International society is, first and foremost, ‘an association of multiple political authorities based on the values of equal sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention of member states’. It is also ‘an arrangement in which the domestic affairs of states are their own affair, which means that statespeople and citizens are free to compose their own domestic values and orchestrate them in their own way’. For Jackson, the normative goal is not to override this pluralism with solidarist politics—a strategy fraught with danger—but to recognize and promote the unique, ‘situational’ ethics of such a world, an ethics based on ‘the dialogue and mutual give and take of sovereign states expressed via diplomatic practice, international law, and the political virtues embodied by the ethics of statecraft’.

The second axis of difference concerns the relationship between the English School and the theory of international society. For many outsiders—including most constructivists—the proposition that sovereign states can form international societies is the School’s *leitmotiv*, with Bull’s evocative title, *The Anarchical Society*, read as capturing the paradox of a society without central authority. Yet this has become an important point of contention among contemporary English School theorists. There are those, like Dunne, who identify the School with the idea of international society. Having called his history of the English School *Inventing International Society*, Dunne points to how Herbert Butterfield’s minutes of early meetings of the British Committee of International Theory ‘record the consensus which had emerged in the early meetings around the idea that sovereign states constituted a society’. And when seeking to align the English School with constructivism, he argues that ‘the notion of a society of states is founded precisely on a belief in the power of inter-subjective structures such as common rules, values and institutions’. There is, however, an ambiguity in the writings of Wight, Bull, and others which opens space for an alternative interpretation of the School’s attachment to the idea of international society. Bull argued that the ‘modern international system in fact reflects all three of the elements singled out, respectively, by the Hobbesian, the Kantian and the Grotian traditions: the element of war and struggle for power among states, the element of transnational solidarity and conflict, cutting across the divisions among states, and the element of co-operation and regulated intercourse among states’. This has encouraged some scholars to see the English School as more eclectic than is commonly assumed. Richard Little argues that in
the writings of Wight and Bull ‘[n]one of the elements are given ontological priority. It is assumed that they are operating within a single complex reality... Although attention may be focused on only one of these elements, it must never be forgotten that this element is lodged in the context of the other two’.51

The final debate among English School scholars is methodological. In seeking to rejuvenate the School, critically inclined scholars have pointed to Bull’s celebrated defense of a ‘classical approach’, as well as the historical, philosophical, and legal reflections of canonical figures, to suggest that the School fits within the broad family of reflectivist or interpretivist approaches. As one of the three ‘preliminary articles of the English School’, Dunne identifies ‘an interpretive approach’ as central, and argues that [f]or ‘the English School, the most important questions about international relations were not amenable to empirical verification (as the would-be scientists demanded)’.52 Roger Epp contends that its ‘hermeneutic orientation... is at its best the source of a distinctive attentiveness to language, an openness to the world, and a critical cultural and disciplinary reflexivity’.53 What is meant by reflection or interpretation in the English School is decidedly unclear, however. Positivism, behavioralism, and quantification are generally rejected, but beyond this most English School scholarship appears methodologically conventional. The idea of empirical verification, for example, is alive and well in such scholarship,54 and the position of most scholars is not dissimilar from Wendt’s scientific realist approach to social phenomena, such as norms, rules, and institutions. The attempt to define the English School as post-positivist has been rejected by those who see it as methodologically eclectic. Building on his argument that Wight, Bull and others saw realist, Grotian, and Kantian dimensions of international relations coexisting, Little claims that this ontological pluralism led them to methodological pluralism: ‘International societies and international systems... rest on very different ontological assumptions and, as a consequence, they need to be examined by means of very different methodologies.’55 Although methodologically unselfconscious, the English School should thus be seen as employing an array of methodological tools, from the positivist to the interpretive. ‘A comprehensive assessment of the work presented by members of the English School’, Little concludes, ‘makes it clear that they rely on interpretivist, positivist and critical assumptions’.56

The English School has long been seen as a via media between realism and revolutionism, between Hobbesianism and Kantianism. Yet the preceding discussion suggests that contemporary debates make its members difficult to situate. Where does one place interpretive-solidarists? Would they be in the same locale as positivist-pluralists? And where would one place a scholar who is methodologically eclectic and believes that an international system, international society, and world society coexist? However one answers these questions, the crucial point here is that the standard constructivist depiction
of the English School presents a narrow, monotone image of what is a rich and contested realm of thought.

Learning from diversity

Exposing the principle lines of difference within both constructivism and the English School may be anathema to some, undermining as it does their integrity as coherent theoretical paradigms. It has the virtue, though, of revealing potentially fruitful sites of engagement. In particular, it has highlighted aspects of each school of thought that can greatly benefit the other. Constructivism can be enriched by learning from the English School’s normative reflections, and the sociological foundations of those reflections can be greatly enhanced by integrating constructivist ideas about communicative action and holistic inquiry.

From the theory of norms to normative theory

There is a certain coyness about much constructivist writing. Constructivists are united by their emphasis on the role of intersubjective values in constituting social actors and action, and much of their empirical research focuses on the development and impact of cosmopolitan or liberal values, such as human rights, arms control, environmental protection, multilateralism, and international law. Yet the fact that this explicit analytical interest in norms coexists with an implicit normative sympathy for, and commitment to, these ‘progressive’ values is seldom admitted, let alone justified. Although Wendt locates himself within the critical tradition, he goes to some lengths to assert his social scientific objectivity. His brand of ‘idealism’ is ‘not a normative view of how the world ought to be, but a scientific view of how it is. Idealism aims to be just as realistic as materialism’. Such categorical statements are rare, but most constructivists remain backward about coming forward with their values. Constructivists have often worked at the hard edge of human misery, showing how humanitarian norms can be constructed and produce real, valuable change. Yet the clear normative sympathies and purposes that lie behind this research are generally left unspoken. Only recently have constructivists confronted their own normativity directly, seeking to elaborate a distinctive constructivist contribution to normative theorizing.

A good example of this tendency to date is Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s excellent study, Activists Beyond Borders, which won the prestigious and lucrative Grawemeyer Prize for a scholarly contribution to international peace and cooperation. Driven to explain why some authoritarian regimes, with horrendous human rights records, eventually reform and others do not, Keck and Sikkink focus on the crucial role played by transnational advocacy networks. ‘A transnational advocacy network includes those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information
and services. These networks generally lack material power, but they bring about change through strategies of persuasion and socialization, employing ‘information politics’, ‘symbolic politics’, ‘leverage politics’, and ‘accountability politics’. Each of these strategies is designed to condition the normative environment in which states act, clarifying and promoting international norms and exposing the dissonance between standards and state conduct. ‘No mere “enactors,” these are people who seek to amplify the generative power of norms, broaden the scope of practices those norms engender, and sometimes even renegotiate or transform the norms themselves’. After examining historical precursors to transnational advocacy networks, and then the operation of such networks in the fields of human rights, the environment, and women’s rights, Keck and Sikkink argue that we need to move beyond the simple imagery of a society of states. They find ‘that enough evidence of change in the relationships among actors, institutions, norms, and ideas exists to make the world political system rather than an international society of states the appropriate level of analysis’.

The analytical purpose of Keck and Sikkink’s book is the explication of a particular set of political relationships between the states that comprise international society, the agents that operate within world society to condition the internal and the external conduct of states, and the norms codified in international society’s legal order, but whose origins and force lies in the activism of agents in world society. Yet the power of their argument also derives from the normative project that clearly underlies it—if we can understand when and how transnational advocacy networks produce improvements in the behavior of states, we can encourage developments along these lines and this will ultimately reduce pathological state behavior, which is clearly a good thing. This normative project is never explicitly stated or defended, though. One might respond that this is hardly necessary, that understanding and promoting the mechanisms that encourage less destructive state conduct is a patent good. While I certainly subscribe to this view, and so too might this chapter’s readership, it is not clear that this is universally the case. For significant numbers of citizens in many states, networks of local NGOs, who reach outside of state boundaries to appeal to international norms, and the transnational NGOs and international organizations who assist them, are inherently illegitimate, anti-democratic, and a sad indicator of declining sovereignty in the face of encroaching globalization. There is a great risk, therefore, that the new transnational normative politics will run into a profound legitimation crisis. If this concerns constructivists such as Keck and Sikkink, then they must take seriously the need to match the rigor of their empirical analyses of normative politics with an equally rigorous defense of their implicit normative agenda. For ultimately only such a defense can legitimate the politics they observe and wish to encourage.

It is here that constructivists have most to learn from the English School. As we have seen, they have all but ignored the normative aspect of the
School’s scholarship, failing to recognize or engage with its concern for the empirical and ethical scope of moral action in a world of sovereign states. I will argue below that there is much that is problematic about the ongoing debate between pluralists and solidarists, and that sociological aspects of constructivist thought can help the English School move beyond this dichotomy. The fact remains, however, that English School theorists have steadfastly attempted something that constructivists have shied away from: systematic reflection on the nature of international social and political life, what constitutes ethical conduct in such a world, and how this might be realized. Whether they begin, as pluralists do, by assuming the robustness and autonomy of a society of sovereign states, and then argue that only a situational ethics is possible and desirable in such a world, or whether they focus on the legitimation needs of such a society, as do solidarists, and conclude that more cosmopolitan ethics are needed both morally and to sustain the society of states, English School scholars have meditated long and hard on the relationship between ontology and morality.

I am not suggesting here that constructivists should uncritically absorb one or more of the English School’s normative arguments, but rather that they can learn from the mode of reflection and reasoning adopted by such scholars. Specifying what this might mean in practice is beyond the scope of this chapter, but four questions might fruitfully guide further inquiry: How do domestic and international norms of legitimate statehood condition the identity of states and their realms of rightful internal and external conduct? How are these norms shaped and mobilized by domestic, international, and transnational actors, and under what conditions? What type of moral action is possible in such a universe of norms and action? And how can existing mechanisms and avenues of normative change be exploited to enhance human justice while cultivating global peace and security?

**Beyond pluralism and solidarism**

If constructivists can learn from the English School’s reflections on the scope for moral action in world politics, English School theorists can in turn learn much from constructivists about the correct sociological bases of such reflections. From the standpoint of constructivism, the dichotomous debate between pluralists and solidarists rests on shaky ontological foundations. More specifically, the pluralist pole, which is still vigorously defended by leading members of the School and which serves as the ‘null hypothesis’ for others, is at odds with many insights of communicative action theory and holistic constructivist scholarship. Constructivist applications of communicative action theory problematizes the pluralist distinction between practical and purposive international societies, and in turn its thesis about the nature of the international institutional order. Holistic constructivism challenges the segregation of international society from world society which is so essential to the pluralist thesis. And both communicative action theory
and constructivist holism raise doubts about the whole idea of situational ethics. If this is true, then the default pole of the pluralist/solidarist debate weakens to the point of collapse, and English School scholars are compelled to occupy a much more variegated realm of sociologically informed ethical and political reasoning.

The defining claim of pluralist international society theory is that sovereign states form a ‘practical’ association, ‘a relationship among those engaged in the pursuit of different and possibly incompatible purposes, and who are associated with one another, if at all, only in respecting certain restrictions on how each may pursue his own purposes’. The warp and weft of international society are the ‘authoritative practices’ that enable states with different goals, values, and objectives to coexist and cooperate, practices such as diplomacy and international law. These institutions, in James Mayall’s words, enable states to ‘rub along together’. The image here is of sovereign states with different identities and interests working to maintain a pluralist, practical association, the framework of which is a web of functional, procedural institutions. Elegant as this is, constructivists have shown that the step from diverse identities to institutional order is highly problematic. As English School theorists have themselves noted, the foundation of international society is mutual recognition, the use of standards of legitimate statehood to determine which polities will be granted the entitlements of sovereign statehood. A deep politics of identity thus undergirds international society, determining its membership.

More than this, though, prevailing ideals of legitimate state identity are inextricably linked to the nature of the institutions states construct to facilitate coexistence and cooperation. Historically, different international societies, in which different ideals of legitimate statehood prevailed, have developed different institutional orders, with multilateral diplomacy and contractual international law only emerging in a world where liberal states, and their principles of governance, have been ascendant. Once one admits that identity politics is constitutive of both the membership and the institutional architecture of international societies, then the whole pluralist/solidarist dichotomy begins to crumble. Ideals of legitimate statehood always incorporate and prescribe procedural and substantive values of governance; liberal ideals do not only prescribe decision-making procedures—such as citizens or their representatives should legislate laws—but also positive values, from the protection of human rights to the promotion of economic development. Interestingly, it was Wight, writing before the English School became so structured by the pluralist/solidarist dichotomy, who understood most clearly this connection between identity, substantive values, mutual recognition, and institutional order.

Pluralist international society theory also rests on the assumption that international society can be understood as a discrete social realm, with relative autonomy from the actors, structures and processes of the surrounding
world society. This assumption is necessary to sustain the development of a distinctive political and ethical theory of international society, a ‘political theory of international relations understood as a “society” with its own distinctive standards of conduct’.71 Because of this, pluralists go to some length to deny that world society is encroaching on international society. In Jackson’s words, ‘[w]orld society is...a client of the society of states rather than the reverse’.72 This claim rests on the concomitant idea that non-state actors do not fundamentally alter the basic principles and dynamics of the society of sovereign states. Here the question is almost always posed in terms of whether or not non-state actors are displacing the primacy of sovereign states, with pluralists supposedly winning the broader argument by claiming that this is not the case. According to Jackson, ‘any claim that a “global civil society”, consisting of such actors and networks, is displacing global international society based on sovereign states seriously misconstrues the character of international society’.73

Posing the question in this way, however, is fundamentally misleading. To sustain the idea of international society as a discrete social realm, warranting its own distinctive political and ethical theory, one needs to show that actors in world society do not influence the basic principles and dynamics of international society, not that they have ‘displaced’ that society. Constructivists, like Keck and Sikkink, have shown, through sustained empirical investigation that actors in world society indeed exert such influence. Arguing that sovereignty is an inherently variable principle, the meaning of which changes from one historical context to another, they have documented how non-state actors have worked to shape the domestic and international normative contexts in which states constitute their identities, define their interests, and conduct their relations. If international society is penetrated and structured in this way, with non-state actors in world society working as ‘norm-entrepreneurs’ to shape the most basic principles of the society of states, then it is increasingly difficult to sustain the idea of international society as a discrete social realm, and even harder to justify limiting the political theory of international relations to this domain.

Finally, pluralist international society theorists build on their propositions about the practical nature of society among states and the relative autonomy of the international social realm to advocate a ‘situational’ ethics of international relations. ‘This is not the ethics of the ideal choice or the best choice or even the least costly choice. And it is not moral relativism in which common standards of conduct are abandoned. Rather, it is the ethics of the best choice in the circumstances, or perhaps the least damaging choice if in the circumstances prevailing at the time all choices are deplorable and destructive to some degree—which is common in war.’74 On the part of political leaders, such ethics involves the ‘virtue’ of prudence: the ‘self-regarding’ prudence of caution in times of national danger and the ‘other-regarding’ prudence of avoiding harm to others in the exercise of one’s foreign policy. On the part
of scholars judging the actions of such leaders, it means avoiding slavish attention to rules or consequences and a focus instead on ‘what we could reasonably expect of a person of sound mind and good character in such circumstances’. As we have seen, the ontological foundations of this ethics have been brought into question by recent constructivist scholarship, but it is problematic in other respects as well.

In particular, it is based on an insufficiently developed understanding of the nature of moral choice in world politics. To begin with, when a political leader makes a foreign policy decision in a difficult context, he or she seeks to maximize a particular set of political values within the constraints and opportunities of existing circumstances. No one would rightly suggest that the contextual nature of this decision is irrelevant to judging its ethical status, but a crucial part of our judgement must be an assessment of the values pursued, and this can only be done with reference to some abstract standard of the right or the good. Judgements about whether to engage in humanitarian interventions are partly based on the constraints of context, but also about whether we have moral obligations beyond borders, and this cannot be decided situationally. Second, the values that political leaders seek to maximize are not personal or private, they are public, in the sense of being proffered in the name of the national interest, and social, in the sense of having been formed, articulated, and justified in contexts of intersubjective debate and dialogue. Even if situational ethics were appropriate in post facto evaluations, more abstract ethical arguments about rightful action (made by scholars, activists, and policy-makers themselves) play a crucial role in shaping the intersubjective debate that conditions the values political leaders pursue.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the evolving relationship between constructivism and the English School, highlighting the partial representations that each makes of the other, the actual richness of both schools of thought, and the ways in which both can learn from aspects of the other that they have previously ignored or downplayed. Constructivism, I have argued, has much to learn from how English School theorists have merged ontological and normative analyses to reflect on the scope of moral action in a world of sovereign states. In turn, English School theorists can draw on the communicative and holistic dimensions of constructivism to move beyond the current dichotomy between pluralism and solidarism. This is essentially a call for constructivists to become more normative and English School theorists to become more sociological, with both converging on the broad terrain of ‘practical reason’. In the five years since the earlier version of this chapter was published, both schools of thought have taken decisive steps in this direction. Early theorists of international relations, of whom E. H. Carr was
an exemplar, took for granted that their new discipline was to serve normative ends, such as peace and security: it was to be a ‘science not only of what is, but what ought to be’. This bringing together of the empirical and the normative was thought essential to the determination and conduct of practical international action, for interests cannot be defined without values, or strategies devised without knowledge. Because of their respective limitations, both constructivism and the English School still fall short of this standard of practical reason. Placing strands of them in dialogue, however, may bring them both closer to this ideal. But this must be a dialogue that recognizes the complexity and diversity of both schools of thought, one that moves beyond the current unproductive dialogue of stereotypes.

Notes and references

7. Reus-Smit, Moral Purpose of the State, p. xi.


27. Risse, ‘“Let’s Argue!”’, p. 7.
39. Ibid., p. 67.
40. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.


44. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.


46. Ibid., p. 179.

47. Ibid., p. 181.


49. Ibid., p. 188.


60. See the essays by leading constructivists in Price, *Moral Limit and Possibility*.


62. Ibid., p. 16.

63. Ibid., p. 35.

64. Ibid., p. 212.
67. Mayall, World Politics, p. 29.
69. Reus-Smit, ‘Constitutional Structure of International Society’; Reus-Smit, Moral Purpose of the State; Ruggie, ‘Multilateralism’.
74. Ibid., p. 147.
General interest in the English School’s (ES) approach to international relations has increased steadily over the past two decades, along with the number of its adherents. These two trends have given rise to contradictory developments. On the one hand, the growing interest in the ES has meant that there are now recurrent attempts by non-ES theorists to locate the ES in the pantheon of IR theory. In the process, however, much of the complexity and variation of the theory is lost. In the interests of providing an unambiguous image of the ES that is clearly differentiated from other approaches to international relations, key elements of its multidimensional theoretical perspective are excised to reveal what is considered to be the main core of the theory. Almost invariably when this happens, the ES is associated with either a purely norm-driven or an institutional conception of international relations. On the other hand, internal differentiation within the school has developed as the ES has attracted a growing number of adherents. Indeed, Buzan argues that there are now at least three different ways of understanding ES theory.¹ ES theory may be considered first as a set of ideas to be found in the minds of statesmen; second, as a set of ideas to be found in the minds of political theorists; and third, as a set of externally imposed concepts that define the material and social structures of the international system.²

Although Buzan believes that the ES has the potential to develop a powerful general theory of international relations, he also argues that the approach as it currently stands conflates normative and empirical strands of thought. What he wants to do is unravel these two strands and follow the empirical line of thought, thereby using the ES to provide ‘the building blocks for a methodologically pluralist grand theory of IR’.³ Buzan is certainly not opposed to normative thinking in IR, but in line with his adherence to a positivist methodology, he insists on the need to distinguish between empirical and normative theory. His aim is to clarify and extend the empirical approach to IR theory but he also challenges normative ES theorists to do the same for their approach to theory.
Buzan demonstrates, successfully, that some of the limitations of ES theory ‘hinge in one way or another around the weakly developed world society pillar’. He endeavours to rectify these limitations by making a clear distinction between international society and world society and then differentiating world society ontologically in terms of interhuman and transnational societies. But although Buzan takes advantage of and extends the ontological diversity that characterises ES theory, he does so at the expense of some of its methodological diversity. Given Buzan’s commitment to methodological pluralism, this assessment may seem incongruous, but in fact, Buzan makes no systematic attempt to explain what he means by methodological pluralism or to evaluate the implications that follow from adopting methodological pluralism. By contrast, Wendt, who also argues in favour of methodological pluralism, makes it quite clear what he means by the term. Buzan uses Wendt extensively when endeavouring to recast ES theory and it might be inferred that Buzan subscribes to the view of methodological pluralism that Wendt promotes. But there are very different meanings attached to methodological pluralism in the literature, and Wendt’s own view of methodological pluralism has recently undergone a major shift. One aim of this chapter is to expose those different meanings and to examine the implications of describing ES theory as methodologically plural.

The other key aim is to demonstrate that methodological pluralism is inherent in the ES’s theoretical approach and follows from the commitment to a multidimensional theoretical framework as well as a multifaceted theory of history. As a result, ES theory generates, arguably, the most ambitious and far-reaching research agenda that can be identified at this time in IR. Neorealism and neoliberalism are both characterised by essentially one-dimensional theoretical perspectives that are ahistorical in character. Indeed, the prevailing methodological orientation in IR is encouraging an increasingly fragmented approach to research, as the history of the realist research programme over the past 30 years demonstrates. The ES, on the other hand, has always been interested in developing an historically sensitive and comprehensive/general theory of IR and this has necessitated an eclectic or pluralistic approach to methodology.

The argument makes five moves. The first examines how theorists outside of the ES have promoted an image of the school that is overly circumscribed in terms of both its theory and its methodology. A second move exposes the multidimensional ES approach to theory, and is followed by a third move that opens up its multifaceted theory of history. The fourth move draws attention to two divergent conceptions of methodological pluralism, one that aims at synthesising divergent methodological positions and another that acknowledges the need to access divergent methodologies. A fifth move then explores how methodological pluralism extends the range of methods needed to advance the ES research agenda.
Narrowing the ES research agenda

Suganami is undoubtedly correct when he suggests that the prevailing well-defined image of the ES is a relatively recent phenomenon. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the ES now has global reach, and that even American theorists are willing to identify the ES, alongside neorealism and neoliberalism, in terms of ‘the best-known approaches to international relations’. But this recognition comes at a price. So, for example, although Krasner has a sophisticated understanding of some of the pluralistic dimensions of ES thinking, nevertheless, when it comes to locating theoretical approaches in his typology of theories that assesses the significance of international norms and institutions, his nuanced, multidimensional view of ES theory gives way to a much more one-dimensional assessment (see Figure 4.1). What the typology reveals, from Krasner’s perspective, is that the ES presupposes that international norms are highly institutionalised and very durable features of any international society. By contrast, Krasner develops a theory that attempts to explain why international norms have little impact on state behaviour despite being highly durable. The problem with this typology, from an ES perspective, is that it makes no provision for either the potential for norms, even deep-seated norms like the ones related to sovereignty, to evolve and transform. Nor does it allow for the interest that the school displays in international settings where norms do not develop.

Figure 4.1  Krasner’s typology of how competing theories assess the impact of norms in international relations
Figure 4.2 Wendt’s typology of the methodological positioning of IR theories

The failure to take account of the pluralistic character of the ES is also evident in the typology that Wendt establishes in his analysis of some of the methodological assumptions that underpin the major IR theories (see Figure 4.2). In this context, Wendt associates methodology with the fundamental philosophical assumptions on which any theoretical framework must build. In this instance, he is examining the competing philosophical assumptions that give rise to different social ontologies. From this perspective, the ontological position of an IR theory can be located along two intersecting continuums. One continuum links idealism and materialism and charts a spectrum of responses about the relative importance that can be ascribed to ideas as opposed to material forces. The other continuum links holism and individualism and it charts a spectrum of responses that can be ascribed to the relative importance that can be ascribed to structures and agents. What Figure 4.2 demonstrates, in the first instance, is that there is a degree of uncertainty about where two of the key IR theories should be located. So Wendt acknowledges, for example, that whereas he himself is clear that neorealism operates at the individualist end of the continuum, others, for example Hollis and Smith, locate neorealism at the holistic or structural end of the continuum. On the other hand, he has no problem with locating the ES. It is unequivocally considered to privilege structures and ideas.

The ES theoretical framework

The main elements of the ES framework were essentially in place from the earliest stages of the school’s development, although they were most clearly
articulated by Bull in the distinction he draws between the international system, the international society and the world society. He insisted, moreover, that international politics is constituted by a mix of the divergent and sometimes competing practices that take place in these three arenas and that they collectively contribute to a complex and multidimensional reality. He also insisted that each arena had become associated with a tradition of thought and that the thinking of theorists operating within each tradition has evolved over the past 500 years and can be drawn upon, as a consequence, to help us to capture the essence of the changing reality of world politics. Bull insists, therefore, that it is important not to ‘reify’ any of these arenas and so, for example, ‘it is always erroneous to interpret events as if international society were the sole or the dominant element’.15 Nevertheless, although some of the central features of ES theory revolve around the interaction between these three arenas, there is no doubt that most attention has been focused on the idea of an international society.

Buzan has made the most serious attempt so far to capture the multidimensional aspects of its theoretical framework, but he does so at the expense of the ontological depth and diversity embraced by Bull.16 Two very different kinds of moves are made by Buzan. First, he insists that there is a need to articulate much more fully what the ES means by world society and, as already noted, he then argues that world society is constituted by both an interhuman society and a transnational society. His second move has even more consequences for Bull’s framework because he questions the need to draw any distinction between the international system and the international society. However, Buzan is not the first theorist to make this move. James initiated the attack on the distinction, insisting that it is simply not possible to conceive of an international system that does not embrace the features that Bull associates with the existence of an international society.17 By the same token, any meaningful conception of an international society must make the systemic assumption that its members will take each other’s behaviour into account. It follows, according to James, that Bull has set up a false dichotomy and the most practical step is to discard the idea of an international system because it is the societal dimension that needs attention.

Jackson, on the other hand, accepts that the two terms point up a useful distinction, but he argues that it is better captured by distinguishing between instrumental and non-instrumental behaviour. Instrumental behaviour is based on strategic conceptions of self-interest that necessarily take the actions of other actors into consideration.18 Failure to take account of others will all too easily give rise to self-defeating strategies. By contrast, non-instrumental behaviour is based on legal and moral obligations that necessarily embrace the legitimate interests of others who will be affected by this behaviour. Jackson accepts that both forms of behaviour need to be accommodated in any analysis of international society. He objects to the use of international system terminology, however, because it too easily gives
rise to a mechanistic view of behaviour that encourages what Jackson considers to be the utterly mistaken notion that human beings can be pushed around by social structures. Moreover, he insists that when Bull refers to the international system he is not suggesting that human behaviour can be structurally determined.

Buzan provides a third significant discussion of the distinction. He acknowledges Jackson’s view that Bull endeavours to capture two distinctive types of social behaviour, but he insists, nevertheless, that Bull’s position on the international system does represent a ‘physical mode of interaction typical of the mechanistic, realist-style analyses of the balance of power as an automatic process rooted in the relative material capabilities of states’. Despite this assessment, Buzan then argues, in line with Jackson, that Bull’s view of an international system can be captured perfectly well within the context of an international society, thereby rendering the need for a system/society divide redundant. What he does, in essence, is to establish a continuum of international societies, locating the international system at one end of the continuum and re-designating it as a power political international society. At the other end of the continuum is a convergent international society where the component states all broadly share the same values. Between the two ends of the continuum (see Figure 4.3), Buzan establishes two interim stages, one where the emergence of institutions permits coexistence and the other where institutions enable states to cooperate. Buzan also recognises, however, that the spectrum can be extended at either end, from an asocial world through to a confederative world, both operating beyond the limits of any society of states.

There is obviously a considerable utility in developing a continuum of this kind but it unquestionably moves away from the logic that Bull was employing and the multidimensional theoretical framework that he wanted to develop. From his perspective, to understand how an international society operates, it is necessary to examine the society in the context of both the international system and the world society (see Figure 4.4) with the international society coming under pressure from two directions. Whereas an international society involves the ‘institutionalisation of shared interest and identity amongst states’, an international system focuses on ‘the structure and process of international anarchy’ and a world society concentrates on ‘global societal identities and arrangements’ of individuals and

![Figure 4.3](Buzan's continuum of international societies)
non-state organisations. But there are three very distinctive features associated with these three arenas. The first is that the arenas need to be examined in conjunction with each other and they must be seen as separate levels of analysis that help to capture the essential features of a more complex whole (see Figure 4.4). In other words, although the international system only focuses on the material distribution of power, it presupposes the existence of an international society that defines the existence of states in the first place. Neorealists have often been criticised for failing to acknowledge this assumption, although it is now suggested that it is, in effect, built into neorealist analysis. In any event, Bull’s conception of the international system bears an uncanny resemblance to the one formulated by Waltz, albeit developed in a much less systematic form. It is, therefore, not surprising to find Bull identifying Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* as ‘an important book’ that provides the ‘first, rigorously “systematic” account of international politics’. On the other hand, international society is not only linked to the international system, but also to world society, and, indeed, a recurring theme in ES writing is the presumption that an international
Figure 4.5 The methodological positioning of key ES concepts using Wendt’s typology\textsuperscript{25}

A second distinctive feature of the ES theoretical framework emerges when the framework is reassessed in terms of Wendt’s typology of the methodological positioning of IR theories (see Figure 4.5). It is unquestionably the case that Bull views the international system, the international society and world society from a holist or structural perspective, but whether he identifies the international system as well as the international society and world society in idealist rather than materialist terms is perhaps more difficult to assess since the issue is not directly addressed. Indeed, if Buzan argues that the failure to articulate the idea of world society in detail represents a weakness in ES literature, the same could be said of the international system. Nevertheless, given Bull’s response to Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*, there is a good ground for placing the international system at the materialist end of the continuum.

The third distinctive feature of the ES theoretical framework relates to its potential to develop an explanatory typology. In contrast to Buzan’s framework, which only locates increasingly integrated international societies along a continuum, it is possible in principle to replicate this continuum but build it into the ES framework. So, in the case of Buzan’s power political international society, it is possible to suggest that the impact of the international society and the world society is severely truncated and overpowered by the impact of the international system (see Figure 4.6). By the same token, in the context of Buzan’s convergence international society, the situation is reversed with the impact of the international system being overwhelmed by the impact of the international society and the world society (see Figure 4.7). Both of these figures, however, are only indicative and are designed to serve the heuristic purpose of revealing that the ES theoretical framework is potentially much more flexible and resilient than Buzan acknowledges. Whereas Buzan’s continuum is no more than a stipulative exercise, Figures 4.6 and 4.7 can provide the basis for a series of research hypotheses and demonstrate that the research framework has the capacity to generate an expanding
Figure 4.6 A power political international society—A levels of analysis perspective

Figure 4.7 A convergence international society—A levels of analysis perspective
research agenda. This feature of the research framework will be explored in more depth in the section on ‘Methods and the history/theory link’.

The ES and the theory of history

Halliday argues that one of the key factors that distinguishes the ES and renders it comparable with both liberalism and Marxism is a distinctive view of history and of historical change. As with the theoretical framework, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that members of the ES have a multifaceted view of history. First, there has been a persistent interest in world history, as demonstrated in the work of Wight and Watson. Both authors presuppose that the ES must break free of the Westphalian and Eurocentric straitjacket and come to terms with the very different forms that states-systems have taken over the millennia. On the basis of his synoptic overview of world history, Watson generated an intriguing pendulum metaphor (see Figure 4.8). He insists that it is only a metaphor and, as a consequence, does not constitute a fully developed theory of history. Nevertheless, it does make some important claims about the course of world history. First he indicates that an international society defined by anarchy and constituted by independent states is not the sole subject matter of international relations, but simply represents one end of a spectrum. At the other end of the spectrum lies empire where independent communities are directly administered from an imperial centre. Between these two extremes lie a range of intermediate positions and as the pendulum moves from the anarchic end of the spectrum, communities increasingly come under the control of a dominant power. Under hegemony, communities

![Diagram of Watson's metaphorical pendulum]

*Figure 4.8 A theory of history: Watson’s metaphorical pendulum*
can no longer pursue independent foreign policies and, indeed, when the pendulum reaches the point of dominion, the dominant power begins to regulate the internal policies of the communities. The second key point that Watson makes is that there is no notion that history can be characterised as a predetermined and regular movement from anarchy to empire by way of hegemony and dominion and then back again. The third and in many ways the most important point made by Watson is that empire and anarchy represent extreme positions and for most of world history, communities have operated between these two extremes. He postulates, moreover, that there are systemic pressures that push the pendulum away from the extremes and, as a consequence, there is a significant tendency for the pendulum to move to the lowest point in the pendulum’s swing. If Watson is correct, then it is certainly the case that his assessment has not been taken on board by the vast majority of theorists in contemporary IR, although the orientation of IR has slowly been changing over the past 30 years. What also needs to be noted is that Watson’s metaphor is effectively operating on the international system level of analysis.

The second facet of the ES approach to history focuses on modern history and provides an account of the development of the European states-system. In contrast to Watson’s approach, it operates on all three levels of analysis articulated by the ES. This view of history is developed most clearly in the volume edited by Bull and Watson (1984). In essence, it is suggested that the history of the modern world can be depicted in terms of two waves. With the first wave, independent communities across the globe were linked together by the Europeans in the form of an international system. Then later, the system was overtaken by the expansion of the European international society, with the norms and institutions that were established initially in Europe being extended across the globe. This development was a source of considerable concern to Bull because of the importance that he attached to the idea of world society. He was unclear whether a stable world order could be established in the absence of a world society that unequivocally extended across the globe. As will be made clear in the fifth move of the chapter, serious reservations have been expressed about this facet of the ES and it is in the process of being substantially revised by another generation of ES theorists. But, before looking at how the research agenda of the ES has been modified and extended, it is necessary to explore the methodological implications that flow from the conjunction of the multidimensional theoretical approach in conjunction with a multifaceted view of history as adopted by the ES.

Methodological pluralism and the ES

Theorists in the ES have traditionally not displayed very much interest in methodological questions, demonstrating ‘methodological quietism’
according to Spegele.\textsuperscript{31} Nevertheless, as intimated above, they have essentially adopted a pluralistic approach to theory building and this requires them to operate on the basis of pluralistic methodological assumptions, whether this is acknowledged or not. Their interest in a pluralistic approach to international relations, moreover, has developed on two separate but interrelated fronts. Not only has the ES promoted a theoretical framework that presupposes the need to proceed on three separate although interacting levels of analysis, but each of these levels also resonate with the distinctive approaches Wight identifies as realist, rationalist and revolutionist, with the realists then being associated by Bull with the international system, rationalists with the international society and revolutionists with world society.\textsuperscript{32} Some contemporary political theorists, however, have been less than impressed with this attempt to establish a triptych of political theorists. Failing to recognise the link with the ES theoretical framework, Boucher argues, for example, that there is an inadequate attempt to explain either how the categories that define each tradition of thought are related to each other or how the theorists located within each category are identified. As a consequence, the traditions are considered ‘little more than classificatory categories into which thinkers are forced irrespective of the embarrassing elements which appear to be ill at ease in their putative homes’.\textsuperscript{33}

Boucher, himself, endeavours to transcend this line of criticism by identifying three styles of thinking that highlight particular sets of criteria that are invoked to ‘guide, justify and recommend state action’.\textsuperscript{34} These styles of thinking are seen to have generated three traditions of thought that are linked in a dialectical relationship. A tradition of empirical realism focuses on the way that human desires inevitably give rise to conflicts of interest which need to be handled by rules of prudence and not moral imperatives. The second tradition allies justice with virtue and identifies the existence of ethical principles that are universally applicable. The final tradition, identified by Boucher as historical reason, is seen to provide a possible synthesis to the other two antithetical ways of thinking. This third mode of thinking recognises that morality is an historically emerging phenomenon and that what we observe today is a thick conception of particularistic morality that is embedded in the day-to-day practices of all societies operating alongside a very thin conception of universal morality that extends across a transnational global community of individuals.

Boucher associates this approach with an idea of methodological pluralism premised on the assumption that these are not independent traditions of thought.\textsuperscript{35} Rather, they co-exist, and there is an inevitable tension amongst the competing ways of thinking about moral questions. As a consequence, the ideas linked to the three traditions of thought are seen to undergo considerable changes. Boucher contrasts his approach to the approach adopted by members of the ES whose traditions are made up of ideas ‘that recur with very little variation in different contexts, like coins that change hands,
and whose value is little affected by inflation’. 36 Yet there are similarities between Boucher and the ES. Wight may be less explicit about this form of methodological pluralism, but without doubt he acknowledges that his three traditions co-exist in ‘mutual tension and conflict’ with each other. Moreover, he also refutes the idea that the traditions form ‘railroad tracks running parallel to infinity’. Instead, he insists that although theorists tend to concentrate on one of the three political conditions at the expense of the others, there are inevitable ‘cross-currents’ that pull the divergent streams of ideas together. 37

Boucher’s idea of applying a dialectical approach to the task of classifying political theorists, moreover, was pre-empted by Ashley and then extended by Linklater. 38 Drawing on Ashley, Linklater pushes the idea of methodological pluralism much further than Boucher because, as he sees it, realism, rationalism and revolutionism not only ‘disagree about the empirical nature of world politics—they possess radically different conceptions of the nature of international relations theory and contrasting notions of the right relationship between theory and practice’. 39 In line with this assessment, Linklater links realism to positivism because it analyses the ‘recurrent and repetitive patterns of international relations’, rationalism to hermeneutics ‘because it analyses the language and culture of diplomatic practice and the conventions which states obey as members of an international society’ and revolutionism to critical theory because it stresses that ‘a series of interlocked crises may bring about the transformation of the modern international system’. He then places the three methodologies into a dialectical relationship with each other, arguing that critical theory synthesises the antithesis that exists between positivism and hermeneutics (see Figure 4.9).

Although Linklater and Boucher provide intriguing ways of relating the very different traditions of international thought that developed across the history of the European states-system, even Linklater’s more complex resolution does not effectively capture the twin track orientation of the ES founders. On the one hand, the ES is interested in the contested and evolving ways that European thinkers have endeavoured to theorise international relations. At the same time, the ES is also interested in developing its own theoretical framework which presupposes that an anarchic international system, a rule-governed international society and a transnational world society co-exist in the outside world and are not simply competing normative assessments of world politics. Moreover, none of these elements are given ontological priority by the ES. It is assumed that they are operating within a single complex reality. The overarching methodological injunction which underlies this approach is that, as Bull puts it, the analyst must never ‘reify’ any of these elements. 40 Although attention may only be focused on one of these elements, it must never be forgotten that this element is lodged in the context of the other two. The point is reinforced by Watson, who argues that the distinctions are useful not because they have the effect of
allowing the ‘complex reality of international relations to be simplified into this category or that but because it allows that reality to be illuminated by considering it from a particular point of view’. Watson’s position is simply not compatible with Linklater’s post-positive move which essentially conflates normative and empirical approaches to theory building whereas, by contrast, these approaches are effectively separated by the ES.

But what this divergence reveals, however, is that there is a degree of tension both within the ES levels of analysis theoretical framework and also between the normative and empirical approaches to theory embedded within the ES. These tensions, moreover, are exacerbated by the reference to methodological pluralism. The tension can be addressed by the suggestion that methodological pluralism itself can be approached from more than one direction. This suggestion can be demonstrated, for example, by examining

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*Figure 4.9* Divergent approaches relying on methodological pluralism
Wendt’s work because he not only provides a discussion of methodological pluralism which is one of the most detailed and sophisticated in the literature but one that was also, initially, at odds with the approach adopted by the ES.\textsuperscript{42} Even more significantly, he has recently presented a new approach that throws a very different light on methodological pluralism and, in doing so, potentially helps to clarify the tension in ES thinking about theory and methodology.

Wendt’s starting point is that social scientists have no alternative but to make ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of social reality and how they themselves are related to that reality. Moreover, they must make these assumptions despite the fact that they involve deeply contested philosophical issues. Wendt initially made the ontological assumption that it is through ideas that states ultimately relate to one another and it is ideas that essentially determine who and what states are. The same, of course, must also be true for the way that individuals relate across state boundaries. But central to Wendt’s position is that the ideas are shared ideas drawing on a common culture, thereby reflecting the importance of holist as well as idealist assumptions. In contrast to most theorists who occupy this space, however, Wendt resists the obvious conclusion that social scientists must, therefore, necessarily rely on a hermeneutic or interpretivist epistemology, where social inquiry can be compared to reading a text as opposed to the positivist epistemology that is employed by natural scientists which rests on materialist ontological assumptions and where investigation involves the observation of physical objects. From Wendt’s perspective, the importance attached to shared ideas will certainly mean that social scientists have to adopt very different methods to those used by natural scientists, but they do not require a distinctive epistemology. In other words, natural and social scientists have a common understanding of what they mean by knowledge. So what Wendt endeavours to show is that an idealist ontology can be harnessed to a positivist epistemology. This is what Wendt means by methodological pluralism and he goes on to argue that social scientists have become overly concerned about epistemological issues whereas he thinks that epistemology will take care of itself in ‘the hurly-burly of scientific debate’.\textsuperscript{43}

This is a distinctive interpretation of methodological pluralism. Whereas Boucher and Linklater associate the term with a dialectical linking of competing normative positions, Wendt associates it with a distinctive and unusual synthesis of an idealist ontology to a positivist epistemology. However, the ES generates yet another order of complexity for the idea of methodological pluralism. It presupposes a relationship between empirical and normative thinking. This is alongside a presumption that an empirical investigation of international relations requires us to operate on divergent levels of analysis and that we need to approach these various levels using different epistemological as well as ontological assumptions. The issue is further
complicated by the fact that the ES also assumes that there are links between these different levels of analysis, thereby raising the question of whether ontological as well as epistemological questions can also get sorted out in the ‘hurly-burly of scientific debate’.

Given the controversial nature of his position, Wendt has inevitably come in for criticism from a wide range of perspectives. In responding to his critics, however, Wendt has argued that if his initial premises are accepted, then there is very little need for him to give much ground to his critics because they all broadly subscribe to a classical model of science which, in turn, rests on the Cartesian dualist position that draws a categorical distinction between mind and matter. The distinction rests, Wendt argues on four assumptions. First, there is a subject–object distinction with the analyst (subject) investigating an external reality (object). Second, the scientific method is needed to acquire knowledge of the outside world. Third, to make progress in science it is essential to maintain a distinction between facts and values. Fourth, it is assumed that matter is purely physical and must be distinguished from the mind or consciousness which is not a material phenomenon and operates on the basis of laws that are different from the laws that govern the physical world.

Although these four assumptions, according to Wendt, are broadly accepted by both positivists and interpretivists, the dualist ontology on which they rest is almost certainly incorrect and generates an erroneous view of consciousness (although Wendt also argues that there is no secure ground at the moment on which to try to build a ‘more correct’ understanding of consciousness). Moreover, natural scientists no longer accept the materialist view of matter on which classical physics, as well as Cartesian dualism, depends. This is demonstrated in quantum physics, despite the fact that quantum physicists are unable to agree on what their theory is telling us about the nature of reality. But in essence, sub-atomic phenomena can be described in two irreducible and non-equivalent ways—as either waves or particles and, as a consequence it is not possible, in principle, to know both the position and momentum of a particle at the same time. It follows that the idea of unitary and integrated knowledge is inherently impossible, because we necessarily require conflicting narratives to describe sub-atomic phenomena. Moreover, in providing these narratives, it also has to be accepted that the subject–object distinction breaks down. Quantum physicists, therefore, have opened up a Pandora’s Box to reveal, among other things, a post-modern world of alternative realities where the conception of causality breaks down.

Wendt insists that social scientists cannot ignore what is happening in the physical sciences because the social world operates within the physical world and he argues that although the material world cannot determine what happens in the social world, it certainly constrains what can and cannot be done. Moreover, as a ‘metaphysical constraint’, the material
world unequivocally ‘plays a fundamental role in our work’. In the past, Wendt argues, like most social scientists, that he has taken the assumptions underpinning classical physics for granted. However, having examined the no-doubt heroic assumption of brain theorists that a quantum explanation for human consciousness is possible, he believes that there is now a need to explore the implications of this assumption for the social sciences because it has such very significant consequences for social theory. It is not possible here to follow the details of Wendt’s argument, which in any event only provide a sketch of the book-length argument that he is developing, but the conclusion of his argument is important. In essence, it has led him to shift his position on methodological pluralism and to reject the attempt to achieve a synthesis of positivism and interpretivism. Instead, he argues that quantum naturalism reaffirms the position that explanations sought by positivists and the understanding pursued by interpretivists are both necessary and complementary ways of viewing the social world.

This is a conclusion that might not come as much of a surprise to the ES. The founders were, in essence, intuitive or perhaps even unintentional methodological pluralists. The complexity and diversity of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the ES approach to theory and history have come about, to some extent, as a consequence of not paying close attention to ontological and epistemological questions. The same line of argument can also be applied to many working historians and, certainly, the impact of historians has been very important for the ES orientation.47 Historians almost invariably acknowledge that there are always at least two stories to tell, one from the inside and the other from the outside. They know that they operate from a potentially privileged position because they can endeavour to recover the viewpoint of the historical actors, but they also have the luxury of knowing what happened after the event. So, self-fulfilling prophecies and unanticipated consequences, for example, can become crucial elements of any historical narrative. Indeed, historians necessarily have to make sense of events in the light of subsequent events. What is distinctive about the ES is not simply the focus on structural constraints, but also the recognition that the impact of structural constraints have to be examined in the light of both the separation and the interaction between facts and values, the relationship between the story told from the outside and the inside, the fact that actors have a conception of both the past and the future, and the link between actors and analysts. These complexities map quite closely onto Wendt’s quantum perspective on methodological pluralism.

Few, if any, ES theorists, however, are likely to engage with Wendt’s quantum move. They are much more likely to be sympathetic with the view that epistemological and ontological problems will be resolved in the hurly-burly of doing research. It is necessary to conclude, therefore, by exploring the methods needed to advance the ES research agenda.
Methods and the history/theory link

The ES’s theoretical framework embraces world history as well as being global in geographical scope (see Figure 4.10). From the ES perspective, for much of world history, international relations must be discussed in terms of states-systems that are regional in extent. The framework presupposes that these regionally based states-systems then need to be investigated on three levels of analysis. However, for the ES, the emergence of the European states-system is particularly important because it has generated an enduring global states-system. Perhaps inevitably, therefore, this system provides the main focus of attention for the ES. Although the majority of research carried out under the ES umbrella concentrates on the modern period, it is also argued that the world history framework needs to be amended and extended. Buzan and Little argue, for example, that the timeframe must also embrace the systems that preceded the emergence of states because there were extensive ‘international’ networks in existence before the formation of states.48 Moreover, many of these networks persisted into modern times and, as a consequence, it is not possible to comprehend large chunks of world history without taking these networks into account. At the other end of the temporal spectrum, Buzan and Gonzalez-Palaez argue that despite the establishment of a global states-system it is important to recognise that regional states-systems persist and maintain their identities.49 At the same time, the ES levels of analysis have also come under close scrutiny, particularly by Buzan, who argues, as discussed earlier, that the international system level should be absorbed into the international society level.50 This position, however, is still contested.51 On the other hand, Buzan stands on much more consensual ground when he argues that the theoretical framework needs to take account of international economics. It is also the case that once economics are taken into account

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Figure 4.10  The historical and geographical scope of the ES framework
a major boundary problem arises since, from a world historical perspective, it is evident that the boundary of an international economic system often extends beyond the boundary of the related international political system.\textsuperscript{52}

There are no signs that these attempts to modify the ES theoretical framework are going to halt in the near future or be finally resolved. A further and significant example is Keene’s challenge to the framework used by Bull and Watson to trace the history of international relations over the last two centuries.\textsuperscript{53} As they depict this period, the Europeans initially entered into systemic relations with outside world and then the European international society extended beyond Europe and moved across the global international system. As critics have argued, this assessment effectively ignores the ongoing process of colonialism.\textsuperscript{54} As Keene sees it, the Europeans used the idea of a standard of civilisation to justify the application of a very different set of rules outside of Europe to the one that operated within Europe. Inside Europe the rules promoted co-existence and a toleration of diversity. By contrast, outside of Europe there were a set of rules that permitted intervention in order to promote ‘civilization’. Far from a rule-governed international society extending into an anomic international system, the Europeans established a hierarchical international order, with different rules operating in the two domains (see Figure 4.11).

There is no doubt that the clarification and modification of the ES research framework is an important and ongoing activity. However, progress also requires detailed empirical research and given the methodological pluralism

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[scale=0.5]{figure411.png}
\caption{Two contrasting ES views of the nineteenth century international arena}
\end{figure}
In the first instance, the founding fathers of the ES hoped to make progress by engaging in a systematic comparison of international societies from the past (see Figure 4.12). Wight acknowledged the importance of the comparative method and Watson examined ten international societies from the ancient world.\textsuperscript{55} Ironically, the most important general insight to emerge from the examination, however, relates not to the nature of rules and institutions but to the distribution of power and the suggestion that hegemony rather than polarity represents the norm in international politics—an assessment that perhaps resonates increasingly in the aftermath of the Cold War. But, in any event, while the importance of systematic comparative research is certainly acknowledged much more needs to be done on this front.\textsuperscript{56}

Watson recognised that he was only making a first step in establishing a comparative study of international societies. There will always be limits, however, to how far this exercise can be taken because of the paucity of information available about many aspects of the international societies that developed in the ancient world. Nevertheless, new information is always coming on stream and, in truth, the ES is only beginning to mine what is already available.\textsuperscript{57} But obviously much richer sources of information exist when it comes to the analysis of the modern international arena. Here, however, the ES has hardly scratched the surface. The work of theorists from Bull to Buzan, moreover, has concentrated primarily on establishing a broad framework. But, as already noted, essential elements of the frameworks are in conflict and have also been challenged by other theorists. These ongoing tensions within the ES, however, can only be resolved or transcended by a constant interaction between theorists and empirical researchers.

There are inevitably problems of method associated with the task of engaging in empirical research. Gong, for example, considers that it is axiomatically true that an international system precedes the establishment of an international society and he focuses on how the idea of a standard of civilisation evolved and played into the expansion of the European international society.\textsuperscript{58} But on what basis can we identify the expanding membership of the European international society? Gong argues that there are two key sources: first, the treaties that the European states signed with non-European countries and, second, the international legal texts written

\begin{figure}[h]
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TIME PERIOD 1 & TIME PERIOD 2 & TIME PERIOD 3 \\
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States System A & States System B & States System C \\
e.g. Sumerian city states & e.g. Greek city states & e.g. Italian city states \\
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\caption{ES comparative historical case studies}
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by leading international lawyers of the time that distinguished between civilised and uncivilised states.\textsuperscript{59}

Keene, however, challenges the premises that Gong operates from, and is much more favourably disposed to the earlier work of Alexandrowicz, who argued that prior to the nineteenth century many states around the world were acknowledged as fully-fledged states by the Europeans, only to have this status removed once the standard of civilisation had been elaborated.\textsuperscript{60} What happened, according to Alexandrowicz, was that there was a shift from natural law to positivist international law and in the process the scope of international law shrank. In fact, it is clear that both Gong and Alexandrowicz are operating on a hermeneutic basis and they show very effectively that the inside story changed across time. It is then necessary to tell the story from the outside as well as from the inside. There is no doubt in my mind that Keene’s outside story is more convincing than the one that Bull and Watson provide. Moreover, it also opens the way to a very much darker account of what the expansion of the European international society involved, not only in terms of European colonization, but also in terms of the way that new members like Japan were able to justify their own expansion.\textsuperscript{61}

Although there is no doubt that treaties and legal texts are important routes to the inside story, for the ES to progress, it is also essential to enter the diplomatic archives, particularly when it comes to assessing whether decision makers are being influenced by systemic changes in the international distribution of power or by the intersubjective norms that help to define and maintain international society. Entering the archives, however, is a time-consuming activity and it becomes important to focus on critical case studies which provide important test cases. For example, the American Civil War has been identified as the last occasion when the Europeans had the potential opportunity to affect the distribution of power in the North American continent. How far were the European actors aware that the balance of power was moving decisively against them and why did they fail to go to the aid of the Confederates in an attempt to divide the continent? The issue is critical, in particular, for offensive realists whose theory predicts that a hegemonic power like Britain would intervene to prevent the consolidation of the United States as a regional hegemon. Mearsheimer argues that a crucial reason that the British did not go down this route was because they believed that the Confederates could not defeat the North.\textsuperscript{62} What the archives reveal, however, is that while the key British decision makers believed during the initial stages of the war that the South would be successful, they were also very conscious of and responsive to the prevailing norms concerning neutrality and intervention. Indeed, Britain paid substantial compensation to the United States after the war for an alleged breach of the neutrality laws.\textsuperscript{63} Nevertheless, contrary to the conventional image, the ES is, in fact, just as interested in the conditions when systemic
rather than societal forces begin to influence the behaviour of states. In both cases, however, access to the archives is crucial to get a handle on the inside story.

A focus on the archives not only opens a window on the relative impact of the international system as opposed to international society, it can also bring the world society into play. In the case of the American Civil War, for example, the British had been contemplating an offer to mediate between the two sides. It becomes very clear from documentary sources, however, that as soon as Lincoln made the Emancipation Proclamation, Palmerston, the British Prime Minister, insisted that mediation was now out of the question because it would be impossible to devise a resolution that the South would agree to and which the British public would find acceptable. As a consequence, while the British government was favourably disposed to the possibility of the United States dividing, they were not only constrained from becoming involved because of established legal norms but also because of pressure from world society. Although Buzan is no doubt correct to argue that the ES founding fathers failed to theorise world society adequately, it is also the case that in addition to conceptual clarification it is necessary to identify methods that will allow us to study world society. Clark has started to make moves in this direction and is convinced that to understand why some key international norms have come into play it is necessary to study more closely the relationship between world society and international society and he takes the abolition of the slave trade as one of his case studies because it reveals ‘a network of transnational actors seeking consciously to shape the policy of international society’. From this perspective, to assess the effectiveness of the network, however, it is essential to identify a method that can reveal their impact on the key actors in international society. Unquestionably working in the archives represents a necessary if not a sufficient way forward.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to indicate first that the ES has a much more expansive research framework than is often recognised and it follows that the framework gives rise to a very ambitious research agenda. The framework is expansive because it operates on a number of very different fronts. On the temporal front, it embraces a world historical timeframe, while on the geographical front it explores the movement from regional systems through to the establishment of a global system. Across these time and space dimensions, the ES also operates on three distinct ontological levels of analysis. Although the ES does effectively privilege the international society level of analysis, this is in part because it was felt by the founding fathers that the sociological dimension of international relations had been underplayed and partly because the international society was identified as an intermediate
level that came under pressure from both the international system and world society. In any event, the need to operate on all three levels is now increasingly acknowledged.

As the attempt is made to open up the three levels both theoretically and empirically, however, it becomes increasingly apparent that the methodological orientation of the ES, like its research framework, is also much more complex than is generally recognised. It is argued in this chapter that it is not inappropriate to identify members of the ES as intuitive methodological pluralists. Although methodological pluralism has been cast in a number of different ways, it is argued here that it presupposes the need for theorists and empirical researchers to operate on the basis of a range of divergent ontological and epistemological assumptions. It is also suggested, albeit tentatively, that some of the more surprising implications of the ES approach to methodology have started to be teased out in Alexander Wendt’s most recent work.

Finally, it is argued that for the ES to make further progress, it is essential to carry out empirical research in conjunction with attempting to develop a theoretical understanding of international action. These two activities need to go hand in hand, with theory helping to guide where empirical research needs to take place and empirical research revealing where there are problems for and lacunae in the theory. This task is further complicated, however, by the methodological pluralism associated with the theoretical framework which presupposes the need for an inside and an outside story on all three levels of analysis. Attention is focused in this chapter on how the diplomatic archives, in particular, provide a way to open up the international society from the inside and at the same time reveal a way of linking the international society to the international system and to world society.

There is no doubt that this chapter raises more questions than it answers. But although it is clearly much less problematic simply to see the ES as providing an idealist take on the international society, such an assessment denudes the school of the depth and complexity that the founding fathers ascribed to it. By embracing a world historical perspective, operating on three levels of analysis, and acknowledging the indispensability of a normative dimension, the ES establishes a theoretical framework with the potential to provide a holistic general theory of international relations.

Notes and references

2. Buzan associates the first theoretical perspective primarily with the work of Manning, see, for example, C. A.W Manning, The Nature of International Society (London: LSE/Macmillan, 1976); the second with the normative dimension of work by Bull and Wight, see, for example, Hedley Bull, The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 2002); and


4. Ibid., p. 15.


7. In the first instance, a parsimonious neorealism overtook the much more expansive and historically sensitive approach promoted by classical realism. But neorealism then subsequently splintered into diverse and more focused theoretical perspectives. Neorealism, for example, has divided into offensive and defensive realism, both of which have been challenged by neoclassical realism. For a discussion of this development, see, for example, Stephen G. Brooks, ‘Dueling Realisms (Realism in International Relations)’, *International Organization* 51 (1997), pp. 445–477.


11. Adapted from Krasner, *Sovereignty*, p. 58.

12. Adapted from Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 32.

13. See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.


16. See Buzan, *From International to World Society*.


20. Ibid., p. 99.


22. Ibid., p. 7.


25. Adapted from Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 32.
26. See Fred Halliday, ‘The Middle East and Conceptions of “International Soci-
ety”’, in Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Palaez eds., _The Middle East Through En-
lish School Theory: A Regional International Society_, Workshop, London, 12–13
27. See Martin Wight, _Systems of States_, edited and introduced by Hedley Bull
(Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977) and Adam Watson, _The Evolution of In-
29. See Robert Gilpin, _War and Change in World Politics_ (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni-
versity Press, 1981); Barry Buzan and Richard Little _International Systems in World
History: Remaking the Study of International Relations_ (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2000); and Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little and William C. Wohlfirth,
‘Conclusion’, in Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little and William C. Wohlfirth eds.,
30. See Bull, _The Anarchical Society_.
31. Roger D Spegele, ‘Traditional Political Realism and the Writing of History’, in Alex
J. Bellamy ed., _International Society and its Critics_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
Studies_ 13 (1987), pp. 221–227; and Bull, _The Anarchical Society_.
33. David Boucher, _Political Theories of International Relations: From Thucydides to the
34. Ibid., p. 23.
35. See Ibid., p. 40; the approach drawing on David Boucher, _Texts in Context: Revi-
sionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas_ (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff,
1985).
36. Ibid., p. 17.
38. See R. K. Ashley, ‘Political Realism and Human Interests’, _International Stud-
ies Quarterly_ 25 (1981), pp. 204–236 and Andrew Linklater, _Beyond Realism and
Marxism: Critical Theory and International Realations_ (Houndmills: Macmillan Press
39. Linklater, _Beyond Realism and Marxism_, p. 10.
41. See Adam Watson, ‘Hedley Bull, States Systems and International Societies’, _Review
42. See Wendt, _Social Theory of International Politics_, and Wendt, ‘Social Theory as
Cartesian science’.
43. Wendt, _Social Theory of International Politics_, p. 373.
44. See, for example, Guzzini and Leander, _Constructivism and International Relations_.
45. Wendt, ‘Social Theory as Cartesian science’, p. 188.
46. Ibid., p. 218.
47. See Spegele, ‘Traditional Political Realism’.
48. See Part 2 of Buzan and Little, _International Systems in World History_.
49. Buzan and Gonzalez-Palaez, _The Middle East through English School Theory_.
50. Buzan, _From International to World Society_.
51. See Tim Dunne, ‘System, State and Society: How Does it All Hang Together?’,
_Millennium_ 34 (2005), pp. 157–170 and Richard Little, _The Balance of Power in
International Relations_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
52. See Buzan and Little, _International Systems in World History_.


57. For an illustration of what can be achieved, although in most instances not working from an ES perspective, see the case studies in Kaufman, Little and Wohlforth, *The Balance of Power in World History*.


59. Ibid., p. 25.


64. Little, ‘British Neutrality versus Offshore Balancing’, p. 89.

The English School’s contribution to the study of international relations is often seen as a set of descriptively rich concepts that may be employed within a variety of theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, few scholars think that this conceptual vocabulary is adequate. Some take the extreme view that the problems with it are so serious that we should use a different set of concepts, such as ‘global society’ or ‘global civil society’, to replace familiar English School ideas such as ‘international society’. But that is a very sweeping judgment and one that threatens to overlook the value of, among others, the historical insights of the English School. A much more common approach is to begin with the conceptual apparatus provided by the school, expanding or redefining some of its central terms. This has been done from a variety of social theoretical perspectives. A prominent recent example is Alexander Wendt’s refashioning of Martin Wight’s ‘three traditions’ of ‘international theory’ into an account of three different kinds of ‘international social structure’, depending on whether the predominant form of interaction involves enmity (Hobbesian), rivalry (Lockean) or friendship (Kantian). More recently still, Barry Buzan has tried to build the English School’s tripartite distinction between international system, international society and world society into a more robust taxonomy, embracing, for example, a distinction between global and regional international societies, and firming up the school’s rather ambiguous idea of world society, in order to create a framework that will allow us to monitor structural changes in international relations particularly with a view to charting processes of globalization.

My goal in this chapter is not to assess these various ways of developing the English School’s concepts, each of which may well have merit on its own terms. Rather it is to explore the resources that the school offers for an interpretive sociology of international relations and to ask how we might want to reconstruct some of their core concepts in order to develop such an approach. This appears to be an especially appropriate line of enquiry because the English School’s methodological orientation, although notoriously difficult to pin down, has often been seen as an approximation to
Verstehen, and their concepts have frequently been described as ‘ideal types’ in a broadly Weberian sense. But there have been very limited attempts to develop a systematic analysis of how Max Weber’s methodological ideas might be employed in our field. My intention is therefore first to explain what a Weberian ‘ideal type’ is (since it is emphatically not just any kind of conceptual abstraction) and how concepts so constructed should be used to interpret the meaning and significance of social phenomena.

This effort should not be understood in any purely descriptive sense, as, for example, Buzan’s classification of international system, international society and world society as different forms of international interaction. As will become clear from the discussion of Weber’s method, in order to employ these essentially descriptive terms, they need to be related to values, and the pivotal English School concept in this respect is the idea of order and also, although to a less developed extent, justice. The school always saw the establishment of order in world politics as involving the realisation of certain values, and it was this that allowed them to make judgments about the cultural significance of international phenomena, such as the existence (or decline) of a society of states. That, in a nutshell, is what gives much of the English School’s work its character as a distinctive interpretation of international relations, rather than a general theory of how international actors behave, or simply a narrative history of what they have done in the past. Once the general methodological principles involved in this approach to interpretive sociology have been identified, we can then use them to assess and build upon the work of the English School.

The second half of the chapter is therefore primarily concerned with three questions. How did the English School define the concept of order in world politics? How did they interpret actual international phenomena, especially the existence of an ‘international society’, in relationship to its core values? And, how does their approach compare with Weber’s methodological principles for interpretive sociology? In it, I will contrast the very well-known definition of international order given by Hedley Bull in *The Anarchical Society* with that which appears in Martin Wight’s essay on ‘Western Values in International Relations’. I will then suggest some alternative ways in which order may also be understood.

**Weber’s method for interpretive sociology**

According to Weber, ‘knowledge of the cultural significance of concrete historical events and patterns is exclusively and solely the final end which, among other means, concept-construction and the criticism of constructs also seek to serve’. This succinct formulation, which lays bare the interpretive ambitions of his enquiry, captures two of the essential methodological principles that inform his approach. First, at least within the field of the social sciences, we are always ultimately concerned with ‘cultural
significance’. The researcher must engage in an act of evaluative interpretation in order ‘to relate the events of the real world consciously or unconsciously to universal “cultural values” and to select out those relationships which are significant for us’.  

Secondly, although ideal types are in themselves abstractions, they are nonetheless attempts to understand the significance of ‘concrete historical events and patterns’, in terms of their causes and consequences, the kinds of social action and actors that they involve, and their meaning as products of a particular social and cultural environment. One of the uses of an ideal type is as a tool with which to develop a better historical interpretation of what happens in the world by ‘constructing relationships which our imagination accepts as plausibly motivated and hence as “objectively possible” and which appear as adequate from the nomological standpoint’.  

Despite the frequent contrast between ‘understanding’ and explanation, Weber’s use of verstehen aimed at an adequate form of causal explanation.

Since the focus here is on ‘plausibly motivated’ forms of social action, Weber’s substantive historical interpretations often identified axiological affinities between social forms, ‘structures’ in contemporary terminology, and ideas in order to deepen our understanding of the motives that shape our own way of life: the link between modern capitalist economic conduct and the ascetic Protestant idea of the calling being the most famous example. To explain his method, then, I will focus on these key terms: cultural significance, value relevance, adequate causation and axiological affinity.

**Evaluative interpretation: cultural significance and value relevance**

The first step in the formation of an ideal type is to relate events to values. In keeping with neo-Kantian epistemology, this position rejects the belief that one can develop concepts merely with reference to the facts: conceptual constructs are, for Weber, always products of how we selectively evaluate phenomena. They are not contained in the phenomena themselves, awaiting only discovery. Since the world is an impossibly complex mass of events, unintelligible in itself, the critical question is how to identify which bits of it are worth knowing, and to be able to make such a judgment we must approach an enquiry from a more or less conscious ‘point of view’. It is the ‘transcendental presupposition of every cultural science’ that we are able ‘to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it significance’. This is how we should understand Weber’s famous description of the ideal type as constructed through ‘the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct’. The focus on sovereignty in the construction of an ideal-type state system would be an example.
Before going any further, we should note that this position implies certain limitations on the kind of ‘analytical construct’ that an ideal type is, and the purposes for which it should be used. As ideal types are based on the deliberately one-sided accentuation of particular points of view, they are not attempts to approximate reality, still less to capture it in its entirety. An ideal type is an attempt to capture the significance of an aspect of reality for us. An ideal type is therefore not particularly suitable for use as ‘a schema under which a real situation or action is to be subsumed as one instance’; on the contrary, it is a ‘limiting concept with which the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components’. Moreover, in constructing an ideal type one is always trying to make explicit ‘the unique individual character of cultural phenomena’, rather than their ‘class or average character’. If we were trying to classify groups of events according to whether or not they share certain traits, we should use what Weber calls a ‘class concept’ (Gattungsbegriff); whereas the ideal type comes into its own when we want to ‘conceptualize complicated historical patterns with respect to those components in which their specific cultural significance is contained’. To repeat, the crucial point is that ideal types do not tell us something about reality as such; their purpose is to tell us something about the significance for us of a segment of reality.

All of which is simply to say that any ideal type is, in effect, an interpretation of the social world in terms of a particular set of cultural values, and the purpose of Weber’s extended methodological reflections on ideal-type formation is above all to determine systematic procedures through which such an exercise should properly proceed. One of his main points here is that, although an ideal type is always constructed from a particular point of view, it does not only contain phenomena of which its author personally approves: mere ‘feelings’ or ‘preferences’ are not a proper basis for concept formation. The attribution of cultural significance is not based on a ‘value-judgment’ in this sense, but rather on a judgment of the relevance of a phenomenon to the values that are embedded in a culture. Prostitution, Weber remarked, could be as valid a subject for an interpretive sociological enquiry as law or economics, although it is worth noting that in his own work he preferred to focus on the latter two. Concept formation properly understood only takes place when we pass beyond ‘the actual evaluation of an object into the stage of theoretical-interpretative reflection on possible relevance to values’. The point is not to select only what one sees as significant or, still less, worthwhile, while in a particular set of phenomena, but to ‘elaborate in an explicit form the focal points for possible “evaluative” attitudes which the segment of reality in question discloses and in consequence of which it claims a more or less universal “meaning”’. In effect, then, the construction of an ideal type should make transparent, systematic and as general as possible the evaluative interpretation of a phenomena in terms of its relevance to a range of viewpoints that give it significance.
for the wider audience to whom the enquiry is addressed. Whether or not that has been done successfully must be measured in terms of the degree to which the interpretation commands the interest of that audience, in the sense that it does indeed reveal something of significance about their lives.

However, we should not ignore the aside through which Weber qualifies his apparent claim to universal significance: ‘as we like to think’. Our enquiries are necessarily based upon our cultural interests, but these are not ‘objectively’ valid general cultural values in a Rickertian sense. On the contrary, Weber said, ‘all evaluative ideas are “subjective”... And they are, naturally, historically variable in accordance with the character of the culture and the ideas which rule men’s minds.’ (An example would be the changing value we place on sovereignty.) Indeed, having said that the point of evaluative interpretation is to identify focal points for possible attitudes towards a particular phenomenon, Weber acknowledged that ‘the inexhaustibility of its “content” as regards possible focal points for our interest is what is characteristic of the historical individual of the “highest” order’. We will never, in other words, be able to provide a truly comprehensive evaluative interpretation of the meaning of historical individuals, such as the state, on the basis of universally valid ‘general cultural values’ in the way that Rickert’s proposal for ‘objectivity’ would require. Weber saw little value in pursuing this will o’ the wisp, warning against ‘the continual chase for new viewpoints and new analytical constructs’ in a misguided quest for exhaustive knowledge of the significance of reality.

Among other things, this suggests that there might well be more than one ideal type of a particular ‘historical individual’, depending on the various viewpoints from which the meaning of that cluster of phenomena could be understood. For example, Weber noted that his contemporaries had come up with several different ideal types of capitalistic culture, and he accepted that ‘Each of these can claim to be a representation of the “idea” of capitalistic culture to the extent that it has really taken certain traits, meaningful in their essential features, from the empirical reality of our culture and brought them together into a unified ideal-construct.’ He therefore admitted the heuristic value of, for example, both neoclassical economic and Marxist conceptions of contemporary capitalism in terms of certain of its key features (the efficiency of the market, on the one hand and exploitation and alienation, on the other) as statements of what made that form of economic conduct meaningful. What he objected to was the inflated claim that either of these ideal types revealed some deeper, metaphysical truth about human existence. In addition, of course, he chose to accentuate yet another aspect of modern capitalist culture as its most significant feature: the intense commitment to steady, methodical work, and hence the accumulation of wealth to a far greater degree than is required merely for the gratification of one’s material needs or desires.
Historical interpretation: adequate causation and axiological affinity

These evaluative interpretations leave us with what Weber called an ‘historical individual’, which both ‘aids in the recognition of the causally relevant components of a concrete historical complex’ and is ‘a source of guidance and direction, insofar as it “interprets” the content of an object ... with respect to its possible relations to values. In doing the latter, it presents “tasks” for the causal work of history and thus is its presupposition.’

For Weber, then, the principal job of evaluative interpretation is to construct an historical individual—a coherent synthesis of the significant elements of what are always complex and multifaceted historical events—as a starting-point for, and perhaps also to give some guiding insights into, an analysis of the relationships between concrete historical patterns. Ultimately, despite its subjective and partial character, the ideal type is supposed to be a heuristic tool that helps us in ‘imputing an historical event to its real causes’. What does this mean, and how does it work?

To begin with, we need to understand that Weber’s view of causal explanation was quite different from the nomological or covering-law models that are common to many other approaches to social science, and which are sometimes seen as the only methodologically proper way in which explanation can proceed. For Weber, the complexity of the world meant that ‘an exhaustive causal explanation of any concrete phenomena in its full reality is not only practically impossible—it is simply nonsense’. As a consequence, ‘the question of causality is not a question of laws but of concrete causal relationships; it is not a question of the subsumption of the event under some general rubric as a representative case but of its imputation as a consequence of some constellation’.

As the term ‘constellation’ suggests, Weber did not think about causal relationships in terms of individual causes regularly having individual effects, identifiable through, for example, the statistical analysis of correlations between variables. ‘The number and type of causes which have influenced any given event are always infinite and there is nothing in the things themselves to set some of them apart as alone meriting attention.’

Weber did not conclude, however, that it was impossible to engage in causal explanation; nor did he dispense with general laws, predictions or statistical probabilities altogether. Although he did not see the identification of general laws as the end of a proper causal analysis, he accepted them as useful means in such an enquiry, if properly understood as heuristic tools rather than actual statements of causal relations. In other words, predictions based on a covering-law model play a similar role to ideal types and, indeed, may be reformulated in that manner once their evaluative presuppositions are made sufficiently clear. (An example would be models based on assumptions about rational action, employed in much of Weber’s own substantive sociological work, where an ideal type of instrumentally rational social
action plays a central role.) Both provide what Weber calls an ‘interpretive schema’ against which facts—that is to say, raw, unconceptualised empirical data—may be compared.

The ideal type does this by ‘constructing relationships which our imagination accepts as plausibly motivated and hence as “objectively possible” and which appear as adequate from the nomological standpoint’.25 As one example, the ideal type may tell us how a particular set of relationships might operate under certain conditions and certain assumptions about individuals’ motivation, as, for example, in ideal types of free markets peopled by rational utility-maximising agents used in economic theory.26 It thus allows us to make judgements about the circumstances that ‘favour’ a particular outcome, on the basis that such-and-such a constellation of factors makes it ‘objectively possible’ that such-and-such an outcome will occur. We can thus proceed in an essentially negative way to ask what we imagine might have happened if certain factors were removed from the original constellation, in order to discern their relative causal significance. As Weber concludes, ‘we can finally estimate the degree to which a certain effect is “favoured” by certain “conditions”—although we cannot do it in a way which will be perfectly unambiguous or even in accordance with the procedures of the calculus of probability’.27 Nevertheless, within the assumptions of the ideal-typical framework that has previously been chosen, it remains a matter of logical deduction of possible causal relationships that should, if correct, be acceptable by other social scientists inspecting one’s analysis.

One further feature of Weber’s approach is his belief that causal analysis should proceed axiologically as well as empirically. That is to say, we are often interested in the logical relationships between systems of values and ethics, here regarded—and this is what gives them their causal significance—as motives for action: ‘historical interpretation is not concerned with our ability to subordinate “facts” under abstract concepts and formulae . . . . On the contrary, it is concerned with . . . “understanding” concrete human action in terms of its motives.’28 While Weber’s understanding of social action attached considerable importance to the subjective meanings attached to actions, it did not neglect the importance of placing these ‘motives’ in the context of wider cultural systems of belief. In identifying relationships between ‘concrete historical events and patterns’, it is quite proper for an historical interpretation to be based on the analysis of axiological relationships and affinities between systems of values. Moreover, this is always preferable to any understanding of verstehen as a subjective, emotional identification with the acting subject.29

An example: the ‘Protestant ethic’ thesis

Weber’s famous interpretation of the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism may be taken as an example of how his method works.
He begins with an ideal type of modern capitalist culture (the ‘spirit’ of capitalism) that highlights one of its particular features:

the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself. Truly what is here preached is not simply a means of making one’s way in the world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty. That is the essence of the matter. It is not mere business astuteness, that sort of thing is common enough, it is an ethos. This is the quality that interests us.30

This is, to use Weber’s terminology, an evaluative interpretation of capitalism. It is not an attempt to identify the ‘class or average character’ of capitalism; capitalism in the sense of an economic system based on ‘free’ labour, profit-oriented businesses and market exchange may exist without this ethic, and the ethic itself may be found even in economics that are not capitalistic in other respects.31 The point is not to work towards a comprehensive taxonomy of different kinds of economic system. (To take just one example, Marx’s conceptual scheme, organised around production relations, would be much better for that purpose.) Weber’s goal is to relate modern economic behaviour to values in order to capture its meaning. He does, of course, think that the particular values he has chosen for that purpose tell us something of unique significance about capitalism and that they represent the ‘fundamental basis’ of the ‘social ethic of capitalistic culture’; it is not an aberration but something that Weber expects will be ‘so familiar to us today’ that most of the people in his intended audience will recognise it and feel its importance to their own ethical orientation.32

In terms of a causal analysis of the origins of modern capitalist culture, Weber’s principal claim, then, is not that the Reformation ‘caused’ modern capitalism in the sense that it was decisive in producing all of the features of modern economic production and exchange: he never claims that Protestantism was a determinate cause of modern capitalism in the sense of a ‘if P then Q’ type of argument. Rather, his claim is that certain aspects of the religious beliefs that developed during the Reformation helped to shape the peculiar ethical character of modern economic behaviour, which is an especially significant element of capitalist culture as a whole. Therefore, modern capitalism owes one of its culturally significant features to the Reformation, which can consequently be regarded as an ‘adequate cause’ of modern capitalism: if the peculiarly Protestant idea of methodical work in the calling had not taken hold as it did in northern Europe and America, it is, one might say, ‘objectively possible’ that capitalism in those parts of the world would have developed in a very different manner.

Of course, the analysis in this particular case is almost entirely cast in terms of axiological affinities: ‘What was the background of ideas which
could account for the sort of activity apparently directed toward profit alone as a calling toward which the individual feels himself to have an ethical obligation?’ Weber’s goal, in other words, was to bring the historical systems of values to which modern economic conduct is logically related into his final understanding of the spirit of capitalism. Thus, at the end, we can recognise that modern capitalism does not simply involve instrumentally rational economic conduct governed by utility maximisation, the profit motive and the desire to accumulate wealth. More precisely, it is ‘rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling’, the meaning of which can only be understood through an examination of the ascetic Protestant idea of the vocation. This illuminates the historical content of contemporary cultural values on the basis of which the initial evaluative interpretation was conducted, and so it expands our understanding of the meaning of modern capitalist culture. Not only do we explain where our capitalistic culture has come from; we also understand its meaning in a more profound manner than hitherto. Thus, we reach Weber’s famous conclusion that the old concept of the calling has been emptied of its earlier religious content, and hence the disenchantment and substantive irrationality of the otherwise intensively methodical and rationalised nature of modern economic conduct: ‘the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs’. It should be clear that this is above all an ethical conclusion in terms of what it tells us about the nature of our own personalities as, in Weber’s words, ‘products of Western civilization’. At the end, the interpretation, by relating our way of life to both historical phenomena and cultural values, helps us to understand something about its nature in the sense of its (limited) potential to realise an ideal of human flourishing, a diagnosis with particular relevance to the sense of a crisis in personality and Bildung that was widely felt among Weber’s German contemporaries.

Of course, Weber’s argument has met with sustained criticism, although often in ways that miss the point of his essentially interpretive analysis of a specific ethic within capitalist culture, and his entire approach to the interpretation of social phenomena is not uncontroversial, to put it mildly. For reasons of space, however, I will not go into these here. My point is that Weber’s interpretation of the ‘spirit’ of capitalism gives us a template for how one might set about interpreting international relations, and thus at least gives us a starting point for thinking about the English School’s method in this regard.

The English School and the interpretation of international relations

The English School is notorious for its lack of attention to methodological questions, and the only writings that do engage with such issues tend to be critical of other approaches rather than offering much constructive
of their own. The obvious example is Hedley Bull’s well-known article on the ‘classical approach’, which (as his original essay for the British Committee makes abundantly clear) was intended more as an attack on American behaviouralist approaches than an attempt to define his own approach in any real detail. One criticism does recall Weber’s method, however; this is Bull’s rejection of statistical analysis on the grounds that ‘strictly testable empirical generalisations can be established . . . but the steps from this to saying something significant about international relations . . . can be taken only if there is a self-indulgent lapse into the “classical” style’.37 The goal of ‘saying something significant about international relations’ sounds very similar to Weber’s desire to gain ‘knowledge of the cultural significance of concrete historical events and patterns’, but here the trail runs dry: for Bull it involves the ‘exercise of judgement’ that is ultimately dependent on ‘rough and ready observation, of a sort for which there is no room in logic or strict science’,38 a position that is tantamount to a denial of method altogether.

That is not exactly a promising starting point. Nevertheless, it is possible to see one of the things that the English School was trying to do as an attempt to develop a distinctive interpretation of international relations along roughly similar lines to Weber’s method outlined above, and that, in this respect, it is possible to identify moments of both ‘evaluative’ and ‘historical interpretation’ in their work (although never, as far as I am aware, explicitly put in those terms by the members of the school themselves). What I want to do now, then, is first to outline the principal theme of the English School’s interpretation of international relations following the same structure as my earlier discussion of Weber’s approach, and then to offer some reflections on the ways in which we might want to develop some of their concepts and arguments in order to pursue new interpretive lines of enquiry in the future.

Can we find anything like Weber’s interpretation of the ‘spirit of capitalism’ in the English School? The first answer to this question would be that the members of the school did consistently call attention to one phenomenon within international relations (although always acknowledging others) to the extent that it has practically become the signature of their work: the existence of an international society. In essence, this concept was developed in opposition to the idea that international relations consist of little other than realpolitik. By contrast, the English School highlighted the fact that states do exhibit sociability in their relations with one another, for example, to paraphrase Bull’s famous definition, through their sense of shared interests and values, through their obedience to rules of international law, and through their participation in international institutions to regulate the conduct of international actors.39

As I have said, the idea of an international society refers—in a suitably ‘rough and ready’ way—to a particular kind of international interaction that is distinct from the logic of realpolitik. In that respect it performs a role
that is not dissimilar to Weber's concept of capitalism, which also helps to distinguish one sort of economic activity from other, more ‘traditionalist’, forms of work and entrepreneurship. Weber’s enquiry was not, however, concerned with capitalism as such, but with its *spirit*. The essentially descriptive proposition that an international society exists, even though that clearly brings norms into the enquiry, is therefore insufficient to make the English School’s work an interpretation of the meaning or cultural significance of international relations. The crucial question is whether the school identified anything that might be called the ‘spirit’ of international society, in the same way that Weber isolated a particular ethic at the core of modern capitalist culture.

The answer to this question lies in another of the central terms within the English School’s conceptual vocabulary: the idea of order. Order was crucial to their enquiries precisely because, as Bull remarked in explaining why he chose to make his major treatise a ‘study of order in world politics’, the concept ‘places the emphasis on ends or values’. In other words, by thinking about international society in terms of its relationship to order, one is in effect relating it to a set of values that allows its significance to be understood: the connection between international society and order is pivotal to the English School’s evaluative interpretation of international relations.

How, then, did they understand the values that are realised by the establishment of order in world politics? Bull’s response in *The Anarchical Society* rested on yet another tripartite distinction. First, there is what he calls ‘order in social life’, which is a way of arranging society so as to achieve three basic goals (although there may be more): to secure individuals against violence, to ensure that promises and agreements are kept and to ensure stability in the possession of things. ‘Life, truth and property’, in other words, are goals that, according to Bull, every society respects and indeed must respect if it is to sustain anything that can reasonably be called ‘social life’. After ‘order in social life’, we are introduced to the idea of ‘international order’, which is represented as ‘the elementary or primary goals of the society of states’. There are four of these: the preservation of the society of states itself as ‘the prevailing form of universal political organisation’; the protection of the external sovereignty of individual states; the maintenance of peace, in the sense of ensuring that war between states is an occasional hazard rather than a ‘normal condition’; and finally, international versions of ‘life, truth and property’, which translates here into the limitation of violence (e.g. in laws of war), respect for one’s treaty obligations (*pacta sunt servanda*) and the mutual recognition of sovereignty (which guarantees states’ ‘property’ in the sense of their territorial jurisdictions). Finally, we have ‘world order’, which Bull understands as ‘those patterns or dispositions of human activity that sustain the elementary or primary goals of social life among mankind as a whole’. This concept is linked to the earlier idea of ‘order in
social life’, since it includes, as well as order among political communities, order within those communities, and hence refers to the way in which the general organisation of the world political system contributes to, or undermines, domestic (and even municipal) arrangements for order. The main point of this idea is to take account of the possibility that the ‘world political system’ might be organised in some form other than a society of states, and ‘a standing question is whether world order might not better be served by such other forms’, which Bull took up in the final part of his book.

The concept of ‘international order’, then, might be seen as an attempt to capture the ‘spirit’ of international society. Just as Weber’s ideal-typical capitalist entrepreneur lives according to a particular work ethic, so we might say that Bull’s ideal-typical state lives according to the ethic contained within the four goals of international society: it resists other forms of universal political organisation, it respects other states’ sovereignty (and expects or demands the same in return); it tries to keep the peace, most of the time; and it obeys international social norms such as *pacta sunt servanda*. The fact that no state lives up to these principles all of the time is not in itself a problem: the construction is ideal-typical, and therefore is not meant to be a description of reality, but an illumination of an aspect of reality that is meaningful because of its relationship to culturally significant values. Just as Weber would hope—probably rightly—that his description of the capitalist work ethic would seem familiar to his readers as something important to their way of life, so Bull would hope—again, I think, probably rightly—that the ethic he describes in the concept of international order is one that his readers will recognise as something significant.

From a Weberian perspective, however, there are still two glaring problems with this way of conceptualising order and international order as a starting point for an interpretation of the meaning and cultural significance that international society possesses. The first is the rather cavalier way in which Bull asserts the universality of the values contained in the concepts of order in social life and world order. His claim that these represent goals that are shared by all societies is not grounded in any sociological or anthropological evidence whatsoever, but instead on an appeal to Herbert Hart’s account of natural law, where they are represented as ‘simple truisms’. That is a slender reed from which to hang a claim to universal significance, and at several times Bull seemed to acknowledge the parochial nature of his evaluative vision. For example, in an important British Committee paper he admitted that ‘our discussions reflect the outlook of a former great power and colonial power, and (despite everything) a presently still relatively rich one. We are not accustomed to looking at international relations from the perspective from which most of the world sees it, the perspective of the underdog.’ The frankness of the admission is to be applauded, but where does it leave Bull’s grandiose claims to have identified universally valid goals of social life in *The Anarchical Society*? His assertion that property is one of these goals,
in particular, looks uncomfortably like the perspective of a relatively rich former colonial great power, rather than something that can genuinely be taken as a universal value.

Beyond that, however, it is extremely doubtful whether Bull’s comparison between the goals of the society of states and the ‘morally prior’ concept of world order is developed into an interpretation of an ethic of international order so much as an evaluation of the moral worth of international society. Note that Weber does not ask whether the capitalist work ethic is a morally acceptable doctrine; he is merely interested in where it comes from, why it is the way it is and how it got to be that way. At the end of Weber’s enquiry, the bourgeois is left trapped in the ‘iron cage’ produced by disenchantment and rationalisation, but that is not a judgement on the morality of the capitalist work ethic so much as an interpretation of the emptiness that results from a way of life that treats the accumulation of capital as an end in itself. Bull’s enquiry offers something quite different: a comparison of the various ways in which the world political system might be organised in terms of which comes closest to realising the ‘universal’ values inherent in world order. The fact that his argument is, to a large extent, a defence of the society of states as the best available means for this goal should not blind us to the fact that, at the end, his enquiry in this particular work makes little attempt to expand our understanding of the values inherent in international order in terms of their axiological relationship to other ethics and ideas. That does not mean Bull’s central line of argument in The Anarchical Society is wrong or even misdirected: a critical analysis of the moral value of the society of states in terms of the needs of world order is, it hardly needs saying, an extremely worthwhile intellectual activity. But it does not fulfil the causal aspirations of the Weberian project.

As we have seen, the question Weber posed to open out possibilities for historical interpretation was to ask about the ‘background of ideas’ that accounted for the ethic at the heart of modern capitalistic culture. There certainly is an attempt to answer something like this question within the work of the English School, including Bull’s. A formulation that more closely resembles Weberian arguments about ‘axiological affinity’ is Adam Watson’s contention that ‘The concept of independence for a multitude of small states in our present international society… has evolved from the Westphalian settlement and bears an inherited resemblance to it.’ No one in the English School would claim that international society today is exactly the same as the European political system in the mid-seventeenth century. They frequently point out, for example, that the shift from the dynastic principle to the idea of nationalist self-determination has wrought major changes in the composition of international society and of the principles of legitimacy according to which, for example, the principle of recognition of sovereignty is supposed to operate. But Watson’s contention satisfies a Weberian notion of causality.
One of the most sustained examples of this line of historical interpretation was developed in Martin Wight’s essay on ‘Western values’. For a start, this does not suffer from the hubris of Bull’s attempt to identify ‘universal’ values of order in social life. It begins by highlighting a culturally narrower range of principles that he thought could be seen as constituting ‘something like a consensus of Western diplomatic opinion’. To the question of how ‘international order’ should be conceived, he then canvases three possible replies: it is an ‘even distribution of power’; it is a ‘distinct international social order’ and it is a ‘distinct moral or ideological order’.49 The first idea of international order is obviously bound up with the notion of the preservation of the balance of power, closely akin to the first of Bull’s ‘elementary or primary goals’ of the society of states; it is the formulation of the concept that Wight sees as most closely associated with the Western tradition of diplomacy that forms the core of his enquiry. The other two definitions of international order—as a social order and as a moral order—Wight sees as ‘bound up with the notion of international society as a civitas maxima, with the assimilation of international society to domestic society’, but viewed from very different perspectives: the idea of a ‘social order’ is favoured by conservatives, the idea of a ‘moral order’ by revolutionaries.

Thus we are offered three ways of understanding the ‘spirit’ of international society: as a balance of power that should be managed or preserved, as a social order that should be defended and as a moral order that should be realised. (A little later in Wight’s discussion, there is a small but significant change in his terminology. ‘Balance of power’ and ‘moral order’ remain intact, but the idea of a ‘distinct international social order’ undergoes a subtle change to reappear as the ‘legal order’, presumably on the (understandable but not entirely legitimate) assumption that the social order approved by conservatives finds expression in the rules of international law that prevail at any given time.) The distinction between ‘the moral order, legal order and the balance of power’ then provides the conceptual framework for a sweeping and remarkably succinct historical interpretation of the development of Western diplomacy across the entire modern era. Grotius, according to Wight, collapsed the moral and legal order together, supposing that ‘there was no general demand of unsatisfied justice . . . to create a cleavage’ between them, and effectively ignored the question of the balance of power. After Westphalia, the balance of power rose to the ascendancy, and the moral and legal orders became identified with its preservation (to the dismay of the Grotians). After 1815, ‘a cleavage appeared between the legal and moral orders, as the Vienna settlement fell into disrespect for obstructing the rightful claims of nationality’ (but these discrepancies could, up to a point, be corrected without fundamentally undermining the balance of power, thereby providing for the considerable stability of the nineteenth-century European political system). When the pursuit of national self-determination could no longer be contained without destabilising the balance of power
International Society as an Ideal Type

(i.e. German unification), the introduction of collective security in the League of Nations after 1919 involved, as Wight put it, the institutionalisation of the balance of power on behalf of the legal order. A renewed consistency between the legal and the moral orders rested on the belief that ‘the Versailles Settlement, the existing order, embodied no substantial injustice, when compared with what had come to challenge it’ and that ‘it represented, in broad outline, a peace of reason and justice’. Finally, since 1945, the balance of power was ‘frozen into the balance of terror’, removing some of the insecurities attendant on a more flexible distribution of power, and so providing space for the reassertion of the idea of moral order over against the legal order, particularly evident in the West's acceptance of the revolutionary claims of decolonisation.50

Whereas I have suggested that Bull's argument in The Anarchical Society eschewed historical interpretation for critical moral evaluation, Wight’s analysis here might be accused of slipping into historical narrative, albeit a brilliantly succinct one, rather than interpretation. The question one might ask here is how much Wight’s account of the shifting contours of Western diplomatic opinion expands our understanding of the ‘spirit’ of the international society that we live in at present. Weber’s analysis, as we have seen, purported to tell the modern bourgeois something new about the ethic by which he lives, even if it is only to point out the emptiness of a way of life that devotes itself to a vocation as an end in itself. In Wight’s essay, it is hard to see how, by charting the various phases of Western diplomatic culture over the last few hundred years, he adds to our grasp of where its ethos came from, in terms of its relationship to other value systems, or offers a new perspective on the meaning of ‘Western values’ for us today.

Reconstructing the English School

The above criticisms may seem to accuse the English School of not doing something that they never claimed to be doing anyway. Up to a point, this is true, but I hope that I have also made it clear that the school contains useful resources for an interpretive analysis of international relations. The school’s evaluative interpretation—their insistence that ‘international society’ was not just a classificatory concept—could be developed into an ideal-typical one by relating it to the values inherent in the concept of order. While that does not mean it is wrong for scholars such as Buzan to develop the English School’s conceptual vocabulary in the direction of taxonomic classification, it suggests that the school may be taken in other directions, by fleshing out the implications of their idea of order in world politics. The English School is tantalisingly on the edge of an interpretation of international relations which can reveal for us not only where our present system came from, but its actual meaning for us.
As one example of how the school’s conceptual vocabulary might be adapted for that purpose, I have emphasised, in another place, the contrast between toleration and civilisation as goals of order in world politics (an evaluative interpretation that is not absent from the work of the English School). Following Wight, I would certainly locate both within a Western diplomatic tradition rather than claiming a Bullian ‘universal’ validity for either. Where I think my account goes beyond Wight, especially in his essay on Western values, is that I have sought to show how the tension between these goals is defused through racial discrimination within the context of a bifurcated international society, with one set of rules for ‘civilized’ peoples and another for everyone else. Western values, in other words, are and have always been fundamentally dichotomous, which became an ethical dilemma when racial or cultural discrimination became unacceptable in the application of international law or the operation of international organisations.

To say, as is often done, that we live in a world where ‘new’ ideas about human rights and so forth are beginning to come onto the agenda of international relations, or that international society has undergone a ‘solidarist turn’, is a misinterpretation of the role that Western values play in international society. The values are not new at all; it is the acuteness of the tension between them that is new. In that work, I posed the question of whether Western values can ever be anything other than a self-contradictory international ethic within a non-discriminatory global international legal order. That is not a defence of the moral value of international society in the manner of Bull’s *The Anarchical Society*, nor is it an historical narrative of the career of Western diplomacy in the manner of Wight’s essay on ‘Western values’. It is an interpretation of the ethic by which we (or at least, those of who are, to use a Weberian phrase, ‘products of Western civilization’) conduct our international relations, and, not unlike Weber’s analysis of the ‘spirit of capitalism’, it uses an enquiry into the ‘background of ideas’ to say where our current ethic has come from and to gain a new perspective on its strengths and weaknesses as a code to live by in the present.

My argument in *Beyond the Anarchical Society* follows in the English School’s footsteps by concerning itself with the international implications of ‘Western values’, and one might very well say that this is only one amongst many interpretive perspectives from which we might wish to look at the world. The world is not exclusively composed of ‘products of Western civilization’, and the values associated with that particular way of life can never be expected to speak to all the ethics according to which international relations are conducted, thus limiting this interpretation’s resonance as a statement of the dilemma that lies at the heart of how ‘we’ understand what is culturally significant in the international society and international legal order today. An Islamic perspective, to take a more or less random example, might see the cultural significance of the modern states-system
in a completely different way, perhaps in terms of its relevance to the values contained in shari’a; an American perspective, rooted in a substantially different diplomatic tradition from modern Europe, might similarly have an alternative perspective on the ‘spirit’ of international society, such as a more universalist one. My own view is that the main fault of the English School’s work is not that they adopted one particular interpretive lens—it is as good, or as bad, as any other—but that they did not fully depict the thorniness of the dilemma that is contained therein, a dilemma for which one can really give no better name than the traditional English vice of hypocrisy. To be the world’s leading imperial power and simultaneously to proclaim the virtues of a society of independent sovereign states is a truly glaring instance of such hypocrisy, but to find it laid bare one needs to consult the works of harder-minded critics such as E.H. Carr or George Orwell.

Besides adopting alternative perspectives on the spirit of international society that take something other than ‘Western values’ as their central focus, there are other promising routes for an interpretive sociology of international relations. One possibility would be to look more closely at what Wight called the ‘social order’ which conservatives saw as the most valuable dimension of international society. This picks up on a theme that recurs throughout Wight’s work, finds occasional echoes in Bull’s and Watson’s work on diplomacy and even extends to other, non-English School, understandings of the concept of international society, such as Hans Morgenthau’s. These are the shared values inherent within ‘diplomatic culture’, such as the shared values of the ‘aristocratic international’ that dominated international society in the early nineteenth century. Where did these ‘diplomatic values’ come from, and what is their relevance to the values of the ‘diplomatic community’ today? The ‘spirit’ of international society need not only be found in the ethical principles that lie behind the rules of international law or the writings of international jurists: one of the clearest messages of Wight’s work is that it is also to be found in the writings, speeches and actions of diplomatic practitioners. Again, such an interpretive focus would obviously have its limits. At the very least, it looks likely to be rather attached to the beliefs and actions of officialdom, when one might think that the views, mental universe, one might say habitus of activists within non-official organisations would provide equally interesting material for an interpretive enquiry. But for now my goal has merely been to locate the intellectual resources for an interpretive sociology of international relations that exist within the work of the English School.

Notes and references


12. Ibid., p. 92.


15. Ibid., pp. 93 and 101.


17. Ibid., pp. 150 and 151.


23. Weber, *Methodology*, pp. 78–79. Weber’s understanding of explanation in terms of causal relationships rather than causal laws is close to some recent work on explanation in international relations theory: see in particular Alexander Wendt,

25. Ibid., p. 92.
26. Ibid., pp. 89–90.
27. Ibid., p. 183.
28. Ibid., p. 196.
29. Ibid., p. 181.
32. Ibid., p. 54. The mere fact that Weber's thesis has held the interest of so many readers—even if they disagree with his actual analysis of how this feature of modern capitalism emerged—suggests that he was justified in this assumption. Of course, it is possible that we may not feel quite the same way today, and it is certainly possible that Weber was describing a peculiarly bourgeois ethos and that his study primarily appealed to a bourgeois readership. That limits the relevance of his interpretation, but does not, in my view, invalidate it.
33. Ibid., pp. 75 and 180.
34. Ibid., p. 182.
39. Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 13. As I have argued elsewhere, while Bull’s is by far the best known definition of the concept of international society, it was not the only formulation to come out of the English School, and others, notably Wight and Herbert Butterfield, questioned the statism inherent in Bull’s definition: see Wight, ‘Western Values’, p. 101; Butterfield, ‘Comments on Hedley Bull’s Paper on the Grotian Conception of International Society’, in *British Committee Papers*, Chatham House, 1962; and Keene, ‘The Development of the Concept of International Society’. I will return to this point later.
41. Ibid., pp. 4–5 and 8.
42. Ibid., pp. 16–19.
43. Ibid., pp. 20 and 22.
44. Ibid., p. 21.
47. See, for example, the work of Andrew Linklater as a development of this theme within the English School.
49. Wight, ‘Western Values’, pp. 90–91 and 103.
50. Ibid., pp. 106–108.
Theorising the Causes of Order: Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society*

K. J. Holsti

The English School refers to the characterization of international politics that emphasizes the role of norms, rules, and laws in tempering the relations between states. Although its status as a ‘school’ has been challenged, the characterization has clearly supplemented other approaches to the field, such as realism and constructivism. The origins of the school were British, as its founders—with the notable exception of Hedley Bull, who was Australian—were all noted International Relations scholars in England. In recent years, the central concept of the school, international society, or the society of states has migrated far beyond the British Isles, and today has universal appeal. It has even made significant inroads into that bastion of scientism, the United States, where it has gained adherents and become institutionalized in a section of the International Studies Association. The term ‘English School’ thus refers to origins, and not to the broad impact it has had on international relations studies around the world.

The main works that developed the concept of international society appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the publication of Hedley Bull’s classic, *The Anarchical Society*, in 1977. Only two decades after this date did American scholars begin to take seriously the main notions of the English School. While the role of rules, norms, and law in international politics had some purchase in the academic study of International Relations in the United States prior to the 1990s, these subjects were largely confined to technical analysis of international law, a subject that had unfortunately separated from Political Science under the impact of the ‘behavioural revolution’ of the 1960s, a revolution that sought to convert International Relations into a formal science. Questions of sovereignty, the ethics of humanitarian intervention, the relationship between culture and international society, and the spread of international society to the former colonial world did not lend themselves to the quantification, formal models, and empirical proof that were the hallmarks of the social sciences in the United States for much of the latter part of the twentieth century.
Although concerns about the role of norms, rules, and laws in international politics began to appear in the United States in the 1990s, primarily in the works of Nicholas Onuf, Martha Finnemore, and the Keck and Sikkink study, these efforts, though acknowledging the work of Hedley Bull, were not inspired primarily by him. Why not? Because these authors regarded the leaders of the English School as methodologically imprecise or indifferent. Cause–effect relationships were seldom specified, the main generalizations about international society were not couched in formulas that could be easily or systematically checked against either historical or contemporary data, and most independent variables were not clearly identified. Finally, much of the early work on the English School analyzed traditions of thought rather than domains of diplomatic action. In brief, American critics deeply committed to the canons of the scientific method and positivism, faulted the English School’s methodological naiveté. There was simply no way that the main ideas of the school, as they had been developed in the works of Wight, Watson, James, Bull, Vincent, and others, could be verified.

Hedley Bull would have agreed with some of these critiques, but then would judge them irrelevant. To him, no area of study such as International Relations can be reduced to an exact science. The subject is inherently one where judgment, tentative conclusions, and interpretation reign. Bull admitted that theoretical work in international relations should be coherent, precise, orderly, and consistent with the philosophical foundations of modern science but this science is not confined to those matters that can be logically or mathematically proved or verified according to ‘strict’ procedures. Intuition, judgment, and a deep familiarity with history are necessary components of the theoretical enterprise, and any generalizations emerging from them are necessarily temporary and are subject to challenge. Knowledge of social domains is always contingent and open to interpretation and re-interpretation. To reduce an area of inquiry as subjective as the theory of international relations to science would, in his famous barb, ‘commit [us] to a course of intellectual Puritanism that keeps [the scientists]…as remote from the substance of international politics as the inmates of a Victorian nunnery were from the study of sex.’ But Finnemore’s critique of the English School does not insist that ‘science’ be reduced to mathematical precision, formal quantification, and endless replication to tie down the results of research as the ‘truth’. It is more a question of making assumptions explicit, clearly identifying cause–effect relationships, and marshalling evidence to support the main generalizations. As she puts it, ‘English School authors…almost never provide systematic discussions about the rules of evidence.’ Indeed, many of the critiques of the English School’s lack of concern with methodological issues are not far distant from Bull’s own commitment to coherence, precision, and the philosophical foundations of modern science.
Why Bull?

This chapter concentrates on a single work, Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society*. It does so for three main reasons:

1. The concept of ‘international society’ is the main theoretical innovation of the school, and Hedley Bull more than anyone else developed it, or more precisely, rescued it from the rather inchoate formulations of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century European analysts such as Grotius, Vattel, von Gentz, and Heeren. All the historians of the English School acknowledge Bull’s central role in the development of the concept. Charles Manning and Martin Wight were among the first to resuscitate the idea, but their writings were predominantly historical-descriptive and taxonomic rather than causal. Bull’s work has served as the main inspiration for further work of this genre.

2. The writings that can be included in the English School canon are disparate, covering a broad range of subjects, and often concerned with normative rather than empirical issues. The distinguishing mark of the English School as far as methodology is concerned is that it has no distinctive methodology, or if one wants to put it in a more negative way, it ranges from the methodologically indifferent to the promiscuous. No single essay can hope to cover the range of methods and modes of argumentation that dot the literature.

3. Bull’s work, despite his disclaimers about rigorous methodology in general, is one of the few in the school that combines a constitutive form of theorizing with causal analysis. While Wight and Watson, among others, have a great deal to say about different kinds of international systems, they do not outline a normative *problematique*.

I will proceed by reconstructing the series of steps by which Bull can be said to create a theory of international order as opposed to a description or taxonomy of the domain of international politics. I am concerned primarily with Bull’s notions of constitution and causation, his use of evidence, and his categorization. Much of his work on ‘world society’ is more normative and speculative and thus will be omitted from consideration.

**Selecting the problem**

All theorizing about international politics begins with a normative rather than ‘scientific’ maneuver: What is the problem to be explained? We choose a problem for exploration and evaluation because we think it is in some way important in the sense that it generates concern and the hope or expectation that if we understand it better, policy choices will be made to alleviate or rectify a situation that we believe is sub-optimal. In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, the critical problem of international politics was
the threat of hegemony, or ‘universal monarchy’ as it was then called. Whatever the great risks inherent in a system of sovereign states (anarchy), they were preferred to the costs invoked by an imperial or suzerain system. By the late nineteenth century, war was added to the problem of hegemony. War had brought such catastrophic consequences to its participants that scholars and publicists of international politics thought something should be done about it. The academic literature of a theoretical orientation throughout the twentieth century was clearly concerned with this issue: the causes of war and the conditions of peace. This was not an artifact of the idealism of the 1920s. Kenneth Waltz’ major theoretical essay, Theory of International Politics (1979), has as its normative core five problems to be explained: (1) the recurrence of war; (2) the necessity to avoid relative gains; (3) why and how political units are socialized; (4) the compelling need to maximize autonomy; and (5) the most stable (e.g., non-threatening) form of power balancing.9

Hedley Bull’s original contribution to the theory of international politics is to shift its problématique from war/peace/stability to international order. Note here that he is not concerned with the international order, as many authors today talk about the world order,10 but with the more generic issue of order in international politics. This is a move of considerable importance because immediately he lifts the problem from the particular to the general. International order transcends time, place, and personality. War, the great practice to be explained—and avoided in policy—in most other theories, now becomes a phenomenon that can play both a constructive and a destructive role in international order. Many of those phenomena that in other theories of international relations tend to cause wars (e.g., balances or imbalances of power, alliances, arms races, etc.), now become open questions. Order is a broader concept than any of these; for Bull, it is the thing to be defined and explained, for clearly international politics is not just a war of all against all, as Hobbes and his successors would have it, but is a domain of strife, occasional violence, and cooperation. Bull’s normative assumption is that order is preferable to disorder, an assumption that he does not examine but one that merits consideration.11 Rather than dwelling on this rather important assumption, Bull jumps directly into the question of the compatibility of order and justice at the international level.

To Bull, order is constituted of the ‘pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society’ (p. 8). It is all the things states do to fulfill three essential goals: the preservation of the system of states, the preservation of the independence of its members, and peace in the sense not of ‘permanent peace,’ but that members of the international society see peace as the normal rather than exceptional condition of their mutual relations (pp. 16–17). So order is a ‘pattern of activity’ among states that consciously or not promotes or sustains the international society. In a more generic level, Bull suggests, order
is any activity that make social life possible, namely assurances for life and safety, the sanctity of contracts, and the assurance that ‘the possession of things will remain stable to some degree, and will not be subject to challenges that are constant and without limit’ (p. 4). Bull is careful to point out that it is elements ‘such as these’ (p. 4) that make social life possible. In other words the trinity is necessary but may not be sufficient. He leaves it open for further analysis: other conditions may also contribute to order. Bull’s stance invites further work rather than closure.

Order is constituted of these three essential elements. They are to be found in all levels of society and are not confined to our current notions of national society. Thus, wherever they are found, at whatever analytical level, we have order. The international domain is a society precisely because it contains all three elements, just as they would also be found in a family. Hence the term ‘international society’. It is more than just the presence of norms and rule-bound behaviour. It is any collectivity where the three elements are found.

If order is also a ‘pattern of activity’, then he implies it is a variable rather than a constant. The pattern of activity may change over time and those activities that, for example, help sustain the system or order can also be reversed. We have good evidence of this sort of change when we compare the diplomatic history of, say, eighteenth-century Europe with the contemporary situation. In the earlier period, conquest was considered a right inherent in sovereignty. Territories were conquered on almost an annual basis, an event that provided cartographers with employment, but disturbed the foreign ministries when they threatened to upset the balance of power. By contrast, conquest is no longer considered legitimate. With only a few minor exceptions (e.g., North Vietnam–South Vietnam, Goa, East Timor) there have been almost no permanent conquests in the world since 1945. This dramatic change in practices and norms can be said to strengthen two essential components of order, the sanctity of possessions and the common interest in the preservation of the system of states. The United Nations Charter prohibition against the threat or use of force in international relations is designed (but not faithfully observed) to sustain the third component of order, international peace and security.

It would be difficult to contest Bull’s selection of the constituent elements of international order, those three goals that make social life possible and continuous. Where do they come from? Bull uses the domestic analogy, by asking initially where does order come from in society? His list of three essentials—life, truth, and property—is not exhaustive, as he notes, but these three or something like them are necessary conditions. He invites speculation on others, again consistent with his view that in the areas of social life, including international politics, certainty and closure are seldom possible.
Bull’s use of the domestic analogy to illustrate the constituent elements of order raises the question of transferring concepts from one domain to another. Adherents of the Hobbesian view of international politics might attack Bull on this point, arguing that a domain of anarchy cannot be compared to a domain of governance. Bull’s answer points to ‘stateless societies’ such as the Nuer and Dinka in Africa to demonstrate that anarchy, the lack of formal governance, does not preclude the development of common interests and a common commitment to maintain and sustain the relevant system or to provide sanctity and security for the lives and properties of those that make up the system. The whole enterprise is also sustained by social history, common identities, traditions, and rules. Cooperation to create and maintain a society does not occur on a one-time basis, by ‘rational actors’ meeting to resolve their ‘coordination problems’ as liberal institutionalists and game theorists would have it, but develops through history, often nurtured by a common culture and identity.

There is thus nothing arbitrary in Bull’s choices in defining the constituent elements international order. His definition is nominal in a sense, but it ultimately has empirical referents in both domestic and anarchical societies. One does not have to stretch the imagination to see all three requirements in operation today. Terms like ‘the international community,’ documents such as the Untied Nations Charter or the Pact of Paris (1991), norms against the use of force and the de-legitimization of conquest are all related, ultimately, to the common wish to preserve the system and the independence and territorial integrity of its members. What is perhaps surprising is that so many modern theorists of international politics have overlooked the elements of society and order in the field.

Bull’s *problematique* is more complicated than just offering a rather unchallengeable definition of order in the international society. The question is not so much whether there is an international society characterized by the patterns of activity that lead to order, but how this order is maintained in the face of serious challenges. It is one thing to outline the constituent elements of order at any social level. It is another to account for their development and/or presence. At this point, Bull switches to a formal causal analysis. Constituient questions concern the ‘what’ or the ‘how possible?’ Causal analysis is required to explain ‘why’ questions.12

**Step 2: How international society is maintained?**

Order is an *outcome* of three interrelated factors: rules such as mutual recognition of sovereign independence, institutions that support these rules, and underlying these and most fundamental, a common interest in maintaining the system. This *causal* explanation of sustaining order can be represented as in Figure 6.1.
The third causal variable, the conscious or unconscious common interest in maintaining the system, is the key to order and demarcates an international society from a system of states.

Bull roughly hypothesizes the connections between the independent variables. Thus, international institutions entail ‘habits and practices shaped toward the realization of common goals’ (p. 71). They also help make rules effective. Rules ‘provide the means whereby international society moves from the vague perception of a common interest to a clear conception of the kind of conduct it requires’ (p. 68). They also promote behavior that sustains the three goals, sanctity of contracts, stability of life and possessions, and limits on the use of force. Bull could have said a great deal more on these critical connections, but appears to have been content to provide mere outlines or hypothetical relationships.13

Bull rejects any functional explanation of order and insists that international institutions as he defines them (see below), rules, and sense of common interest in maintaining the system are part of the efficient causation of international order, or in his words, they are ‘among [my ital.] the necessary and sufficient conditions of its occurrence’ (p. 71). Note again his caution. His modest (e.g., underspecified) model of causation is not exclusive. Unlike Morgenthau, Waltz, and many other theorists who insist that their explanatory models are complete, Bull never invokes closure but invites additions, modifications, or elaborations. It is a stance of reasonable certainty and some face validity within an intellectual exercise that, given the nature of the subject, is necessarily uncertain.

The causal model explains the maintenance of order (Chapter 3 of his text is entitled ‘How is Order Maintained in World Politics?’). As suggested, Bull is more interested in how an order is sustained than how it originated, a point his critics have elaborated as ignoring the issue altogether. This criticism is not valid. Take the issue of the common interest in maintaining the system, the underlying condition that allows or ‘causes’ institutions and rules of coexistence to develop. Bull does not enter into a historical discussion of the origins of the European states system, but outlines four possible
conditions that explain the emergence of this critical common interest. To make the point precisely, it is worth quoting Bull’s position on the origins of international society:

The maintenance of order in international society has as its starting point the development among states of a sense of common interests in the elementary goals of social life. However different and conflicting their interests may be, they are united in viewing these goals as instrumental to them. Their sense of common interests may derive from fear of unrestricted violence, of the instability of agreements or of the insecurity of their independence or sovereignty. It may have its origins in rational calculation that the willingness of states to accept restrictions on their freedom of action is reciprocal. Or it may be based also on the treatment of these goals as valuable in themselves and not merely as a means to and end—it may express a sense of common values as well as of common interests.¹⁴

This is not a formal causal analysis, but a list of some of the possible necessary conditions for the emergence of a common interest.¹⁵ Despite the English School’s long preoccupation with the question whether a shared culture is a necessary condition for the emergence of an international society, Bull’s list above makes no reference to a common culture (although it does mention common values). Fear, uncertainty, and a common recognition that if we do not cooperate minimally to secure our independence, we will all perish lie as the bases of institutions, rules, and the common interest in system maintenance. Bull is clearly interested in origins, but he does not dwell on the issue.

Bull is more concerned with the endurance of order. As Rengger points out, ‘for “international society” to be a “fact,” it must include norms, rules and procedures that are not simply rules of thumb but which are able to create illocutionary and normative force.’¹⁶ The fear, common values, and other conditions that help account for the rise of the essential common interest in the maintenance of the system must persist over time and must become embedded in the make-up of the states that comprise the system. Rational choice approaches that see cooperation arising from self-interested action do not adequately explain how cooperation eventually becomes rooted in a normative framework of permanent obligation. Bull in his most original and highly developed move focuses on longevity and endurance rather than the origins of international order. His stance is similar to that of his peers: none of the realist theorists of his era puzzled over the origins of anarchy or of states, for example.

If Bull can be exonerated from the claim that he pays no attention to origins of the common interest in maintaining the system and focuses instead on the issue of maintaining the elements of order, the charge
of underdevelopment is more valid when it comes to his conceptions of rules and institutions. Both are critical sources of order, but Bull makes no systematic—analytical or historical—foray into their origins. He basically ignores the issue, which leads to some inaccuracies. For example, he insists that Chou China during the Warring States period (403–221 BC) and the Greek city states of the sixth and fifth centuries BC were international societies. However, neither of these ‘societies’ had developed notions of sovereignty or exclusive territorial jurisdiction. The origins of institutions and rules are not the subject of historical explanation because of Bull’s preoccupation with how the rules and institutions of the states system contribute to order and how they are challenged in the contemporary environment.

Bull’s project, throughout, is an invitation to further research; it is a challenge to others to add to or subtract from his theoretical framework and for others to do the historical research on origins. I will say more on this in my concluding comments. Here, it is sufficient to argue that methodologically Bull’s work is reasonably clear within a limited domain. The constituent elements of order are specified and supported through the use of domestic analogies. He then specifies some necessary conditions for the maintenance or order and he interrogates the connection between them. His causal analysis is consistent with his epistemological stance: causes and outcomes are usually put in a conditional language of ‘may’ instead of ‘is.’ He develops persuasive arguments to show how institutions may contribute to international order and how some current developments are compromising the main characteristics of some of the institutions. Substantively, more could be said on any of these issues, but it is not Bull’s intention to ‘lay down the law’ (to use Vattel’s famous phrase)—a new hegemony for international theory—but to offer suggestive explanations for a phenomenon in international politics that had been ignored in both the Hobbesian and the Kantian versions of the field.

There are, however, several areas where Bull’s writing leads to ambiguity and thus to misunderstanding. I will highlight three ‘mysteries’ in the Anarchical Society that arise from the lack of rigor in some of Bull’s definitions and exegesis: (1) What is ‘international society,’ and what is its relationship to the larger domain he terms ‘world society’? (2) What are international institutions? and (3) Where is history?

**Mystery #1: what is international society?**

For most of the commentaries of the English School, the notion of international society refers to a characterization of the essential characteristics of international politics over a long period of time. It is thus a ‘fact’ something that can be observed, identified, and experienced. To Bull, it is also an ‘idea,’ and an ideal type; states will resemble the idea or ideal type to
the extent that they ‘think of themselves as constituting a society of that kind.’18 It is both a social construction and something that the observer can analyze. It is a shorthand characterization of some aspects of international politics, one that goes back to the insights of Grotius, Vattel, Heeren, and many others.19 It has an intellectual history and continuity, which raises the question why Morgenthau, Waltz, and many others ignored it. While Bull talks extensively about ‘international society,’ as he talks about states, balances of power, and international law, it is clear from numerous statements that it is also a constantly changing variable. It has no fixed parameters such as those found in the concept of ‘international system,’ or ‘power politics’ in realist theory. Bull makes constant reference to the ‘elements’ of international order in international politics, stating clearly that these elements are only part of international relations and that they vie against Hobbesian and Kantian elements in constantly shifting proportions:

...[S]ociety is only one of a number of competing elements in international politics; indeed, the description of it as a society at all conveys only part of the truth. An explanation of the rules and institutions of international society that dealt only with the functions they serve in relation to international society as a whole would overlook the extent to which international politics is better described as a state of war or as a political field in which individuals and groups other than the state are the principal actors.20

The elements of order in international society are thus variables that wax and wane, just as the Hobbesian and Kantian elements are. Bull offers no systematic explanations regarding why and how the social elements grow in strength or decline, although in his discussion of alternative international systems in Part III (‘Alternative Paths to World Order’) he offers some hints. Moreover, he says little about the boundaries between the various domains.21

Figure 6.2 offers a pictorial rendering Bull’s world view.

The globe is the total system, which is comprised of various ‘elements,’ within three domains: the Hobbesian domain (war of all against all), the domain of international society (the domain of rule-based practices and commitment to the preservation of the system), and the Kantian domain (representing elements of ‘world society’ comprised of individuals and possibly other non-state actors).22 The three domains expand or shrink historically in a zero-sum way. If the Kantian domain expands, as seems to be the case today, then it is, as Bull suggests, ‘subversive’ of the elements of international society. Similarly, the Hobbesian elements, as during World War II, grew rapidly at the expense of both the international society and the Kantian elements. Figure 6.2 suggests a possible rendering of this scheme, comparing 1702 (the eve of the War of the Spanish Succession),
with the contemporary situation. In the former, Hobbesian elements dominate, although there are elements of society as well as a limited (to Europe) world society represented by the position of the church and the cultural affinity of ‘Christendom.’ Today, the Hobbesian element has declined perceptibly, as interstate war and conquest have become a rarity in international relations, while the influence and weight of non-state actors and individuals have impacted on critical elements of international society such as the doctrine of non-intervention. Many of the contemporary debates about the adequacies of international theories revolve around this very question: to what extent are we seeing the rise of a world society, and in what ways is it challenging the ontological and theoretical primacy of state-centered conceptions of the world? The boundaries between the domains are constantly in flux, although Bull is never very clear on how we might theorize about the connections between the domains or the dynamics of movement.

What the figures do not illustrate is the duality (at a minimum) of the international society concept. Bull refers, simultaneously, to a ‘social reality’ (e.g., pp. 123, 133), to an ‘idea,’ or concept, to a social construction, to a ‘supreme normative principle’ (p. 137), and to variables in his causal scheme. There is nothing inherently wrong with multiple meanings, but Bull does not always make clear distinctions between them and, in particular, he offers no clues as to how, in his causal scheme, the variables can be rendered into
research design. The conflating of social reality with a supreme normative principle also raises significant issues. It encourages Bull, for example, to argue implicitly that the is should also be the ought.

**Mystery #2: what are international institutions?**

Bull offers a definition of institutions, one that while vague in some respects is certainly capable of pointing to empirical referents. He also distinguishes them from international organizations, a distinction that many others fail to make. Institutions, in Bull’s sense, are established patterns of action that contain normative elements and are sustained through tradition and culture. International institutions are akin to social arrangements such as marriage, universities, or business. We speak of each of these as an ‘institution’ rather than as an organization. Although he avoids a functional methodology in his book—indeed he deliberately rejects it (pp. 72–73)—he insists that international institutions have consequences for international order, or to use his term, they serve certain functions for that order (e.g., how does diplomacy contribute to international order? (p. 156). In general, they sustain the normative and rule-based elements of international politics, and, as in diplomacy, they symbolize the society of states. Bull is careful to point out, however, that these functions can be performed in ways other than those offered through the institutions he selects. One could have, for example, a robust element of international society without professional diplomats: communication between states could be handled through other means, as is increasingly the case today.

Bull’s institutions have the function of ‘protecting’ the essential rules of coexistence between sovereign agents. But it is states that are the premier and essential institution, as well as agents, of the society of states, for they not only make the rules, but also communicate, administer, interpret, enforce, legitimize, alter, and protect them (pp. 68–71). An international society, as he has defined it, is unthinkable without states. They are thus the foundational institution. The other institutions he examines contribute to international society and order, to be sure, but we have no way of knowing if his list is comprehensive, and in what ways institutions are comparatively important or crucial. Bull seems to have an implicit hierarchy of institutions, with states and balances of power as essentials for the maintenance and functioning of the other institutions. Without the balance of power, the system would probably transform into a universal empire or a suzerainty system. The balance of power is a human contrivance, as opposed to many realist theories which suggest it can be fortuitous, or an automatic tendency in any international system. But one can raise the question whether the balance of power is critical to order and its constituent rules, for throughout history there have been serious imbalances of power (as today) without a resulting system transformation or a luxurious growth of the Hobbesian elements.
of international politics. Many states, rather than resisting potential hegemons, have bandwagoned with them, leading to greater imbalances, and the so-called ‘balancers’ have often failed to balance. Bull does not consider the possibility that imbalances of power may contribute to international order as well. So while, after states, balance of power may be the most critical institution in his list, he pays little attention to the problems that the concept raises for theoretical inquiry.

Bull also lists the great powers as an institution. This raises numerous issues, not the least of which is that analysts seldom agree on its roster. The great powers have selected themselves in some key historical moments (as prior to the Congress of Vienna), but the hierarchy has seldom stuck. Moreover, in discussing the contribution the great powers make to international order (pp. 199–220), Bull skips over the well-known fact that the great powers have been more war-prone than any other category of state. While they have occasionally used armed force to maintain a balance of power, to enforce international law, or to punish lesser power violence, one can certainly make the case that they have been the source of more international instability, crises, and outright war than other states. Indeed, it is often the smaller states rather than the great powers that are the main defenders of international law and multilateral institutions. In the contemporary environment, it has been the lesser states of the world that have joined together to create international regimes (e.g., the land mines ban), led and sustained international peace-keeping efforts, protested violations of international law (such as the no-fly zones in Iraq), and devoted larger proportional sums to major development schemes and relief programs. Bull insists that one hallmark of an institution is ‘patterned activity,’ but in the case of the great powers, their activities have ranged from massive genocides to passive withdrawals from international politics. There is little pattern to their behavior. In my opinion, great power refers to a particular status in international relations, not to an institution as Bull has defined it.

There is little basis for arguing that Bull’s choice of the remaining institutions is off the mark. International law, war (in some respects), and diplomacy are certainly the key elements of the Grotian view of international society. However, what about other institutions such as territoriality (not discussed by Bull), or the global market? In brief, Bull’s methodology does not include the selection criteria for choice of institutions and one key institution—the state—receives only slim treatment compared to the others.

A further problem arising from the lack of explicit selection criteria is that Bull’s choices load the dice in favor of institutions that promote international order. His selection of war may seem to contradict this observation, but Bull does at least strive to discriminate between types of wars and their consequences. The use of organized violence to enforce society norms, as in the case of collective military sanctions, offers numerous examples. But what of less order-promoting activities? Bull’s definition of
institutions is rather vague—‘habits and practices shaped toward the realization of common goals’ (p. 71)—allowing for an extraordinarily wide range of possibilities. Among them could be the practice of piracy which was in some cases organized and abetted by states and the governors of the Barbary polities in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Bull also excludes transnational non-state bodies whose activities are patterned and suffused with norms and ideas dedicated toward common goals. International drug trade would be included in this category.

There is probably no authoritative solution to the problem of selection criteria. Bull implicitly suggests that states and balances of power are essential to the functioning of other institutions, but he offers no clues as to why this should always be the case. In my own work, I have distinguished between ‘foundational’ institutions, such as the state, territoriality, sovereignty, and international law and ‘process’ institutions, such as diplomacy and trade. This is not the place to offer a justification for this categorization, but we can go through a counter-factual imagining and try to see if something akin to an international society and its defining characteristic of order would be possible in a domain of non-sovereign agents, having no conception of territoriality, and abjuring all efforts to create analogies to international law. Despite some globalists who see the burgeoning realm of transnational private activities as taking place at the expense of states, it is the sovereign territorial state that remains the sole locus and source of authority in international politics. Authority is not the same as power or influence, but it is an essential attribute of order, one that Bull does not adequately consider. There could be any number of process institutions in international society, but my list of the foundational ones is exhaustive and sufficient in a way that Bull’s is not.

Finally, I reiterate the point that The Anarchical Society is mostly mute on the origins of and changes in institutions. When, how, and why did these institutions arise? Have all the institutions survived? Which ones have become obsolete and why? Are there nascent institutions emerging in the contemporary society of states? This criticism is not entirely fair, for Bull very carefully sets out the questions he wishes to explore in relation to each institution. His fundamental concern is to outline the roles and functions his selected institutions play in sustaining order, and the status of these institutions at the time he wrote his treatise. Bull is concerned with the problem of change in institutions in the 1970s, but not in a systematic way. His treatment of change is context-dependent, not generic.

Mystery #3: where is history?

Bull was highly critical of the scientific or behavioral approach to the study of international politics, in part because in his opinion the studies extant at the time he wrote were a-historical. The Anarchical Society is replete with
history; Bull’s familiarity with some crucial developments in international politics is fully on display. However, aside from historical illustrations about the status of various international institutions, Bull in *The Anarchical Society* is mostly interested in the history of thought about international relations.\(^{26}\) Some of the forefathers of the concept of international society—Grotius, de Callieres, Vattel, Heeren—and many others are brought into the discussion. The whole idea of Europe as a single ‘Republic,’ bound not just by propinquity, but also by religion, culture, history, economics ties, and the arts, fills the pages of most of the continent’s great thinkers. Aside from those Bull mentions, we would have to add Rousseau, Kant, Gentz, Fenelon, and Montesquieu.\(^{27}\) Bull and his colleagues on the British Committee on the Study of International Theory did not inaugurate a new theory of international politics, but resurrected European thinkers of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, these central figures who were concerned like Bull about international order and the problem of hegemony. For many graduates of American PhD programs in the 1960s until even today, the originators of the idea of a society of states must seem of antiquarian interest only, but they are central to the background tradition of the English School. Bull’s contribution, in this regard, is to demonstrate the continuity of thinking and to buttress his claim that the study of international relations bereft of historical knowledge, particularly of intellectual history, deprives the investigator of the means of self-criticism, and in consequence leads him or her to have a view of the subject and its possibilities ‘that is callow and brash.’\(^{28}\) Throughout *The Anarchical Society* Bull appropriately pays homage to his intellectual predecessors.

It is in connection with Bull’s discussion of ‘Alternative Paths to World Order’ that the mystery of his use of history comes to the fore. His alternatives, ranging from a disarmed world to world government, contain no discussion of the actual historical record of alternatives, the most common of which has been the search for hegemony.

While Bull emphasized the ‘dark side’ of politics within the society of states—the persistence of Hobbesian elements—he did not acknowledge that a major source of the Hobbesian element may be the conflicts and wars fought over competing visions of order within a single society of states. The alternative to the society of states may not be the victory of the Hobbesian element (or the Kantian element, for that matter) or the alternatives he outlines in Chapter 10, but rather an international order that sustains or incorporates the three essential elements under an entirely different distribution of power, buttressed by different ideologies, norms, and institutions, but still consistent with his concept of order.

If we look at the greatest threats to the international system over the last four centuries, they have all come from actors that had different visions of how an international order ought to be organized. Hitler’s ‘New Order’
does not qualify as an alternative because it was based on a racial hierarchy enforced by terror, theft, and war, and is thus inherently incompatible with Bull’s notion of order. Note also that it was a war of one against all others, and not all against all in the Hobbesian image. The remaining contenders’ images all meet the three essential requirements of order specified by Bull, but the configuration of power was essentially different, as were the ideologies and rules under which the system would operate.

For European opponents of Napoleon, the French emperor personified the threat of ‘universal monarchy’ that had so preoccupied analysts of diplomacy ever since the Thirty Year’s War. He set out to reconfigure the map of Europe, establishing satrapies and fictional states wherever the Grande Armée ‘liberated’ populations from the yoke of monarchical despotism. Napoleon established an empire (1804–1814) in name, but not in fact. Provided that the other European states accepted French supremacy, they were able to maintain the essentials of sovereignty. They remained states within a European system of states, they exchanged ambassadors, they entered into treaty relations with each other, and they maintained their own military forces. France annexed considerable territory from the victims of its conquests, but unlike the ancient Chinese states during the Chou era, Napoleon did not ‘extinguish’ most of those whom he defeated. Prussia, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, and Spain (with Napoleon’s brother as king) continued as ostensible sovereign states. Only some of the territories in Italy became parallels of foreign provinces in the Roman Empire. In the Napoleonic order, France was the suzerain or hegemon, justifying its superior position on its liberal and revolutionary ideology. This was a system of order within an international society characterized by the hegemony of a single power.

The next great competitor of order came after the Bolshevik victory in 1917. The Communist vision of an alternative world order was never outlined in great detail, but there is no evidence that states as such were to be eliminated in favor of a Russian constructed, centralized empire. Had Bolshevik-inspired revolutions in the aftermath of World War I in Germany, Finland, Hungary, and elsewhere been victorious, it is doubtful that the new regimes would have liquidated themselves and their countries to be ruled by apparatchiks from Moscow. Even in the heyday of Stalin’s rule, the communist countries of central and east Europe maintained all the symbols and appurtenances of sovereignty. The Soviet bloc closely resembled a suzerain system because Moscow held a veto on most of the lesser members’ foreign and domestic policy decisions, but it was never centralized in the way that Rome or Hitler’s system of gauleiters were. The Soviet order was sustained by the Marxist–Leninist ideology, military force, bonds between its members’ party leaders, and the development of a concept of socialist international law which was proclaimed to be superior to imperialist international legal principles. ‘Socialist internationalism’ was the underlying normative structure
that prescribed the rules and norms appropriate for inter-socialist state relations. The order had its own institutions and etiquette quite distinct from the universal ones outlined by Bull.

The contemporary international system constitutes a third addition to the list of alternatives to the international society portrayed by Bull. There has been much loose talk and writing about an American empire, but most of it is in the vein of political rhetoric rather than serious analysis. No empire in history has formally recognized the sovereignty of states within its ambit. To speak of empire and sovereignty in the same breath is an oxymoron. Technically, the United States does not present a threat analogous to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century concept of ‘universal monarchy.’ However, it certainly does not see its contemporary role as that of just another great power within a balance of power system. The United States is firmly committed to the world plan of societies incorporated into separate sovereign jurisdictions. It is also committed to the promotion and sustenance of norms, rules, and institutions that would allow us to characterize the contemporary system as an ‘international society’ in Bull’s sense, that is, as a collectivity of sovereign states where there is a predominant common interest in its preservation and in the rules that incorporate Bull’s famous trinity defining the basis of all societies. In the conception of George W. Bush’s first administration, the United States can provide security for the entire international society, provided that its members support other American priorities. Where American foreign policy diverges from Bull’s concept of international society is in its insistence that it is not itself bound by the rules of that society and, as in a Hobbesian space, its security and other interests take primacy over all other concerns. This is not the place to review the record of exceptionalism in the Bush administration’s foreign policy pronouncements and actions, but a few highlights of this view can be listed:

1. Strong promotion of the prosecution of war criminals, but at the same time retracting the American signature to the treaty incorporating the International Criminal Court.
2. American insistence that the states of the world sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, but refuses to sign it itself.
3. A strong program of attempting to halt the spread of nuclear weapons while itself developing new nuclear weapons and insisting on the right to do so.
4. Announcing a ‘right’ to attack any target ‘suspected’ of attempting to obtain weapons of mass destruction, while helping to provide such weapons for selected allies such as India.
5. Repeated statements that while others (except Israel) should refrain from using force to defend or achieve foreign policy objectives, the United States will unilaterally decide for itself when and if it should use military
force. The international community has and cannot have any veto over such decisions.

6 The United States promotes free trade, but when the WTO or NAFTA make decisions that counter American interests, the United States will decide unilaterally whether or not to accept those decisions.

7 The United States promotes the development of democracy abroad, but when popular elections put into office governments that challenge American interests, the United States will resort to subversion, assassination, and armed intervention to overthrow those governments. Iran in 1952, Guatemala in 1954, the Congo in 1961, Chile in 1972, and Hamas in Palestine today, to mention just the most prominent, have been the recipients of this kind of American attention.

8 The United States will place weapons into space, thus assuring its military supremacy for the foreseeable future and, coincidentally, violating another international norm, the demilitarized status of outer space as noted in the Outer Space Treaty of 1967.

The philosophical underpinnings of contemporary American foreign policy reflect a Hobbesian view of the international community and America’s role in it. While in practice in the past several years, elements of cooperative diplomacy have reappeared—Bush, Rice, and their cohorts have learned that the United States is not all-powerful and that collaboration is sometimes necessary—the essential administration view of the world is that of a dangerous place where others are constantly plotting to harm the United States which is, of course, innocent of damaging threats to others except those justified as self-defense. American rhetoric may appeal to the values of liberalism, human rights, and democracy, but that lexicon does not include any obligation to observe the rules of the international society as Bull has defined them. The Bush administration’s underlying image of American predominance thus contains a strange mix of Bull’s elements of order. It has a vision of an American-led world order, but its outlines appear in none of Bull’s discussions of ‘alternatives to world order.’ The United States seeks to preserve and protect the society of states on one hand, but on the other, it arrogates for itself a right to ignore or violate the rules and institutions that sustain that society. It formally supports the notion of sovereign equality, but claims that it has an obligation to bring liberty to those who do not enjoy it and to do so by violating the sovereignty of the target states. It tolerates no external intrusion into its constitutional sphere [sovereignty], but insists on a right to intrude into those of others. Condoleeza Rice has termed the idea of an international community—a synonym for international society—as a ‘myth,’ but insists that such a community support the United States in its various endeavors around the world, in particular the ‘war on terror.’ Its military doctrines unabashedly claim the intention of maintaining supremacy against all other states or combination of them. It
is, in brief, a hegemon, above or beyond the reach of the rules of the society of states, but nevertheless committed to the perpetuation of that society.

The final example that does not fit in any of Bull’s categories of alternatives to international society is the vision of the heaven on earth under a universal Islamic regime. This is an order that is incompatible with international society. The most fundamental assumption or norm underlying Bull’s concept of international society is tolerance of social, economic, and religious difference. But in the extreme Islamic view, there is only one community of the righteous and in this community there is no room for infidels, whether Hindus, Buddhists, ‘crusaders,’ or others. Bull might categorize such a world under his concept of ‘ideological homogeneity’ (pp. 235–240), but in his discussion of this alternative, he sees it only as a (slight) possibility within a system of states.

In brief, Bull did not use the historical record to come up with his alternatives to the present international society. His alternatives are hypothetical and abstract, and most serve as easy targets for devastating criticism, of which he offers more than one example in his substantive discussion. It remains a mystery why Bull, with his deep knowledge of the historical record, missed the most obvious candidates for alternatives and ends up mostly with a series of straw men.

The Bull legacy

Hedley Bull did not set out a formal ‘scientific’ account of his methodology, nor did he propose to offer a full characterization of international politics, a la Morengenthau or Waltz. This is a point Bull’s critics often miss. He did not seek to create a theory of international politics, but only of order within it. Bull is meticulous in outlining his theoretical agenda. He clearly establishes a causal model, he roughly hypothesizes connections between variables, and he acknowledges that while he can specify necessary and sufficient conditions in some cases, he welcomes others to try their hand at their own explanations. The Anarchical Society echoes Bull’s epistemological position, which is that in the social realm knowledge is uncertain. He carries though his own work his conviction that ‘if we confine ourselves to strict standards of verification and proof there is very little of significance that can be said about international relations.’29 Bull’s phraseology is cautious throughout, reflecting his view that ‘general propositions [about international politics] must . . . derive from a scientifically imperfect process of perception or intuition, and . . . cannot be accorded anything more than the tentative and inconclusive status appropriate to their doubtful origins.’30 We should not therefore expect Bull’s variables to be carefully operationalized, systematic data supporting his main hypothesized causal relationships to be displayed in lengthy charts, and his hypotheses to be rendered into a falsifiable form, to be replicated by others (which social scientists of the
most hard-nosed methodological persuasion seldom do themselves). Bull views his theoretical enterprise as an open-ended analytical approach to certain aspects of the domain called international politics. Unlike most realist theories, it is not a closed system.

Nevertheless, methodology is clearly not missing in Bull’s work. *The Anarchical Society* contains both constitutive and causal analysis, variables are for the most part identified and specified, and the outcome (order) takes a precisely configured central space in the analysis. Some of the hypothesized relationships must necessarily be couched in conditional language, and not all variables can be neatly operationalized into formal scientific formats. How, for example, could one approach the question ‘does the balance of power contribute to international order?’ in a formal manner? It is notable that dozens of quantitative analyses of this question have come up only with contradictory answers. Clearly specified rules of evidence do not necessarily lead to unambiguous outcomes. Bull’s narrative-like analysis of this question seems as enlightening to the reader as do dozens of formal quantitative studies. Bull does not make a fetish of methodology, but he does not ignore it either. Methodology is built into the analysis but does not command it.

I have listed a few of the problems or mysteries in Bull’s great treatise, but this is not to denigrate the value of the whole. Even with some methodological flaws, Bull’s work stands out because it has inspired others to go beyond. I dispute Martin Shaw’s claim that *The Anarchical Society* represents an encapsulation of Cold War ideology or Nicholas Rengger’s assertion that Bull’s theory of international society is ‘incoherent.’ Few would bother to go beyond Bull if it were. We cannot criticize Bull for having failed to do more than he intended. Bull’s work is not a general theory of international politics, and his normative position that under contemporary circumstances a strengthened element of society in international politics is probably the best we can hope for, even if it is often against the interests of justice, is defensible.

The key is in the durability of Bull’s explanation of international order. One can read *The Anarchical Society* today and benefit from most of it. It has worn well. It is a partial theory of international politics that has successfully transcended time, place, and personality. Most important, unlike many theoretical works in the field, it has stimulated others to explore issues and problems raised but not resolved by Bull. Buzan’s exploration of the issue of boundaries between the Kantian and international society domains is one prominent example. Without Bull’s previous work, it is unlikely that Buzan and Little’s magisterial historical account of international systems and other societies of states would have appeared. My own *Taming the Sovereigns: Institutional Change in International Politics* (2004) is deeply indebted to Bull’s insights as well as to some of his shortcomings in dealing with the problem of institutions. Bull’s normative position has helped
spawn a lively debate between the so-called ‘pluralists’ and ‘communitarians’. And despite the common complaint that the English School in general has been indifferent to methodological rigour, Bull’s work, combined with constructivist theory, has inspired a new wave of empirically based research on interstate conflict and zones of peace.36

However, Bull’s work has not spawned as much empirical research as one might wish. Debates founded upon many of his distinctions have revolved primarily around the pluralist versus communitarian issues but there are numerous substantive and methodological issues arising from his essay that remain to be examined. For example, what about a systematic, historical account of the waxing and waning of the social elements of international politics over time? Why not explore the links between institutions and rules, or vice-versa? How do we explain over time the dynamic movements and assaults between the Hobbesian, Grotian, and Kantian elements in the international system.37 A perennial question raised but seldom explored empirically is when systems of states become international societies.38 Only one case study39 has explored the issue in detail, but much more can and should be done. Bull’s work has been the subject of considerable critique, but one can make the case that now it is the time to get on with the research. We do not need more of the endless squabbles about ‘schools,’ concepts, and approaches. Bull had his shortcomings, to be sure, but without his work, methodological warts and all, the term ‘the English School’ would have receded into the dim mists of the largely forgotten history of our common endeavor.

Notes and references

3. In the text that follows, all page references are to Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. 3rd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). For these statements by Bull, see pp. 34 and 26, respectively.
15. Strangely, Bull did not include in his list the processes of mimicry. The history of international politics is filled with examples of one government imitating the practices of another because of various perceived advantages. The institution of the permanent embassy spread throughout Europe primarily in a copy-cat fashion, often because of concerns of status and prestige. See K. J. Holsti, *Taming the Sovereigns: Institutional Change in International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Ch. 6.
17. Ibid., pp. 69–72.
23. In his later discussion of the great powers, Bull acknowledges that they ‘frequently behave in such a way as to promote disorder rather than order, they seek to upset the general balance, rather than to preserve it, to foment crises rather than to control them, to win wars rather than to limit them, and so on’ (p. 201). Indeed, Bull was so concerned with the policies of the ‘new’ Cold War in the years of the Reagan administration, that he was stimulated to write his famous denunciation of the Soviet Union and the United States as the ‘Great Irresponsibles.’ See Hedley Bull, ‘The Great Irresponsibles? The United States, the Soviet Union, and World Order,’ *International Journal*, 35 (1980) pp. 437–447.
26. The comments that follow refer solely to Bull’s use of history in *The Anarchical Society*. They do not cover Bull’s general views on the role of historical
studies in the study of International Relations. For discussion of the latter problem, consult Linklater and Suganami, *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment*.

27. The concept of an international society is succinctly paraphrased in the following statement by Gentz, written in the early nineteenth century:

‘An extensive social union was formed among the states [of Europe], of which the essential and characteristic aim was the preservation and mutual guarantee of the well-won rights of each of its members. . . . Men became aware that there were certain basic rules in the relationship between the strength of each individual part and the whole, without whose constant influence order could not be assured.’


29. Ibid., p. 20.

30. Ibid.


34. Buzan, *From International to World Society*.


History enjoys pride of place in English School thought, not only because some of its founding members, Martin Wight and Herbert Butterfield in particular, were trained historians. It is also the only kind of knowledge to rival the authority of science in the field of international relations, although the commerce between historians and international relations is often tenuous and sparse. ² It was Wight who looked to history in order to shine light on ‘violets’—the potent principles of Grotius’ thought—which were hidden beneath the ‘gigantic rhododendrons’ of arguments forgotten long ago.³ Wight conceived the good historian as one who possesses the imagination to enter into the past, to understand the minds of individuals and the societies in which they live because ‘events have also their insides, the purposes and passions which shaped them’. He professed agreement with Frederic William Maitland’s view of history as consisting in something more than a rehearsal of the things people have done: ‘history is the history of ideas’.⁴ Butterfield too stressed the importance of getting inside history—to avoid the fallacy that goes with reading history backwards in order to ratify the glory or righteousness of a present state of things. Failing that, he observed, we shall find ourselves entirely cut off from one another as ‘all generations must be regarded as a world and a law unto themselves’.⁵

But if it is clear that English School theorists take history seriously, their purpose for doing so is a great deal less so. Once we have gotten inside history and have allowed our imagination to roam freely, we are still left to ask: What is historical knowledge for? Butterfield, Wight, and Bull all reject a mechanistic view of history that lends itself to the prediction of future events; and yet they tend to coalesce around a poorly articulated view that the idiosyncrasies of history bear instructive knowledge which illuminates timely questions of contemporary international relations. The purpose of this chapter is to explore what English School theorists claim for history and what they mean to achieve in making historical knowledge a central part of their scholarship. I shall proceed by first examining the writings of Hedley Bull and Herbert Butterfield, which, taken together, provide an idealised
though coherent distillation of the place historical inquiry enjoys in English School theory. I then turn to Michael Oakeshott’s conception of history as fable to address limitations in their positions while sympathetically engaging the English School’s contention that historical knowledge is important in understanding international relations. I shall conclude by reaffirming the place English School theorists give to historically informed theory by, paradoxically, denying to history any didactic character or practical relevance. For it will become evident that a didactic history—and whatever lessons it has to offer—is an illusion made in the present for the present, which is neither historical nor instructive.

**History as speculation**

In a manifesto denouncing what he described as the ‘scientific approach’ to theorising international relations, Hedley Bull suggested that tightly framed hypotheses, strictly defined procedures of verification, and a rigorously applied course of empirical testing were likely to contribute ‘very little’ to a theory of international relations. Indeed, he went so far as to describe such an approach as a ‘retrograde development’ that was ‘positively harmful’ to what might be otherwise achieved in studying international relations. In disavowing mathematical proofs, *a priori* assumptions, and logical extrapolations, he also disavowed the pretension of a cumulative knowledge on which to build a truly scientific theory of international relations. Instead, he embraced a ‘classical approach’ to theorising that derived from ‘philosophy, history, and law, and which relies explicitly upon the exercise of judgment’.

Of the three, it was history that was the main focus of his attention. Good history is informed by theoretical considerations, he argued, and good theoretical work is informed by history. Questions of international relations could not be answered by consulting history alone, for the theoretical enterprise amounted to something more than merely interpreting historical facts. Rather, Bull viewed history as a necessary, as opposed to a sufficient, condition of scholarly inquiry. It is in the world of history that we obtain a feel for the character of particular events that disclose something uniquely their own. It is in the context of history that international relations must be understood, not as a mere point in time that has been arrested in abstract theoretical postulates, but as a ‘temporal sequence of events’ that are the product of historical interpretation. And it is history that provides the ‘laboratory of the social sciences’ in which general propositions are tested and thereby verified or falsified. Indeed, the necessary relation between history and theory led Bull to conclude that ‘historical study is the essential companion of theoretical study itself’.

Essential though history might be to the theoretical enterprise, there is a certain ambiguity in Bull’s argument. On the one hand, he argues that historical generalisations, for example generalisations about patterns
of international order, supply us with valuable knowledge. On the other hand, he argues that historical generalisations are not enough because there is something about events that are unique and therefore cannot be explained in general propositions. Bull attempts to escape this paradox by seeing the international relations theorist as studying history to illuminate issues of contemporary world affairs while the international historian studies history for its own sake, perhaps for no other reason than sheer curiosity. But Linklater and Suganami see this answer as incurring further ambiguity, for it begs a question of crucial importance: How does historical knowledge illuminate contemporary world affairs? They readily concede that historical knowledge provides the background to events in the present, or perhaps what might be described as the context in which these events take place. However, theorists of international relations, members of the English School being no exception, tend to claim more for history than the provision of context. History, it is often said, can be made to yield lessons so that we might avoid repeating the mistakes of the past—‘fighting the last war’, ‘succumbing to the hubris of power’, or ‘failing to appreciate the reality of the human condition’.

But Bull is also ambiguous about a didactic conception of history. We can be reasonably sure that he did not mean to illuminate contemporary events by scouring history for general laws according to which things are structured or moved: his attachment to the classical approach rules out such a view of history. Indeed, he never abandoned the idea that the study of international relations should be partly idiographic in orientation because he regarded events as imparting something peculiar unto themselves that could not be gathered in regularised patterns. Linklater and Suganami attempt to make sense of this ambiguity by suggesting another possibility, namely that historical knowledge may be useful, not in predicting future events, but, for example, in guiding our speculative views about what international society might look like in the future. It is then possible to make sense of both Bull’s commitment to and scepticism of historically grounded research: whereas historical knowledge is an essential part of the theoretical enterprise, the peculiarity of particular events constrain what history can tell us. Linklater and Suganami describe this paradoxical position as pointing to what Bull understood as the concurrent range and limit of historical inquiry: ‘[h]istory may be an indispensable guide to our speculation, but our speculation may fail precisely because it has to be guided by history’.

I want to contest Bull’s position, not because Linklater and Suganami are mistaken in their interpretation, but because of the incoherence it imparts. The ambiguity in Bull’s argument is not removed by substituting the uncertainty that goes with speculation for the rather more demanding expectations that go with prediction; nor does it answer the difficulty in deriving general propositions from singular events, events he admitted cannot be fully explained to the extent that they are truly singular. In fact,
both approaches to history, the speculative type Bull embraced as well as the predictive kind he rejected, appear to share more in common than he otherwise allows. This similarity is found in recalling the different purposes Bull ascribes to the study of international history as against international relations: whereas a study of an event undertaken for its own sake belongs to the student of international history, a study of the same event undertaken ‘in order to throw light on contemporary interstate politics’ belongs to the student of international relations. In other words, speculative and predictive approaches to history may indeed be different but their purpose is one and the same: to provide useful knowledge about present events.

Also unclear is what the international relations theorist is to do with this useful knowledge, especially since the fully detached scholar, moved by nothing but genuine curiosity, belongs to the history rather than the international politics department. This question is all the more important because English School theorists tend to view history as providing an unreliable guide for political action; otherwise, we would be well advised to cede the day-to-day affairs of political life to those who submit the most highly rated returns to the history RAE panel. Linklater and Suganami argue that Bull viewed history as providing a basis on which to compare past and present, so that it was possible to speculate about a changing international society, the future shape of which was nonetheless still something of a Rumsfeldian ‘known unknown’. In other words, historical knowledge enabled him to offer (speculative) insights that no mathematical model or logical deduction could provide, such as, for example, the extent to which the states system was beginning to look like a ‘secular reincarnation’ of mediaeval Christendom. Thus, history is useful, not because it can tell us what will happen, but because it can tell us about possibilities that may (or may not) happen.

But the notion of history as providing a speculative guide to the future is unsettled by uncertainty as to the character of historical knowledge itself. Bull sees history as providing the basis for comparison between past and present, which in turn is useful to the extent it throws light on contemporary events; and he sees international relations as a ‘temporal sequence’ of past events organised in terms of an ‘intellectual structure of hypothesis and argument’ that is the imposition of the historian. The question, then, turns on what part of historical knowledge is actually the past—something that happened and which is independent of the historian—and what part is the present—something that reflects the experience of the historian who writes and therefore produces history. Bull’s position seems to invite an interpretation, according to which history is a type of present knowledge that is made by the historian; and yet he clings to the proposition that history is a repository of (past) events that furnishes cases against which (present) generalisations are tested. But this sequence of past events might not be what ‘really’ happened or ‘all’ that happened; instead, it might
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be merely a story composed of events that is complete and coherent as a story, but which cannot stand for a complete and coherent account of history as such. Thus, Bull’s conception of history provides a rather precarious guide to understanding present events, not because their idiographic character is greater than that we can comprehend, but because it entails a comparison of two kinds of present experience—a (present) history of past events and a (present) speculation on future events.

History as interim knowledge

The confusion in Bull’s position is illuminated further by examining Herbert Butterfield’s writings on history. Butterfield begins by identifying ‘proper’ historical writing with an imaginative and sympathetic understanding of the past, whereby the historian must endeavour to understand their ideas, their desires, and their ways of life, not because it ratifies (or condemns) the present, but because it makes the nearest approach to truth. Indeed, Butterfield argues that the ‘historical imagination comes to its sublimest achievements when it can succeed in comprehending the people not like-minded with oneself’.22 No privilege is given; no winner is anointed. Rather, the historian must labour to ‘understand the past for the sake of the past’, which involves as well accepting—though not endorsing—that ‘their generation was as valid as our generation, their issues as momentous as our issues and their day as full and as vital to them as our day is to us’.23 Butterfield distinguished this kind of ‘academic’ history from a ‘contemporary’ style of history that reveals itself in a Heroic narrative in which the past is made to speak at the tribunal of the present. The contemporary historian provides a God’s-eye view of human achievement: daring exploits are distinguished from ignominious failures, saviours are commemorated and villains condemned, and battle lines are drawn so that history itself can give a verdict on the course of events. In other words, the contemporary historian is interested in separating ‘the sheep from the goats’ while chronicling an epic contest between right and wrong.24

The idiom of contemporary history is known well enough, if only because it is the most common way of introducing the past into popular discourse. With the insights of contemporary history at hand, history itself is placed securely at one’s side so that the wisdom of ‘our’ policy is vindicated and the folly of ‘their’ policy is laid bare. It is then possible to gaze into the past and ridicule the foolishness of Neville Chamberlain’s attempt to secure ‘peace in our time’. Thumb through a few pages and we can revel in the triumph of a righteous democracy over a wicked Marxist collectivism. And the latest and still unfolding chapter in this form of epic is known well enough, especially to those who see the ashes of the ‘evil empire’ as vindicating the truth of a particular kind of (universal) freedom; so today we can march into battle assured, as George W. Bush reminds us with metronome-like
regularity, that ‘[t]hose who place their hope in freedom may be attacked and challenged, but they will not ultimately disappointed, because freedom is the design of humanity and freedom is the direction of history’.25 Of course, this kind of history is the stuff of pundits, arm-chair generals, and enthusiasts who breezily pass judgements on Oliver Cromwell’s ‘fanaticism’, Woodrow Wilson’s ‘naiveté’, and Bernard Montgomery’s ‘stupidity’ in the field, all the while making the world a great deal simpler than it really is.

Butterfield saw in ‘contemporary’ history a danger that typically goes hand-in-hand with the enterprise of giving retrospective judgements. Making history yield lessons, so that destinies are intelligible and errors exposed, misunderstands what history can tell us. In short, it involves a kind of abridgement that exaggerates the control with which men preside over events and, even more improbably, it implies that we know or can know what would have happened had Julius Caesar not crossed the Rubicon. Hence Butterfield dismissed ‘pretended’ lessons of history as the result of the historian interpreting the past ‘in terms of some contemporary experience— he has what we might call the modern “set-up” in his mind’.26 His disdain for such an enterprise followed from his belief that writing history is always unfinished business: there are no complete histories, just as there are no definitive histories. Rather, a historical narrative can be nothing more than an interim report; and as historians, ‘the best that any of us can do at a given moment only represents the present state of knowledge in respect of the subject with which we are dealing’.27 Indeed, the interim character of history is the inevitable consequence of the subject itself: the material with which the historian must work is complicated in such a way that it can never be fully penetrated.

In viewing history as a representation of the historian’s ‘present state of knowledge’, Butterfield was untroubled by a need to explain what counts as useful historical knowledge: he simply did not believe that history provided any guidance for political action. Thus, he heaped scorn on those who would rummage through history for lessons to guide Cold War diplomacy, the fallacy of which manifested itself in the excesses of ‘whig’ history. He deplored the Whig historian for apprehending a principle of abridgment, used to separate the useful from the useless, in order to make the crooked look straight. In other words, the Whig approach provides ‘a short cut through that maze of interactions by which the past was turned into our present’.28 By this method lessons to future generations shout out for attention while saving us from being made to look foolish for ever having believed that Chamberlain could secure peace in his time. Once the complexity has been cleared from the field an intrepid Churchill is set to take the stage, dispensing lessons for future generations to digest and to implement lest they too suffer eternal (historical) humiliation. History of this sort is certainly made in the present, but for Butterfield it is history founded on a mistake: ‘when we organise our
general history by reference to the present we are producing what is really a gigantic optical illusion’.29

But Butterfield could never fully bring himself round to the idea that all history is a story made in the present, for he always remained attached to the idea that ‘academic’ history could attain to truth with the passage of time and by exerting enough unsentimental effort. So where contemporary history closed its eyes to the facts in pursuit of glory, academic history could penetrate the fog of pride provided it looked hard enough. The passage of time would eventually distil the noxious effects of passion into a wholesome sense of detachment; and then academic history would be vindicated, as it uncovered the ‘fundamental human predicament’ that lay at the heart of all human conflict.30 Recognition of this predicament—that all men are sinners—enables the historian to strip away the layers of veneer that obscures the true nature of the problem, where ‘we shall find at the heart of everything a kernel of difficulty which is essentially a problem of diplomacy as such’.31 Here, Butterfield unwittingly joins the academic wagon with the contemporary wagon on the track of useful history, and he sets them in motion by suggesting that with knowledge of this predicament his fellows would have known that an ‘age of terrible warfare’ was on the horizon. Hence he rejected lessons of history only to re-embrace them by subscribing to a non-progressive account of history that purported to illuminate ‘the very geometry of human conflict’, and he did so by simply reversing the lesson peddled by those ‘specialists in wishful thinking’ he ridiculed: history teaches that conflict results from a fear born of man’s universal sin.32

**History as fable**

Butterfield's notion of history as reflecting the historian's ‘present state of knowledge’ implies a relation of past and present that warns of the excesses of Heroic narrative. But a history made in the present need not lead to the abridgements, short-cuts, and illusions of the contemporary history he so detested. This possibility passed unnoticed because, like Bull, he wanted to maintain a distinction between historical facts and the historian’s ideas used to organise those facts. In other words, Butterfield regarded history and the historian as being independent of one another, so that the former stands for a concrete (past) reality that the latter reconstructs in so far as his (present) state of knowledge allows. But this separation of past and present is in the end unsustainable: the historian cannot know what he does not already know. For a past that is entirely independent of the historian’s experience is also a past that is placed outside the possibility of his understanding. Such an independent past is impossible, Michael Oakeshott argues, because ‘[i]t is what is experienced sundered from the experience of it and offered an independent existence which, nevertheless, it is powerless to sustain’.33 The problem, then, is not one of method, whereby we should strive to remain
true to the calling of the academic historian while endeavouring to stay clear of the contemporary historian's congenital prejudice; it is one in which history is said to be perceived in facts when it can only be made of facts.

It is here that I turn to Oakeshott's philosophy of history in order to bring coherence to the relation between past and present, and yet sympathetically engage with the general disposition of Butterfield's position. In fact, Butterfield was right in rejecting the notion that lessons or practical guidance can be derived from history, although not for the right reasons. Oakeshott's view of history sustains this objection while providing an escape from the paradox of asking the historian to make sense of the facts that are independent of the knowledge required to understand them. According to Oakeshott, seeing history as a practical guide to present and future events confuses the activity of being an historian with the considerations of practical life, the latter of which is intelligible in an evaluative discourse that is ordered to our relation to our world. History does not begin with facts that are interpreted in such a way that they speak to the circumstances of present events; nor does it have any advice to offer so that it possible to say that this situation requires this response and that situation another. A prescriptive history is no history at all; and it is of no use to those who might consult it. Indeed, he went so far as to say that 'the world of history has no data to offer of which practical experience can make use; and to conceive it as offering such data is to misconceive its character'.

An Oakeshottian conception of history begins with a world of ideas and ends with an achievement of thought, for it relies fundamentally on the contention that history is tied up in the judgement of the historian. And the activity of writing history involves a particular type of understanding that goes beyond the mere recollection of an event, such as the date on which American colonists declared their independence from the rule of King George III. Thus, history can never be reduced to discrete facts which, taken together, give themselves readily and clearly to events—the discovery of the New World, the partition of Africa, or the onset of decolonisation—which happened in something called the past. Facts are never so simple and unambiguous that they 'speak for themselves': identifying facts involves judgements that are necessarily informed by the historian's current state of knowledge. Moreover, these judgements are themselves contingent on the knowledge of those who read or hear them; and what they do not know—that which lays beyond their knowledge—cannot be recognised for what it is. For language may be crucially important in constructing our world but language is of itself not enough: 'language itself is powerless to convey a meaning to those who do not already understand. Words have a meaning for us—or no meaning—in proportion to what we already know as well as in proportion to the “sense that they make”'. For this reason, Oakeshott describes history as a fable; it is a fable told of facts, the judgement of which
results in an achievement of thought that is informed and conditioned by the historian’s present state of knowledge.

Understanding history as fable invokes a way of thinking and speaking about facts that is radically different from what is usually the case. The common if not popular understanding of historical inquiry has as it starting point the collection of data, whereby source material—diaries, speeches, letters, minutes, and notes—is examined for the nuggets of raw information they contain. These facts are then interpreted, carefully lest they give a false picture of what really happened, before they are stitched together into a narrative of events that advances an argument, explaining perhaps the reasons why Harry Truman ordered the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the reasons why Hannibal failed to exploit his stunning victory at Cannae by comprehensively defeating Rome. Hence the data of which historian makes use is given; it exists prior to historical inquiry in the sense that ‘the facts’ present themselves to the historian in a process of discovery.38 Oakeshott rejects this positivist view of historiography, saying that facts cannot provide the starting point of historical enquiry because it would place ‘history’ beyond the historian’s knowledge and therefore beyond the possibility of his understanding. In other words, a world of independent (past) facts, which the historian discovers, sifts, collates, organises, synthesises, and then relates to an audience, is impossible, he argues, because it separates a fact from the world in which it is intelligible; which implies also that ‘an isolated fact can be established while we remain ignorant of the world of facts to which it belongs’.39

A world of isolated (past) facts leads to the difficulty of making sense of a particular fact, say the League of Nations covenant, without any knowledge of the First World War, distrust of the balance of power, the principle of collective security, Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, decisions taken at the Paris Peace Conference, America’s refusal to join the League system, and so much else. Thus, Oakeshott proposes an alternative view, one which conceives historical facts as conclusions that are parts of a single world of experience which embraces both past and present in a paradoxical but nonetheless coherent system of thought. An historical fact, he argues, does not correspond with ‘what was’ or ‘what really happened’; it is an achievement of present experience that is qualified and articulated in terms of a past which no longer exists. Indeed, for Oakeshott, facts are not starting points; they are conclusions.40 The difference, then, between a fact which is a part of an independent past and one which is a part of present experience is illustrated in the way an event is perceived and understood. Consider, Oakeshott begins, a man with a wooden leg. If we perceive him as merely passing by, the present is not qualified by the past. However, if what we perceive is intelligible as a man who has lost a leg which has been subsequently replaced by a wooden prosthetic, our present experience has been qualified by a conception of the past. He then proceeds to explain the relation of the past with
the present by arguing: ‘this awareness of past is evoked, not by neglecting present, but in a reading of present which evokes past expressed in the word “lost”’.41

A world of historical facts belonging entirely to present experience collapses the distinction, employed by Bull and Butterfield, between a world of past happenings and a world of present knowledge. In short, there is no intellectual structure to impose on isolated facts that are then ordered in a sequence of past events: ‘the past in history varies with the present, rests upon the present, is the present’.42 For a long-lost document that names the builders of the Egyptian Sphinx does not change the past. What happened then happened; it is dead, finished, and most certainly lost to our eyes. Such a document, were it to exist, would be a survival of a past event that is gone; and yet it would be unmistakably a part of the present in the same way that the Taj Mahal, Monet’s Water Lilies, and St. Augustine’s sermons are all present facts in which our understanding of their respective pasts emerge. Likewise, the discovery of the Rosetta Stone did not change history, it was and is a survival in terms of which our understanding of the dead past of Pharaohic Egypt emerges. Thus, for Oakeshott, the historically understood past is a construction; and because it never can be what ‘really was’ as such, ‘[i]t can neither be found nor dug up, nor retrieved, nor recollected, but only inferred’.43 Writing history cannot, therefore, involve a process of discovery and historical truth cannot consist in achieving a tight fit between past events and present knowledge. Instead, the activity of being an historian involves a creative engagement in which the standard of truth is nothing more and nothing less than coherence understood as ‘what the evidence obliges us to believe’.44

Making coherence the standard of (historical) truth should not be taken to mean that history is indistinguishable from fiction. History is not whatever the historian wishes to be; it is not a free construction sustained by nothing but a scaffolding of pure reason, ideology, or, worse, unadulterated preference. Moreover, Oakeshott denies that history is merely a reflection of the historian’s autobiography whereby history is a social image of class, race, gender, or some other attribute. Rather, coherence is to be understood, Terry Nardin explains, as ‘coherence within a system of ideas’.45 Thus, an historical past that is inferred from present evidence and, consequently, is a world of present ideas born of the historian’s present experience, has no advice to offer to present and future generations. For history is a fable precisely because it is an account told from a particular point of view, namely that of the historian; and that point of view is liable to change as his state of knowledge changes. It is in this sense that history is like an index to a book, as Oakeshott puts it, which can be accessed from many different points in order to pursue many different purposes.46

Oakeshott’s conception of history is particularly relevant to making sense of a species of popular discourse in international relations. Few
'lessons of history' are as emotive and compelling as the injunction against appeasing tyrants, which as Churchill warned the House of Commons after Czechoslovakia was delivered to Nazi Germany in 1938, is ‘only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup’. In the lead-up to the Iraq War of 2003 The Daily Telegraph columnist John Keegan fretted about an odour of appeasement in the air, saying that ‘[t]he history of appeasement does not change. Hitler was once a weak little man—and it was the concessions of the appeasers of his day that allowed him to grow strong’. George W. Bush invoked the same trope on the eve of hostilities when laying out the case for disarming Saddam Hussein: ‘[i]n the 20th century, some chose to appease murderous dictators, whose threats were allowed to grow into genocide and global war. In this century, when evil men plot chemical, biological and nuclear terror, a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this earth’. Such lessons of history are prof-fered as timeless pearls of wisdom that contemporary statespersons ignore at their peril.

But the difficulty with such appeals to history is evident, for example, in E. H. Carr's much celebrated The Twenty Years' Crisis, the first edition of which is dedicated ‘to the makers of the coming peace’. In this first edition (1939), Carr praises the (now) infamous Munich Agreement as representing the ‘nearest approach in recent years to the settlement of a major interna-tional issue by a procedure of peaceful change’; indeed, he is unashamedly candid in his view that Czechoslovakia's fate, which resulted from ‘discus-sions round a table in Munich’, should be preferred to a result achieved by war. However, references to Munich in the second edition (1946) sound not a single note of praise and yet it too is dedicated ‘to the makers of the coming peace’. What changed was not the facts but the state of Carr's knowledge; and still the (fallacious) ‘lesson of history’, a lesson tiresomely repeated to all present and future ‘makers of the coming peace’, holds that appeasement—for which Munich is a byword—is imprudent, immoral, and, in the end, does not work. A change of the exact same sort seems to be at work as the Munich trope has given place to the Vietnam trope in describing America’s increasingly difficult involvement in Iraq. The histori-cal pendulum is said to have swung again, investing lessons of quagmire and quandary with new-found currency, so that the confident child of Munich—‘mission accomplished’—has spawned a rather more menacing sibling: the Iraq syndrome.

Fashionable though such appeals to history might be, their shelf life is no greater than what the market will bear. For the business of dealing in lessons of history is not unlike selling England football shirts after the World Cup has finished: demand will vary with knowledge of England’s success. When ‘Munich’ or ‘Vietnam’ or ‘Iraq’ is invoked as a guide to the present events, the past is transformed into a kind of practical short-hand consisting in what Oakeshott describes as a ‘vocabulary of symbolic characters (ill-distinguished from mythical figures and from such images as sturdy oaks, snakes in the
grass, and the burdensome Albatross). Here, events are transformed into icons of a didactic past which announce our desires, our purposes, and our intentions. They communicate who we are and what we believe. They identify policies that are to be praised and those to be condemned. And they issue warnings that call out for caution and precedents for proceeding apace. Indeed, this kind of past, Oakeshott explains, is not concerned with understanding objects and utterances in their own circumstances; it is concerned with whatever meaning or use it might have in pursuing current engagements. It is only then that the accidents, triumphs, and failures of history make any sense. In other words, history is made to be an authority, an adjudicator between what is righteous and what is wicked, which, Oakeshott contends, is ‘designed to justify, to make valid practical beliefs about the present and the future, about the world in general’.

That such a practical past yields all sorts of lessons and examples of which the practitioner should take notice is obvious enough. In fact, when talk of the past enters into political discourse it is almost always as an expression of practical concern. But unlike an historical past, which is a present world inferred from and qualified by survivals of a lost past, a practical past is composed of survivals ‘recalled for use from where they lie in the present and understood and valued for what they have to offer in current practical engagements’. So where an historical past is concerned with the past as such, a practical past is concerned with the acceptability or desirability of particular conclusions.

The many so-called ‘lessons of history’ which are said to speak to present and future generations are audible only because they mean what we need them to mean. Their circumstantial characters are unimportant; for example, the meaning and purpose of the scriptural injunction ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth’ is of little concern to the prescriptively minded historian, who easily forsakes its historically understood character of proportionality and restraint when it can be used practically to make the case for revenge. The only connection such practical icons have with the past, Oakeshott argues, ‘is not to the past to which they ambiguously and inconsequentially refer but to the time and circumstances in which they achieved currency in a vocabulary of practical discourse’. As icons they might be interesting for what they tell us about those who invoke them, but once they have been separated from their circumstantial characters and transformed into icons, they have also been separated from history, and they become useless as bearers of some transcendental truth.

Conclusion

An Oakeshottian approach to history goes a long way in addressing the limitations of the arguments advanced by Bull and Butterfield while sympathetically engaging their claim that historical knowledge is important in obtaining a proper understanding of international relations. Bull viewed
history as providing a basis of comparison from which to make speculative statements about present events. But this position is problematic: the categories ‘past’ and ‘present’ are confused in so far as he wants to maintain a distinction between independent (past) events and the historian’s (present) experience according to which these events are organised. The difficulty, then, is that the past which is to furnish the basis of comparison may also be the present, or at least partially so. Butterfield’s approach answers this objection by suggesting that historical narrative is but an interim report that reflects the historian’s present state of knowledge, which led him also to reject the idea that historical knowledge provided a useful guide to political action. Yet he too wanted to separate history and the historian in the belief that a certain kind of (academic) history could illuminate the ‘geometry’ of human conflict, the proof of which is found in man’s universal sin. His rejection of instructive history was incomplete because he never fully let go of an independent past that (allegedly) confirmed the illusion of only one kind of instructive history: the progressive kind he associated with ‘contemporary’ or ‘whig’ history.

The Oakeshottian rejection of the distinction between past events and present experience relieves us of the intellectual gymnastics required to accept the English School proposition that historical knowledge is important in understanding international relations. In short, history is an idea, not a course of events that the historian relates after having discovered or examined the facts. There are no facts to recover and no events to re-enact. Indeed, history is a construction, although not by the hands of men and women whose actions are often said to change the course of events: ‘[i]t is “made” by nobody save the historian; to write history is the only way of making it’. That history is a peculiar though coherent kind of present experience makes nonsense of the idea that the past speaks to the present. The past as such is gone and therefore has nothing to say; and whatever lessons are attributed to it are in fact statements about the desirability of particular conclusions, which are made in the present about the present. Hence historical knowledge is not to be understood in terms of ‘usefulness’; it is no tool with which to pursue other ends and it is no guide to present circumstances, despite the ever pervasive fetish of equating good scholarship with policy relevance. In other words, history leads us nowhere, Oakeshott explains, because ‘[n]either the truth nor the character of history depend, in any way, upon its having some lesson to teach us’.

When placed against this backdrop the emphasis which the English School places on the study of history is at once undermined but also paradoxically reaffirmed. In the first instance, it undermines the claim of difference with which Bull and other English School theorists wish to separate themselves from American international relations. It is certainly true that historical narrative is far more prominent in English School scholarship than, for example, the neo-neo debate that once dominated American scholarship or the constructivist and rational choice approaches which now struggle
for supremacy. English School scholarship is comparatively rich in the lives of kings and queens, the proceedings of conferences and congresses, and the development of diplomacy, international law, and other international institutions. So there are differences of course, but their significance is exaggerated. English School theorists stress the idiographic character of history more so than their nomothetically inclined American counterparts, who are more often concerned with questions of causation and the general patterns in which they are intelligible. But this difference is principally one of a methodological kind than one which points to an approach that makes use of history and another which does not. For Bull’s study of order, like Waltz’s structural causes of war, Keohane’s and Nye’s institutional cooperation, and Wendt’s logics of anarchy, is verified or falsified in the ‘laboratory of the social sciences’ that is history understood as a repository of independent facts which stand for an equally independent past.

But if history is poorly conceived as a decorator’s catalogue from which to choose a variety of colours to brighten up our theories, history is not irrelevant to the enterprise of theorising international relations. Strangely enough, the Oakeshottian rejection of the distinction between past events and present experience reaffirms the importance English School theorists have ascribed to historical knowledge. We should look to history, neither for guidance about what may come nor for clues about how we should act, but for what it imparts about the character of the activities in which human beings engage. The identity of a cricketer as a cricketer is not determined by a demonstration of success, whereby the person who makes a century is more of a cricketer than one who is out for a golden duck. Identity, be it that of a cricketer, a mother, or an innkeeper, is intelligible in the recognition of the rules, conventions, and virtues of the activity. In other words, the determination of identity, as opposed to an evaluation of skill, calls forth an engagement according to which ‘a participant in the activity comes to be recognized not by the results he achieves but by his disposition to observe the manners of the “practice”.’ History (and indeed only history) can tell us what it means to conduct oneself as a diplomat, as opposed to a carpenter or a shoemaker; and it can tell us what it means to participate in the activity of war, knowledge without which it would be impossible to distinguish, for example, between combatants and innocents, between ‘new wars’ and old wars. And it is the singular achievement of historical inquiry that such distinctions emerge, not as ‘natural essences’ cut-off from further scrutiny, but as intelligible and indeed stable characters that ‘the evidence obliges us to believe’.

A history of this sort certainly forsakes the iconised events which are habitually invoked to salve an uneasy conscience or to instil courage where doubt lingers. It forsakes the notion that events point the way forward when we are said to confront a ‘turning point’ in history. Instead, the drama and intrigue that goes with clothing practical concerns in the language of history gives place to the comparatively modest but more coherent enterprise
of interrogating the character of international society and its attendant practices and institutions. It is then possible to make sense of the institution of war, to give but one example, understood as a settled mode of activity which is intelligible in terms of contingent but nonetheless distinct attributes that impart an identity that is different from those imparted by ‘aggression’ or ‘violence’.

It is in this vein that I have explored the idea of trusteeship. I have not studied trusteeship for the purpose of deriving a transcendental meaning of the institution, or to determine the conditions which may give rise to a condition of trusteeship, but rather to understand what it denotes in the context of international society. And I have studied it historically; that is, in the context in which it arose, and as it was understood by the people at the time, to make sense of its distinct identity. That this identity is not an eternal essence, but a historically intelligible character, it is entirely possible for some of its circumstantial attributes to change without also destroying the identity of the thing or activity in question. Indeed, that attributes can change while leaving identity intact makes it possible to say that the activity of war in medieval Europe imparted one or more characters that evoke similarities and disclose differences with war in modern Europe while still speaking intelligibly of the activity of war. And it is the business of the historian or the historically minded theorist of international relations to interrogate these characters, not because historical inquiry has a transcendental purpose that somehow vindicates the course of history, but because it tells us something about the activity of war, trusteeship, and so much else.

In denying a transcendental purpose to historical inquiry, I do not mean to argue that there is no place for evaluative discourse. It is then that we hear of good and bad diplomats, and wars that are aggressive, justified, necessary, or perhaps just foolish. But when the iconic representation of Munich is invoked—weakness and immorality—history is pressed into service to make what is in fact a moral argument which is neither instructive nor historical. Here, the danger lies in claiming too much for history. There is surely a place for moral argument in the study of international relations but the veracity of that mode of argument is not determined historically. Indeed, history is exactly what Bull said it was: history is a necessary as opposed to a sufficient condition for understanding international relations. It is in this sense as well that the study of international relations cannot be reduced to the study of history. English School theorists have been perhaps more forthright than most in acknowledging that their vocation involves a great deal more than ‘doing history’.

Notes and references


6. Martin Wight might also have been included alongside Bull and Butterfield, as he is most responsible for directing English School scholarship towards the historical sociology of state-systems. Moreover, his religious convictions are often said to have profoundly shaped the character of his historical inquiry. However, he did not write very much on history as such, and the content of his Christian outlook on history is very closely paralleled by that of Butterfield. See Hedley Bull’s introduction to Wight, *Systems of States*, pp. 11–12; Ian Hall, ‘Sir Herbert Butterfield and International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, XXVIII (2002): 719–736; Robert Jackson, ‘Martin Wight’s Thought on Diplomacy’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, XIII (2002): 1–28; and Scott Thomas, ‘Faith, History and Martin Wight: The Role of Religion in the Historical Sociology of the English School of International Relations’, *International Relations*, LXXVII (2001): 905–929.

7. Oakeshott’s thought has had a considerable influence on several theorists of international society, most notably Robert Jackson, Terry Nardin, and Nicholas Rengger. The significance and potential of his philosophy of history for the general field of international relations has been recently addressed by Renee Jeffery, ‘Tradition as Invention: The “Traditions Tradition” and the History of Ideas in International Relations’, *Millennium*, XXXIV (2005): 57–84.


13. Ibid., p. 87.


15. Ibid., p. 92.


17. Ibid., p. 249.


27. Ibid., p. 170.


29. Ibid., p. 29.


32. Ibid., pp. 9, 22, 31.


37. Oakeshott, ‘History is a Fable’, p. 35.


41. Michael Oakeshott, ‘Present, Future and Past’, *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), pp. 8–9. It is in this sense that Oakeshott’s notion of ‘historical past’ is not to be confused with a view of history, such as that of Eric Hobsbawm, as encompassing ‘anything and everything that has happened to date’. Oakeshott accepts that there are several conceptions of the past; however, he demarcates a very specific field for a genuinely historically understood past as consisting in an autonomous mode of understanding. Hence an historical past is distinct from a merely remembered, recollected, consulted, and recorded pasts in so far as it alone turns on ‘considerations of appropriateness and completeness’: ‘[e]verything that the evidence reveals or points to is recognized to have its place; nothing is excluded, nothing is regarded as ‘non-contributory’. See Oakeshott, ‘The Activity of Being an Historian’, pp. 168–175 and ‘Present, Future and Past’,

42. Oakeshott, Experience and Its Modes, pp. 107–108.


44. Oakeshott, Experience and Its Modes, p. 112.

45. Ibid., pp. 100–102. Nardin distinguishes Oakeshott’s constructionist approach from post-modern deconstruction, which claims there are no objective constraints on the historian’s imagination of the past. See Nardin, Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott, pp. 146–148.

46. Oakeshott, ‘History is a Fable’, pp. 35–36.


48. Keegan, ‘Blair Must Turn a Deaf Ear’.


52. Oakeshott, ‘Present, Future and Past’, p. 44.

53. Ibid., pp. 43–45.


58. The idea of re-enacting history is most commonly associated with R. G. Collingwood’s thought. Although he and Oakeshott are both regarded as students of British Idealism, they differed fundamentally on their approaches to history. See R. G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 215–218, 302–307. For a comparison of their respective positions, see David


60. Ibid., p. 158.

61. It is worth nothing that the English School has been criticised by American theorists for failing to make explicit its methodological commitments. See Martha Finnemore, ‘Exporting the English School?’, *Review of International Studies*, XXVII (2001): 509–513.


The English School’s Approach to International Law

Peter Wilson

One of the defining features of the English School is the emphasis it places on normative rules, and in particular the rules of international law. Yet the position of the English School on international law has nowhere been properly set out. The first purpose of this chapter is to provide a fairly detailed account of the English School’s position on international law. I do this with reference to those members of the ‘classic’ English School who have been most concerned to explore the nature of international law and its place in international society: C. A. W. Manning, Hedley Bull, and Alan James. There are few, if any, better introductions to the role of international law in international relations. The accounts provided by Manning, Bull and James are systematic and precise. They are also highly accessible; they presuppose no more than a basic knowledge of international law—its sources, scope, and some of the controversies surrounding it. They similarly presuppose only a basic knowledge of modern international affairs and international theory. They eschew all unnecessary jargon. Admittedly, the idiosyncratic style of Manning is not to everyone’s taste. But while the mode of expression may be unfamiliar, no specialist knowledge is needed to decipher it, only patience and a reasonably alert intelligence.

I then look at the criticisms that are typically made of the school’s approach and set out the main lines of reply, including those of certain ‘modern’ members, namely Terry Nardin and Robert Jackson, who have sought to strengthen the methodological foundations of the approach. I then identify some of the limitations of the school’s approach which its modern adherents will need to address if its relevance is to be sustained in the twenty-first century. I conclude with some reflections on method.

International law, society and order

The general stance of the school may be described as follows. International law is a real body of law, no less binding than domestic law, and therefore no less deserving of the name ‘law’. Although the main bases of international
order are to be found elsewhere, international law is certainly not without efficacy in this regard. Importantly, international law provides a normative framework, an essential ingredient for the successful operation of any large and complex social arrangement. By providing a reasonably clear guide as to what is the done thing, and what is not, in any given set of circumstances, of what can be expected and what not, and what will be tolerated and what will likely be met with a disapproving, perhaps vociferous, response, law helps to reduce the degree of unpredictability in international affairs. For members of the English School, international law ‘stands at the very centre of the international society’s normative framework’.1 It supports ‘a structure of expectations without which the intercourse of states would surely suffer an early collapse’.2

While lacking a central legislature to make new and modify existing law, international society nonetheless has its own mechanisms for changing the law and keeping it up-to-date. As a result, international law is not immune or unsympathetic to the call of justice. The slowness with which many changes in the law take place is not so much a defect of international legal mechanisms as a reflection of the society in which they operate.

Unlike the situation pertaining in most domestic legal systems, international law should not be conceived as a means of social control, much less as an instrument of social reform (although there is a strong tendency to view it in such a manner).3 Rather it should be seen as a body of rules, deemed by those to whom it applies as binding, the purpose of which is to facilitate regular, continuous, and generally orderly international relationships. As a legal system, it is sui generis. To evaluate the significance and efficacy of international law in terms of a domestic legal standard makes no more sense than to evaluate the merits and utility of one activity—say golf—in terms of another—say long-distance running. As competitive sports as well as recreational activities both golf and long-distance running have things in common. But success in these activities, as well as being relative to the personal aims of the participant, depends on a strongly contrasting set of skills and mental and physical disciplines. To judge one in terms of the skills and disciplines needed to perform the other is absurd, or certainly not helpful. Likewise, it is absurd, or certainly not helpful, to judge international law in terms of the sources, mechanisms, and objectives of law emanating from a very different, domestic, social milieu.

It may be inferred from this that the approach of the English School to international law is sociological. Members of the school have been at pains to point out that law always reflects the society from which it emanates. Any given system of law can only be properly comprehended and evaluated by examining the social milieu that gives rise to it. Sense can thus only be made of international law by making sense of international society. Importantly, the significance and efficacy of international law can only be ascertained by examining the nature, institutional structure, values (if any), and goals
(if any) of international society. It was this essentially relativistic conviction that led Manning, in particular, to stress that International Relations should be not be conceived as part of Political Science, History, or Law but as a distinct academic discipline: one which drew on these and other cognate disciplines, but which discarded their domestic, ‘state-bound’, legal, ethical and sociological presuppositions.  

The defining features of international society

First and foremost, the school emphasises the absence of common government in international society. For Manning, ‘[m]unicipal law exists, and is what it is, because, domestically, there does exist social control. International law exists and is what it distinctively is because, internationally, there does not. Municipal law is the handmaiden of government, international law of diplomacy.’ According to James, ‘... the cardinal characteristic which distinguishes the international society from others is the lack of government, the absence of central authority and the concomitant dispersal of authority’. Internationally there exists no central legislature to make new and amend existing legal rules. There is no central agency charged with the enforcement of the rules. There is no central court or judicial body empowered to adjudicate disputes over the rules—or at least not one before which a state can haul another state against its will. In terms of H. L. A. Hart’s conception of law as a union of primary (prescriptive) rules and secondary (institutional empowering) rules, in international society there are no universally agreed upon ‘rules of recognition’, ‘rules of change’, and ‘rules of adjudication’.

In Bull’s view, international law differs from municipal law ‘in one central respect: whereas law within the modern state is backed up by the authority of government, including its power to use or threaten force, international law is without this kind of prop’. As a consequence, and in sharp contrast to municipal law, the efficacy of international law does to a large extent depend on self-help, including on occasions the threat and use of force. It is for this reason, Bull continues, that there is an intimate connection in international society between the efficacy of law and the functioning of the balance of power. ‘It is only if power, and the will to use it, are distributed in international society in such a way that states can uphold at least certain rights when they are infringed, that respect for rules of international law can be maintained.’

One consequence of the absence of central government is that the utility of international law as an instrument of social change is severely limited. In domestic society, law is frequently used as a tool of social policy. Changes are made to the law with the explicit intention of expediting changes in behaviour. The employment of this tool is often successful due to fear on the part of potential miscreants of punishment. But the main factor is the
greater respect for the law *qua* law that domestic society enjoys *vis à vis* international society.\(^\text{10}\) So while certain social changes necessitate the creation of new rules of international law or the amendment of existing ones (for example, changes spurred by technological innovation in areas such as sea use, and the use of air and outer space), and while other desired changes can be assisted by changes in the law (for example, in the field of human rights), the law itself is powerless to bring about changes in behaviour unless such changes are already desired by all the relevant actors.\(^\text{11}\)

The English School acknowledges, however, that the setting of general standards in law can have a long-run effect on behaviour. James puts the point as follows: a set of exact rights and duties ‘will almost certainly represent a pre-existing intent or willingness on the part of all subject to them to act in the way they indicate’. Their translation into law is therefore not likely to have much of an independent effect on behaviour. However, legal obligations that are only loosely defined may by virtue of that fact be accepted despite a lack of a strong commitment to their observance. Since they do not have to pin themselves down in detail, the signatories may reasonably assume that if they need to act in a way contrary to their commitment, they will not have too much difficulty in finding a reasonably plausible legal justification. ‘However, once a principle enjoys the dignity of law states may come to feel, to a greater extent than before, that they should try to live up to it.’ Moreover, ‘the inducement to do so will . . . be stronger in that the principle is now established as a criterion, albeit a rather ambiguous one, in the light of which those bound by it can be judged’. Additional critical opportunities will have been created. As a result states may cautiously amend their behaviour in line with the obligation, ‘for they dislike being charged with breaches of the law’.\(^\text{12}\) Giving a social aspiration a footing in law can thus help bring about the realisation of that aspiration over time. In this way law can have a modest independent impact on international behaviour. In James’s view the abolition of the slave trade, the outlawing of the use of force as an instrument of national policy, and the delegitimisation of colonialism all had their legal roots in the establishment of an initially vague legal principle.

The potential independent impact of law has recently been analysed by Yasuaki Onuma, a prominent Japanese international lawyer. He categorises some treaties as ‘aspirational’ in that they embody global aspirations shared by the overwhelming majority of members of international society. Examples include the 1966 UN human rights conventions and the 1990 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. In entering such treaties, states communicate to their peers in the most solemn way possible their intention to work towards certain common goals. These treaties are not necessarily observed from the outset in a strict manner. It is widely known, for example, that there is a gap between major human rights treaties and reality.\(^\text{13}\) Yet framing such agreements in law gives them a dignity, legitimacy, and authority that no member of the international club can openly deny. ‘As
such they induce convergence, if not strict observance, of the behaviour of
diverse members of international society over a period of time.14 The trend
for this kind of ‘aspirational’ law-making since 1945 is sufficiently strong for
Dorothy Jones to talk of a ‘declaratory tradition’ in modern international
law, a key feature of which is to create a body of rules and intentions more
akin to moral philosophy than positive law.15

A further consequence of the absence of government is the familiar reflec-
tion on the security imperative. In domestic society individuals look to
government and its agencies to provide a large amount of their physical
and, in many cases, their economic security. States are not so lucky. While
they may belong to universal or regional associations whose declared job it
is to ensure the collective security of its members, states know that when
it comes to security they ultimately have to look after themselves. This
explains why, when a conflict arises between ‘an urgent national demand
and fidelity to the law’, it is usually the latter that gives way.16 Largely if not
exclusively because of the anarchical setting in which they find themselves,
states are highly self-regarding in their behaviour. They invariably put the
satisfaction of important national interests before observance of the law on
the relatively rare occasions when they starkly conflict. It also explains why,
although there is a huge amount of important international law in the field
of security, states have not been greatly assured by those legal instruments
whereby the parties bind themselves never to attack or threaten to attack
their fellows, or commit themselves to immediately come to the assistance
of the victim of aggression. It is due to this understanding of states’ self-
interpretation of their security predicament that members of the English
School share E. H. Carr’s dim view of Article 16 of the League of Nations
Covenant and the Kellogg-Briand Pact.17

The second defining feature concerns the importance of normative rules in
society, and the role of the most important of those rules—law—in shaping
behaviour. According to the English School, normative rules are essential
for the efficient and orderly conduct of any complex social activity. Such
rules provide a social grouping with a ‘body of understandings about proper
behaviour’.18 They provide social actors with a fair amount of confidence as
to what, normally, will be done and what will not be done, and the mode of
its doing. In brief, normative rules provide a behavioural framework. As Alan
James puts it, these rules are ‘the sine qua non for the existence of coherent
group activity or an effectively-functioning society’.19

Normative rules can be of several kinds: rules of prudence, of etiquette,
moral or ethical rules. However, by far the most important kind of norma-
tive rules, in international as in domestic society, are legal rules. According
to James:

The fundamental explanation for this is to be found in the different oblig-
atory force of legal and non-legal rules. For, in the public sphere, non-legal
rules carry a somewhat uncertain sense of obligation. Those to whom they
apply are expected rather than obliged to observe them. A standard has been erected to which it is intended that behaviour should conform, but society and its members customarily feel that they have no ground for trying to insist upon it. Observance is the done rather than the demanded thing. Law, on the other hand, is inseparably associated with the idea of strict obligation.\footnote{20}

Part of its obligatory nature is that the law generally aims for precision. Its object is to leave those bound by it in little doubt as to what it expects of them. There are exceptions, but ‘generally the main function of law is to create an exact as well as a binding relationship’.\footnote{21}

Of course, the extent to which this function is achieved varies from law to law and from system to system. There is precise law and vague law (and not all vague law is bad law). In Manning’s view certainty as to what the law requires is the exception rather than the rule, even in the most orderly and legally fastidious societies:

What litigants get even from the highest court in the land, is at best a decision which is constitutionally and legally incumbent upon them to accept as presumably correct. It is \textit{formally} binding upon them. But lawyers, even so, are at liberty to probe in published articles the reasoning upon which the decision rested. So, when it is said, in belittlement of international law, that all too often, when appealed to, its trumpet gives forth an uncertain sound, the fitting comment is that this is inevitable and only to be expected, since international law is like any other kind of law.\footnote{22}

No sooner have they established the importance of international law, however, than they set about dispelling the sanguine belief that it has an independent causal effect on behaviour. In their view, international law does not so much determine state behaviour as provide a framework within which and with reference to which states make their decisions. ‘The typical question asked by a state is not, what does the law require me to do? but, does the law permit me to do this? or, how can I lawfully achieve this goal? Likewise it will ask whether it has any ground for complaint, in particular circumstances, or whether another state’s complaint is well grounded’.\footnote{23}

In Manning’s view, it is in the main only indirectly that the decisions of states are influenced by legal considerations, the main factor at work here being ‘the importance attached by others to the law’s correct observance’ (on which more below).\footnote{24}

Bull similarly contends that while the rules of international law are widely observed, it would be wrong to conclude that the principal explanation for this is respect for the law itself. ‘International law’, he says, ‘is a social reality to the extent that there is a very substantial degree of conformity to its
rules; but it does not follow from this that international law is a powerful agent or motive force in world politics. 25 States sometimes obey international law through habit or inertia: ‘they are, as it were, programmed to operate within the framework of established principles’. 26 In more rational mode, they sometimes view actions sanctioned by international law as being ‘valuable, mandatory or obligatory’ regardless of any legal undertakings they may have acquired (what Bull calls the ‘international law of community’). Observance may result from coercion or a threat of coercion from a superior force (the ‘international law of power’). Observance may also result from the interest a state perceives in reciprocal action: many agreements are upheld by a strong sense of mutual interest (the ‘international law of reciprocity’).

The argument that states obey international law only when it coincides with their interests, or that they do so only for ulterior motives, does not however dispose of the question of the law’s legal force. ‘The importance of international law’, Bull concludes, ‘does not rest on the willingness of states to abide by its principles to the detriment of their interests, but in the fact that they so often judge it in their interests to conform to it.’ 27 While it would be incorrect to assume that international behaviour is determined by the law, it is a salient fact that states often consider observance of the law to be in their interest. Furthermore, they are almost invariably concerned to act in a manner not inconsistent with the law, or at least to act in a manner not inconsistent with a plausible reading of it. They are reluctant to acquire a reputation as law-breakers.

This latter point is central to Manning’s interpretation of why international law meets with such widespread compliance. On the one hand, by providing a set of agreed symbols for the conduct of international relations, law in a sense simplifies international life. ‘It is here,’ he suggests, ‘in the partial prefabricating of the hundred and one decisions that make up the daily round for the normal middle-of-the-road sovereign member of international society, that international law performs its most characteristic service.’ 28 On the other hand, much of international life proceeds on the generally well-founded assumption that ‘what is bindingly provided for will duly be performed . . . . And this despite the absence of a court around the corner before which a state defaulting on a promise may be hauled.’ 29 States comply with many of their legal obligations because it is convenient or beneficial for them to do so. But they also frequently comply with the law even when the benefit derived from so doing is uncertain. The reason for this, Manning argues, is peer-pressure, real or perceived. According to Manning, ‘like the individual, the state conducts itself in the presence of a cloud of witnesses, comprising a diversity of what to the social psychologist are known as reference groups. And, as often as not, if it be wondered why a state has done this or that, and no more obvious explanation avails, the answer is that, in doing this or that, it was meeting the expectations of some politically or diplomatically consequential reference group.’ 30 For
Manning, regard for legal obligations is to a large extent a function of the expectations of the relevant reference group. The judgement of the relevant reference group was, in Manning’s opinion, a potent sanction for the efficacy of any given legal rule. (It is worth noting, however, that in the 1960s and 1970s Manning believed that the reactions to breaches of the law of the relevant reference group were losing their fierceness and authenticity, and consequently their terrors. And, ‘the less your indignation, the less my self-restraint’.)

A third defining feature of the English School’s sociology of international law is the emphasis it gives to the lack of solidarity in international society. For members of the English School, unlike realists, lack of solidarity is more a cause of anarchy than an effect. The legal implications of this lack of solidarity are profound. It has largely undermined attempts to outlaw war and transform international society into a Kelsenian ‘coercive order’ in which acts of war are conceived as either breaches of law or measures of law enforcement. In Bull’s view, agreement on this conception is unlikely to be forthcoming. ‘The typical case is that in which states are not agreed as to which side in a conflict, if either, possesses a just cause. There may be deep disagreement among states as to which side represents the community and which the law breakers, or there may be general concurrence in treating war as purely political in nature.’ Part of Bull’s fondness for the positive international lawyers of the nineteenth century derived from their firm appreciation of the lack of solidarity in international life and their consequent view that the law did not distinguish between just and unjust causes of war.

A second consequence of the lack of international solidarity is that changes in the law can only be made on the basis of consent. States do not trust their fellow members of international society to make law for them since they cannot guarantee they will be of the same mind, of the same ideological and political disposition. In practice this has two important consequences. On the one hand, it means that international law is not easily altered. There are well-established procedures in domestic society for altering the law even if such alterations are favoured by some but by no means all. In international society such procedures, to the extent that they exist, are invariably clumsy and inefficient. This makes international law more protective than municipal law of the ‘vested interest of the few’. On the other hand, it means that in frustration, or as a means of ideological warfare, states sometimes seek to press a majority view (or what they assume to be a majority view) on the rest of international society. They thus seek to replace consent with consensus and assume the mantle of speaking for the conscience of mankind. This approach led Manning to conclude that the principal site of this kind of activity, the United Nations, had become (in contrast to the far more honourable and honest League) little more than an arena for the conduct of political warfare. In Bull’s view, the tendency
on the part of certain states to assume a consensus, and to act as if they represented that consensus when no consensus actually existed, was a major threat to international order. ‘The result . . . is not that the rules deriving from the assumption of consensus are upheld, but simply that the traditional rules which assume a lack of consensus are undermined.’

**Criticisms**

Four types of criticism are typically levelled at the classic English School’s reading of the relationship between international law and international society. The first is that the school simply restates the core propositions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century legal positivism. The notion that society and law are inextricably intertwined, that the character of a legal system is always a reflection of the character of the society that gives rise to it, and that the anarchical character of international society accounts for the paramount importance of consent and self-help in international law—none of this is very original. The second criticism is that the school conceives international law in a limited and in certain respects unrealistic way. In confining its understanding of law to ‘a body of rules which binds states and other agents in world politics . . . and is considered to have the status of law’, it fails to recognise the indeterminacy of much law and the extent to which cultural, political, ethical, and other factors intervene in international legal processes. The third criticism is that the school's approach is inherently conservative, perhaps even morally complacent. The sociology it posits for understanding international law is one that rests on certain static features of international life such as absence of central government and lack of cultural, social, and political solidarity. It consequently endorses laws that are limited in ambition, laws that aim to keep things more or less as they are (because that is the limit of what the society it reflects can tolerate). But a sociology which emphasised change—globalisation, cultural homogenisation, growing demand for the realisation universal human rights—would supply very different criteria for judging legal vitality. The moral complacency resides in the reluctance on the part of members of the school to step outside the world of states and make ethical judgements based on more ‘critical’ and independent values. The lack of willingness to criticise the law, according to this view, reflects general satisfaction with the law, which in turn reflects satisfaction with the values of the chief architects of the law: the great powers. The fourth criticism is that the school’s propositions are very general in nature, and little effort is made to empirically verify them. While members of the English School have consistently stressed the centrality of international law to international society they have done little to establish causality; that is, identify precisely the mechanisms by which and the extent to which law produces certain behaviours.
There is no doubt that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century legal positivism had a profound influence on the thinking of English School legal commentators, as recent scholarship has affirmed. One of Manning’s first published articles was a reappraisal of John Austin’s jurisprudence. Bull was influenced by Oppenheim and conceived much of his work in IR in terms of retrieving the lessons and wisdom of nineteenth-century political and legal thought, which was based on a firm appreciation of the limits of cooperation, particularly collective decision-making and collective action, in a culturally plural world. James was influenced by Manning, and while his ‘Sociology of International Law’ course, taught at the LSE in the 1960s and 1970s contains few references to the big names of positivist international law of the nineteenth century, it is full of references to those lawyers who assumed their mantle in the early mid-twentieth century—Brierly, Schwarzenberger, Fitzmaurice, Jennings, Stone.

Of equal importance, however, is the intellectual context in which Manning, Bull, and James wrote. Manning was reacting against those writers of the League period—his LSE professorial predecessor, Philip Noel-Baker, chief among them—who believed that peace could be achieved by outlawing certain types of war and replicating internationally those institutions and practices successful in producing civil order domestically. Bull was reacting partly against these ideas (his first book Control of the Arms Race was a direct response to Noel-Baker’s The Arms Race on which he worked for a period as Noel-Baker’s research assistant), and partly against their latest manifestation in the ‘policy science’ approach of Myers S. McDougal and the New Haven School, and the World Order Models Project of Richard Falk and Saul Mendlovitz. Against these moves Manning, Bull, and James did not see themselves as offering something new, but rather as re-stating to a new audience, the nature of international society, the limits of its corrigibility, and the values it helped to preserve.

The second criticism comes in more or less radical forms, from the revisionist stance of Rosalyn Higgins to the instrumentalism of the New Haven school and the radical rejectionism of Martti Koskenniemi and Critical Legal Studies. According to Higgins, international law is best conceived not as a body of rules but as a ‘continuing process of authoritative decisions’. Law involves far more than the impartial application of pre-existing rules. ‘International law is the entire decision-making process . . . not just the reference to the trend of past decisions.’ Those charged with making decisions on the basis of international law do not simply find the relevant rule and then apply it. Rather they make choices, not between fully justified and groundless legal claims, but between claims possessing varying degrees of legal merit. The process will always involve considerations—cultural, humanitarian, and political—other than the purely legal. Higgins concludes that policy considerations are an integral part of the international legal process. Whether they are aware of the fact or not, ‘authoritative decision makers’ habitually
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rely on policy preferences and assumptions in arriving at decisions on the law. No amount of legal training will enable them to keep law ‘neutral’. Law and politics are inextricably linked. Higgins makes the further claim that international law is a normative system ‘harnessed to the achievement of common values’.\textsuperscript{48} This opens the door to a fully New Haven school conception of law as an instrumental tool for the realisation of these common values.

Bull’s response to this view was typically robust. He conceded that the process of legal decision-making, nationally as well as internationally, involved extraneous factors such as the social, moral, and political outlook of judges. Decision-making could never be a pure process of the non-contentious identification and application of existing legal rules. But without reference to a body of rules, the idea of law, Bull claimed, was unintelligible. The notion of legal decision-making as a distinct social process, distinguishable from other social processes, could only be sustained by reference to a pre-existing and agreed body of legal rules. The conception of international law as a body of binding rules was, therefore, paramount. The existence of extraneous factors in legal decision-making did not do away with the concept of legal reasoning. The implication of merging the legal, political, and other social domains on the ground of providing a more realistic account of how law is actually made was that lawyers would cease to have anything distinctive to offer. The idea that international law was not a body of rules but a process of authoritative decision undermined International Law as a branch of study separate from Sociology or Political Science. Ultimately, the logic of conceiving law in this way, and of determining its content with reference to its stated or postulated social purpose, was the reduction of choice between rival legal claims ‘to the choice between one authority’s moral and legal values and those of another’.\textsuperscript{49}

Moreover, the English School is concerned with identifying actually existing norms of state behaviour. Laws, particularly hard (precise, widely accepted, and observed) laws, signal the most substantial norms. Too much attention to legal process can lead to a confused situation in which the actual identity of the norm is lost. Bundling everything pertaining to or impinging on international law into a basket called ‘international law’ merely serves to compound the problem.

The assertion that the school’s approach is conservative and perhaps even complacent, our third criticism, has been effectively dealt with in landmark works of the modern English School by Nardin and Jackson. In subtly different ways both theorists draw on the insights of Michael Oakeshott on the character of different types of human association, to provide a robust, political theoretical, defence of the value of international society as a particular kind of human association. For Nardin it is a practical association. This is conceived as a relationship between individuals or groups who pursue different and possibly incompatible purposes. The basis of their association is
commonly accepted restrictions on how they each may pursue their separate purposes. In terms of this conception, international law is understood as a body of common rules, by and large rooted in the customary practices of states, which enables states to coexist while pursuing diverse purposes. Practical associations embrace a conception of law and morality which is process or constraint orientated: their purpose is to foster mutual constraint, mutual accommodation, and the toleration of diversity. Purposive associations, by way of contrast, consist of relationships between individuals or groups who cooperate for the purpose of securing certain shared beliefs, values, or interests. The basis of this association is the existence of shared goals and the adoption of cooperative practices for their achievement. In terms of this conception, international law is a body of rules understood instrumentally. Their value is judged according to the relative efficacy with which they foster the desired ends. Purposive as opposed to practical conceptions thus embrace a conception of law that is end-orientated.50

For Jackson international society is a societas. It consists of ‘human relations characterized by the coexistence of independent selves who conduct themselves by freely observing common standards of conduct’ (‘morality as the art of mutual accommodation’ in Oakeshott’s terms). International law according to this notion consists primarily of a body of practices: usages and customs devised over time by statespeople in order to define and facilitate their relationships and avoid unnecessary collision. By way of contrast a universitas consists of ‘human relations characterized by collective enterprise between mutually dependent partners, or collaborators, in the pursuit of a conjoint purpose’ (the ‘morality of the common good’ in Oakeshott’s terms). International law according to this conception consists primarily of a series of declared goals and ideals towards which statespeople strive in their foreign policies, and a series of measures to facilitate their achievement. Rather than embedded practices regulating current conduct, it consists of declarations of intent regarding conduct in the future.51

One of the reasons for making these distinctions between different types of human association, and setting out their characteristics so carefully (and in the case of Nardin in fine detail), is to demonstrate that one type of association (purposive or universitas) is not in principle superior to the other (practical or societas)—though the prejudice of the modern state has wrought this assumption. Much depends on the character of the associates in question, and the commonality or divergence in values, goals, and interests. In true conservative fashion (and very much in the spirit of Oakeshott) Nardin and Jackson demonstrate that given the diverse character of states, a practical association or societas is a superior form of human arrangement than a purposive association or universitas.

Furthermore, there are great dangers in attempting to force international society into a purposive mould. With regard to international law this is summed up in Jackson’s critique of the declaratory tradition. He notes that
many politicians sign broad declarations of the UN and other international organisations ‘in full awareness that they are not obliged to achieve or even pursue the ideals they affirm’. Such affirmations are easy to make and their value as standards of conduct is low. Many of these declarations and resolutions cannot be realised or enforced. This has the corrosive effect of discrediting the UN and other organisations when the undertakings given are not fulfilled or even seriously pursued. In this way such declarations provoke cynicism on the part of many who expect international actors to live up to their ideals. ‘Is there any more efficient way of morally discrediting oneself,’ Jackson concludes, ‘than by declaring an intention to do something that is deemed to be urgently required...and then failing to do it?’

Making declarations and proclaiming praiseworthy goals is an undemanding activity. Unless matched by binding obligations the result is merely the cheapening and politicisation of ideals. ‘Rather than reinforcing and deepening the traditional moral basis of society...the declaratory approach may have the opposite effect of undermining it by stretching it and diluting it.’

The contribution of Nardin and Jackson, at root, is to have constructed a more robust moral defence of international society, and the international law that serves it, than that hitherto provided by the English School. Bull’s defence was that international society provided (or was capable of providing) a greater degree of order for its members (and indeed humankind as a whole) than its alternatives, and that these alternatives were in any event of doubtful viability. Nardin and Jackson persuasively add the liberty of states to pursue their diverse purposes to the moral good facilitated by international society. They further establish that there may be reasons to prefer a practically based association of states even when the achievement of a more purposive alternative is practicable. They thereby scotch the claim that the English School is guilty of moral complacency.

The fourth criticism concerning the generality of the English School’s propositions, the failure to empirically verify them, and the failure to identify relationships of cause and effect amounts to a serious misunderstanding of the nature of its approach. The generality of its propositions is a reflection of the fact that, certainly in its classical mode, the English School has been concerned not with this or that state, or this or that group of states, but with the society of states as a whole. It has sought to borrow a phrase from Manning, to take a bird’s-eye view, and arrive at a general understanding of the role law internationally. Such an understanding must precede causal analysis. Moreover, the English School understanding of the role of law internationally seems to account for certain key facts better than rival understandings. While state behaviour is never determined by law alone, states nonetheless take law very seriously; while they never act contrary to their perceived interest, they frequently deem law, or legal propriety, to be a factor in the calculation of interest; and while they sometimes breach the law, they rarely do so brazenly—they always attempt to offer a legally
plausible defence of their actions. Nicholas Wheeler's recent study of the Kosovo bombing campaign is a good example of English School analysis in which interests, ideas of propriety, and law are seen as constantly circling one another.\textsuperscript{53}

**New directions?**

The English School’s sociology of international law is fine as far as it goes. States are still the most important category of actor in international relations. States are still by far the most important subjects of international law. The lack of solidarity on so many questions of international import—concerning \textit{inter alia} environmental protection, controlling the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the promotion of democracy, the limits of legitimate non-state violence, humanitarian intervention, compensation for past colonial wrongs, the obligations of rich nations towards the poor—makes the creation of new law a slow, cumbersome, and often fractious process. There is still little agreement on the need for and the feasibility of central enforcement mechanisms. International law, for good or for ill, remains a convenient behavioural framework rather than an instrument for social control, or vehicle for the promotion of the world common good.

But the approach of the school does have a number of limitations. Three of them are salient.

**The role of power**

First, while not the only factors accounting for the wide observance of international law, members of the English School stress the importance of enforcement, or fear of enforcement, according to the principle of self-help, and social pressure in the form of the expectations of ‘relevant reference groups’. The implications of this position, however, have not been fully explored. The decentralised nature of the international legal system provides states with a good deal of discretion on whether and how to respond to suspected breaches of the law. Decision-makers inevitably take into consideration a variety of factors. Legal considerations no doubt feature. But political and economic factors are invariably paramount. The implication of this is that those states with the most political clout and the greatest economic resources at their disposal will be in the best position to effectively respond to suspected breaches, and to deter or fend off the negative responses of others to suspected breaches of their own. This puts a solitary superpower such as the United States in a uniquely strong and privileged position. Not only are its own legally dubious acts unlikely to be met with an effective negative response, but it enjoys an unusual amount of discretion on the laws it chooses to uphold and thus further sanctify, and those it chooses to overlook and thus, very possibly, weaken.
The long-term implications of this for the shape of the international legal order are profound. To remain effective any legal system has to be seen by the majority of those it applies to as impartial. If large segments of the law are seen as providing special protection for particular groups at the expense of the community, the law itself, and its normative validity, is thrown into disrepute. The unipolar position of the United States presents a special challenge to the benign conception of the links between power and law promulgated by the English School. The challenge is complicated not only by the absence of effective balancers, but the sceptical even contemptuous attitude towards international law exhibited by influential sections of American society.

Secondly, the English School has had little to say on the role of power in international courts and tribunals. One reason for this is that the heyday of the English School in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the height of the Cold War and the emergence of other fissures in the international body politic. At this time there was little opportunity for international juridical innovation, and little of it took place. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the opportunity and the will to give law more ‘teeth’ by creating new courts and tribunals has arisen, and while the pace of innovation—as a good English scholar might predict—has been slow, considerable successes have been chalked up, for example the dispute settlement procedure of the WTO, the Hague, Arusha, and Sierra Leone war crimes tribunals, and the International Criminal Court (ICC). But there is a sense in which such courts and tribunals are beholden to states not only for their success, but the continued existence. States are the paymasters, rich and powerful ones in particular. Yet it is states, or in the case of the ICC and the war crimes tribunals, the leaders or high ranking officials of states, that these courts and tribunals are mandated to put, in extremis, in the dock. The dilemma is clear enough. If they are too tough, or perhaps too consistent, judges and prosecutors risk undermining support (political, moral, and financial) for the very processes they are trying to implement and strengthen. There is therefore a systemic incentive for courts and judges to tread more delicately in the international legal field than they usually do in the domestic—for fear of antagonising their paymasters.

On the other hand, it may be true, as one leading practitioner and legal authority has recently argued, that a judicial change in climate may be taking place. States seem to be more prepared to impose strong structures upon themselves, and not run away, in the form of withdrawal of support, when the going gets tough. This possibility notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that courts and tribunals are a part of and are sometimes influenced by wider power-political processes. Although they have ignored it in the past, the nature of this relationship will require greater scrutiny in the future from those working within the English School tradition.
Norm change

There is a large and growing literature on the nature of norms and the dynamics of norm change in international relations. Given the sociological nature of its approach it is surprising that members of the classic English School gave scant attention to this issue. The role of NGOs, pressure groups, political parties, cross-national political groupings, and epistemic communities in changing or modifying the values of states was nowhere seriously explored. Certain contemporary English School members, notably Andrew Hurrell, have begun to make amends for this neglect.

While noting the importance of such non-state actors in norm development, Hurrell has highlighted the fact that most of the traffic in normative ideas is one way: from the West to the rest. Most NGOs are Western in origin and they pursue a predominantly Western liberal or humanitarian agenda. One consequence of this may be the further narrowing of societal and cultural diversity and a reshaping of the world in the image of the West. Many will view this as largely for the benefit of the West. The point here is that there may be dangers in the headlong rush to a more solidarist world legal order the desirability of which global civil society theorists and activists assume almost without question. True, the pluralist conception of international law can no longer do service unassisted. With the domestic sources of international upheaval and conflict so widely understood and recognised, it would be palpably retrograde to seek confine the chief norms of international society to the relations between states, and bar them from having any purchase on what goes on within them. But the central purpose of the pluralist conception, the maintenance of peaceful coexistence between highly diverse political actors, is one that retains great relevance. A rush to solidarism that ignores the slow pace of the growth of a sense of international community may serve to undermine the very principles it seeks to uphold. A large gap could open up between theory and reality, between obligation and practice. The resulting cynicism and accusations of hypocrisy could have a withering effect on genuine attempts to uphold common international standards, as has been the sad experience in such bodies as UNESCO and the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Connected with this issue of norm change, members of the classic English School were perhaps too willing to dismiss liberal interpretations by the UN Security Council of its obligation to promote international peace and security as a wilful interpretation of the Charter, for narrow political purposes, and a corruption of the international legal process. Their sociology now seems based on too rigid a separation between domestic and international factors. Declaring apartheid in South Africa or white supremacy in Rhodesia as a threat to international peace and security does not appear today to be stretching the law as far as it did then. Again, the wide recognition of the domestic sources of upheaval and conflict instability is
an important factor. In certain extreme cases of human rights abuses and systematic persecution of minority groups (e.g., in Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo), members of the Security Council have been able to go beyond the usual foot-shuffling and tepid condemnation. Moral concern has been inseparable from fears of the likely consequences for international stability of the continuation of such untrammelled brutality. In the light of this agreement and recognition of the interconnections between domestic brutality and international security, the cautious expansion by the Security Council of its remit is arguably not as damaging to the fabric of international order as Bull and Manning considered it to be in the 1970s.58

**Domestic and transnational reference groups**

A realist might conclude that a superpower enjoying the unrivalled military and economic strength of the United States is in a position to flout international law with impunity. It can use its strength and influence to minimise the impact of any measures other members of international society might deploy in response. The mere existence of its vastly superior strength and influence is sufficient to ensure that the response of many will be muted. It is interesting to observe, however, that even superpowers, when doing something controversial, invariably offer a legal defence, as well as a political or moral defence, of their actions. Even when they emphasise, as they sometimes do, the high moral causes for which they act, they never claim that such high causes justify their violation of the law.59 Even in extreme cases where an act is manifestly in conflict with the law, states big and small still offer some sort of legal justification.60 As members of the English School point out, this alone demonstrates the importance states attach to the observance of law. It is an established social fact that states big and small do not like to gain a reputation as law-breakers.

Yet there is another set of reasons, unexamined by the English School, why even exceptional states, such as the United States, cannot violate international law with impunity. In liberal democratic states especially, opposition parties, NGOs, and the media take a keen interest in legally dubious acts of their governments. While a powerful country such as the United States may have the luxury of ignoring the negative responses and countermeasures of other states, its elected government cannot afford to ignore the likely responses of interested and potentially troublesome domestic actors. These likely responses constitute a big factor in the deliberations of policy-makers. To overlook them would amount to a massive and foolish political gamble. In addition, many liberal democratic countries have judicial review systems which enable the legality and constitutionality of the policies and acts of government to be scrutinised and tested in the courts.61 This is especially the case in countries where treaties, once ratified, become part of domestic law.
It is of course true that some major Powers (e.g., China) operate with extremely limited domestic restraints due to lack of effective opposition parties, an independent media, active and critical NGOs, and an independent judiciary. For these states it is the likely international reaction, not domestic, they will be most worried about when contemplating an act of doubtful legality. Most liberal democratic states will be worried by both the national and international reaction to any such act. It is a significant fact, however, that a Power such as the United States is more likely to be worried and constrained by the likely reaction of certain important domestic actors than that of other states.

The cloud of witnesses in the presence of which states conduct themselves now embraces domestic as well as international actors. Many of these actors, from Amnesty and Oxfam to Greenpeace and Jubilee 2000, are now importantly transnational in their organisation and scope. This is perhaps the most striking shortcoming of the classic English School’s sociology of international law: the failure to take into account the role of domestic and transnational actors. The ‘consequential reference groups’ whose expectations and responses states have to take firm note, are no longer—if they ever were—comprised exclusively of states. Compliance with the law can only be fully understood by examining the network of domestic, transnational, and international restraints that prevail in any given case.

Conclusion: method or anti-method?

In this chapter I have refrained from using the word ‘method’. The reason is that the English School does not have one. Indeed its whole approach is antipathetic to method. A method suggests the identification and execution of a series of precise steps in order to achieve a specific goal. It makes sense to talk of the method one might employ to learn a musical instrument or a foreign language, of the method employed by economists to calculate the GDP of a country or its rate of inflation. Method *senso stricto* suggests technique, the mastery of certain technical mental and/or physical moves in order to achieve a practical outcome. In this sense the English School eschews method. ‘Approach’ is a much more appropriate term, for it suggests a general outlook, the employment of a certain set of concepts, the advancing of a certain set of propositions, and the assumption of a certain style or character of argumentation. The goal is not the acquisition of a skill, or technique, or practical capability. Rather the goal is general understanding or a general appreciation of ‘the relation of things’. I remain wedded to the Manningite notion of connoisseurship: that is, refined judgment born of familiarity with and feel for a subject. This, rather than objectivity, or science, is what we should strive for in the pursuit of social understanding.62 I have found myself using the term ‘approach’ throughout this chapter because this word captures the nature of the English School’s engagement with the phenomenon of international law. What they attempt to arrive at
is not technical knowledge, but an appreciation of the nature and character of international law, what we can reasonably expect of it, and how it relates to the wider scheme of international relationships.

This being said, if we conceive the notion of ‘method’ loosely as, say, ways and means of proceeding in the making of knowledge-claims, several explanatory strategies can be found at work in English School analysis. In his assertion that international law ‘supports a structure of expectations without which the intercourse of states would surely suffer an early collapse’, Alan James, for example, puts forward a functional explanation. In his assertion that ‘[t]he importance of international law does not rest on the willingness of states to abide by its principles to the detriment of their interests, but in the fact that they so often judge it in their interests to conform to it’, Hedley Bull puts forward a rational explanation. Manning, by way of contrast, sees observance of law in terms of social dynamics: regard for legal obligations is to a large extent a function of the expectations of the relevant reference group.

This ties-in with the observation that one of the distinctive features of the school is its methodological pluralism. At least two methods may be identified in the English School approach to international law. One is legal positivism, as identified above. This is concerned to identify what the law is. The second is aspirational legalism: the identification of soft law and broad declarations on a variety of moral themes in order to get a handle on where the law is heading. The methodological pluralism of the school is one of its chief assets. Being unencumbered by the need to identify a distinct method, being immune to the pressure—very considerable in some quarters—to adopt a method senso stricto, and being generally unselfconscious about methodological issues has enabled the school to provide a rich account of the relationship between international law and international society. It is an account that is coherent and accessible, but not at the cost of loss of complexity.

Notes and references

2. Ibid., p. 68.
3. In International Studies this conception is most closely associated with Myers S. McDougal and the New Haven School (on which more below) and Richard Falk and the World Order Models Project. See, for example, Falk’s monumental study, The Status of Law in International Society (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), esp. chs I–III, X, XV.


7. Hedley Bull, _The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics_ (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 133–136. Bull overstated this point. While international rules of change, enabling institutions to alter primary rules in the light of changing circumstances, do not exist in any substantial sense, even in Bull’s day rules of recognition, establishing unambiguously what the rules are, could be found in areas such as the law of treaties, state-succession, and any of the big ‘codification’ treaties. Today rules of adjudication, empowering a body to lay down authoritatively when a law has been broken, can be found in a number of legal instruments including the European Convention on Human Rights and the Statute of Rome (establishing the International Criminal Court). See Michael Byers, _Custom, Power and the Power of Rules: International Relations and Customary International Law_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 142–146.


11. R. J. Vincent notes that international law, for Bull, was like Sir Alfred Zimmern’s rendering of law for the classical Greek: ‘the formulation of the will of the community . . . an external manifestation of its continuing life’. Law thus illuminates continuity but does not itself provide it. In terms of its social instrumentality it is ‘a cart, not a horse’. See Vincent, ‘Order in International Politics’, in J. D. B. Miller and R. J. Vincent (eds) _Order and Violence: Hedley Bull and International Relations_ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 56.


19. Ibid., p. 66.

20. Ibid., p. 67.

21. Ibid., p. 67.

26. Ibid., p. 139.
27. Ibid., p. 140.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., pp. 322–323.
31. Ibid., p. 323. For further commentary on this aspect of Manning’s thought, and his obsession with the Indian seizure of Goa, see Wilson, ‘Manning’s Quasi-Masterpiece’, pp. 2–3.
34. A principal theme of his ‘Grotian Conception’.
36. Ibid., p. 314.
38. Ibid., p. 127.
42. See, for example, ‘Grotian Conception’, pp. 51–52.
44. See, for example, Koskenniemi, *From Apology to Utopia: The Structure of International Legal Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1989]).
47. Higgins, Problems and Process, p. 5.
49. Bull, Anarchical Society, p. 160. The most systematic critique of the ‘policy science’ or ‘teleological’ approach of the New Haven school from an English School perspective is provided by Nardin, Law, Morality and the Relations of States, ch. 8. See also Byers, Power of Rules, pp. 207–213.
52. Jackson, Global Covenant, 128–129. See also Nardin, Law, Morality and the Relations of States, pp. 97–112.
58. The two English School authors who have done most to take this point forward are John Vincent and Nicholas Wheeler. See R. J. Vincent, Human Rights and International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and N. J. Wheeler, Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
For the English School, the proof of an international society was to be found in Europe abroad. For the English School, international society was an actual historical phenomenon. It emerged in Europe at a particular time, and spread through an historical process to other parts of the world, incorporating them into a new widened form of international society, but one that still reflected its European origins. The English School saw the post-colonial period as one of incorporation, of a bringing in, of diverse peoples into a single international order of Western-inspired state forms, and Western-inspired rules, customs, and habits. For them, international society was not a fiction, or a heuristic device, but an actual historical social form, and it was not superseded by the post-colonial processes but was spread by them.

From the standpoint of the English School analysis, what was spreading at first was Europe’s notions of how matters should be organised, particularly financial matters. Expanding outward from Europe of ‘international society’ into other parts of the world was, first of all, a European model of financial viability. The state should be able to honour its debts; many pre-colonial states, especially Egypt, had large debts to bondholders in Europe, and did not have processes acceptable to Europe by which these debts could be securely paid. European governments, eventually,¹ came to back bondholders and indeed to anticipate them in insisting on a system for the rational distribution of local revenues, so that debts could be paid. This was more important than any notion of a centralised, rational, bureaucratic or competent state able to control society, let alone a sovereign state. But the insistence on financial prudence would lead to new more rational ministries in the pre-colonial and colonial state, and would eventually become an important part of a process of incorporating more rational state forms generally.

But the Europeans were not the only agents in the expansion of international society. The recipients had their own agendas that encouraged the process. In the case of Egypt, what Egypt demanded was, initially, an acceptable legal way of dealing with internal disputes with Europeans. Egypt
sought a system which would give them that possibility and that would protect them from untoward pressures of the European merchants and concessionaires, from whom they had no protection under the capitulations. It should be a system, moreover, by which the Europeans would be bound.

A wide range of explanatory routes has been taken by scholars to explain the modalities of the expansion process. Bull saw it as a process of power spreading from the European cosmopolis to the peripheries.² Yannis Stivachtis sees it as a form of cultural expansion in which ideas are spread from outside to the inside.³ Colas sees it as a form of capitalist imperialism and the reaction as a form of collective resistance. Organised social movements in the periphery accommodated themselves to the ‘transition’ by ‘contributing to and drawing from the prevailing norms, values and institutions of international society’ to confront their former masters.⁴

Along these routes, many of these thinkers point to different legal phenomena involved in the process of transformation from colonial status to a modern state in an international society. Colas, for example, in considering the transformation of Morocco, points to the development of a uniform system of provincial administration, as well as a rationalised mode of taxation.⁵

Many of these developments may be understood as part of a process of legal reception. Legal reception is the process by which laws are ‘received’ into a legal system from outside, transforming it, but also transforming relations between, in the case of a colonial relationship, the colonial state and the colonial master. Legal reception played a variable role in the expansion process—in Egypt, it was central.

The theory of legal reception

The concept of legal reception emerged in 1974, when Alan Watson and Otto Kahn-Freund, in unrelated works, presented competing theories of the viability of legal transplants. Watson had written an important work on the spread of Roman civil law first to southern Europe and eventually to the whole of France through the legal unification of that country in the 17th century.⁶ Watson observed that law had certain autonomous effects, and that in general law developed by transplanting; that is, that it did not grow from within but that the dynamic elements were received from without: he called this ‘borrowing’; he declared that ‘most changes in most systems are the result of borrowing’.⁷ Moreover, this was a deliberate process. It occurred ‘not because some such rule was the inevitable consequence of the social structure and would have emerged even without a model to copy’, but because ‘the foreign rule [law] was known to those with control over lawmaker, and they observed the apparent merits that could be derived from it’.⁸ It was a conscious process. Watson also insisted that ‘legal rules are devised by legal jurists, not necessarily or closely responsive to social needs’;⁹
that is, that the rules themselves did not necessarily respect local customs or traditional social practices. (Kahn-Freund’s counter-argument was that ‘legal institutions may be more-or-less embedded in a nation’s life, and therefore more-or-less readily transplantable from one legal system to another, but never the less at one end of the spectrum law is so deeply embedded that transplantation is in effect impossible’.)

Watson was less interested in the causes of legal borrowing than its occurrence and its consequences for the legal orders in which law was ‘received’; it was Duncan Kennedy in a series of later articles who outlined some of the causes. Kennedy identified three major ‘globalisations’ of law, which had some common features. First, as a theory, legal borrowing implied a peripheral status on the part of the recipient. The legal developments in such a peripheral or semi-peripheral system will be heavily influenced by what is happening in more cosmopolitan ‘centres’. The synthesis, that is, the result of the process of borrowing, is presented sometimes as playing back into the cosmopolitan centres, at other times as having little influence on them. Secondly, legal borrowing points to the effects on a legal system of drawing on different fields and amalgamating them into a single legal system—for example, in the case of the Middle East, the incorporation of Shari’a law into ‘western-style’ legal codes. Or, alternatively, the reorganising or codification of Shari’a in the pattern of a European legal code. Thirdly, legal borrowing challenges histories of legal development that present them as determined only by internal social and economic events. Moreover, it gives some causal power to the law itself. Kennedy’s position is often associated with ‘legal realism’ since it implies that the law can have some independent effects, and is not merely a reflection of local social or power conditions.

The colonial process forms an important part of Kennedy’s theory. Kennedy points out that the colonial powers ‘spread their national versions of classical legal theory directly to their colonies with or without codification’. He also points out that the first global system of international economic law took form as a result of the growth of world trade and the infrastructural and primary product investment from the centre to the peripheries. This, in his words, ‘unleashed a process of social change, irreversible as it has turned out, of the tradition/modernity distinction that still rules our lives’.

But what is equally important is the way in which the adaptive process may also have been chosen by elites in the periphery. Kennedy points out that ‘selection’ often accompanied ‘imposition’, partly to unite the emerging national elites with their ‘people’ but also to ‘deploy European historicist legal theory to defend themselves [sic] against European legal hegemony’. The position of the national elites in Kennedy’s theory is critical. ‘They could develop their own slightly modified national versions of the civil and commercial codes of the commercially, financially and militarily dominant European powers facilitating integration into the world market without
seeing themselves as traitors to their own national constituencies, and they could work as jurists for their nation’s interests within the structure of international law deploying the norms of sovereign equality and autonomy against the great powers.\(^{15}\) The approach is actor oriented, in that it presents many developments as having been deliberately chosen to accomplish some objective or other, usually to effect some critical social transformation.

**Egypt and legal borrowing**

In the case of Egypt’s incorporation into international society, legal borrowing played a critical role, but in a particular way. It began with a conscious decision on the part of the Egyptian government to reform an aspect of the Egyptian legal system. Having already achieved autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, Egypt now embarked upon reform of its judicial system in a deliberate attempt to achieve greater autonomy as against the European powers and the ‘capitulations’ system—the system that gave extra-territorial legal privileges to European traders and communities.\(^{16}\) Moreover, the key to a successful judicial reform, so it was thought, was not only to make Egypt look more ‘European’ legally speaking but also to persuade the Europeans to be bound by the new law.

The system that Egypt would introduce was borrowed from Italy and Switzerland, whose codes were a modernised version of the Napoleonic code, with some reference to the French code. Contract law was influenced by the Shari’a, that was placed within a modern court system. A European-style legal system for Europeans, known as the Mixed Court system (to handle litigation between foreigners and Ottoman subjects), was established in 1876, an occurrence which Britain had not opposed and showed little interest in shaping. The result was that a continental type of legal system began to take root in Egypt. Thereafter, the Egyptian political establishment confirmed its commitment to European legal norms by introducing a legal system (the Ahliyah Court system—1883) for the entire Egyptian population similar to that which had been established for the Europeans in mixed cases, thus marginalising the Shari’a. It also attempted to get rid of the rights of foreigners to set tariff levels by indicating that Egypt should have the same legal rights to set its own tariffs as European states. Eventually, the Egyptian authorities would borrow the legal form of the international alliance (of equals) to regulate their relations with Britain and would insist on the concomitant right to represent themselves in diplomatic relations and in international conferences.

When order broke down in Egypt and Britain occupied the country militarily (1882), it did not interfere with the Egyptian government’s initiatives in judicial reform, not out of any desire to ‘modernise’ the country, much less to bring it the benefits of civilisation, but rather to assure the other great powers that its stay in Egypt was only ‘temporary’. When the British did
begin to take an interest in judicial reform (and it was not until the early 1890s), the aim was essentially to get rid of the capitulations, as well as the Mixed Courts, in order to reaffirm Britain’s now pre-eminent position in Egypt. But this, the British government never managed to do. The internal legal reforms, requiring the training of new legal elites, provided the foundations for a new claim of not merely legal but also political equality. Once Egypt shared the same legal norms with the occupying power, it became difficult to see that occupation as anything else than illegal. Once it became clear that Britain’s occupation was not temporary, Britain began to search for ways of legitimating its presence in the country rather than ruling as an occupying power.

**Egyptian strategies and legal processes**

How is Egypt’s legal borrowing to be understood? The Egyptian story is one of deliberate strategies, in which legal devices were used, in some cases to sustain, in other cases to change power relations and to alter the legal form of those relations. To a significant extent, the rationalisation process began under Sa’id (1854–1863), who inclined strongly towards Europe and looked to Egypt being part of Europe. After a brief period of restriction by his predecessor, Sa’id reestablished a climate favourable to the Europeans and ended restrictions on trade in all agricultural production. David Landes, writing about the influx of Europeans looking for huge profits, denoted the period of the 1860s as ‘the Klondike on the Nile’.17 In the final years of Sa’id, the beginning of the construction of the Suez Canal (and the cotton boom, fueled by the American civil war) was an added stimulus to the immigration of Europeans. The system of ‘capitulations’, the method of adjudicating disputes among foreigners, had been extended by Muhammad Ali to aid management of the foreign presence. By the time of Sa’id, these extensions had become customary practices that weighed heavily on him and his successors, particularly with the growth of the European presence. After the Franco-Prussian war, the system would come to include the new imperial power of Germany, who won additional capitulations.

It is not precisely known when the first capitulations emerged, but one of the earliest grants of special privileges to foreign merchants were those granted to Pisa in 1154 by the then Egyptian rulers within the Byzantine Empire. Later utilised by the Ottoman Porte, the capitulations granted to European monarchs regulated trading rights and liberties of their nationals in the ports of the Ottoman Empire. They gave to the nationals of the grant-receiving country and those under its protection the right to trade unimpeded by local laws. By the end of the 18th century, the jurisdictional privileges accorded to the Europeans throughout the Ottoman Empire had been extended to include all cases in which they were involved, regardless of the nationality of the other party. (The French has won such rights by 1740 and they were extended to the rest of the diplomatic community
through the application of the most-favoured-nation clause.) These practices made the Europeans and their protégées virtually immune from the applications of local law. Each community was in fact regulated by its own national law—British law for British traders, French law for French traders. Accordingly, the various consuls had exclusive jurisdiction in any civil, commercial or criminal case involving their members, even if the other party were a local. Often, the European powers could not press home these gains in Egypt, since the Ottoman government had relinquished effective administrative power in Egypt. Nonetheless, the inability of the Egyptian government to have its laws—even simple policing laws—enforced is borne out by the reception of the law of 1857, in which Sa’id tried unsuccessfully to make European consuls enforce Egyptian police regulations.

After mid-century, there was a growing amount of litigation involving both Muslims and foreigners. This was problematic, since there was no legal system acceptable to Europeans to deal with this type of case until the arrival of the Mixed Courts in 1876. The practice developed in which, not the consular courts but the local courts had jurisdiction, but only if the consul were present during the hearing and acquiesced to the decision. Suits involving more than 4000 piastres (a considerable sum), had to be taken to Istanbul, to the Porte; if less, the suit could be heard at the local level in the presence of the consul. Criminal cases seem to have been sometimes treated in the local courts, but Scott, an important British judge in the Mixed Courts, denied that the British capitulations gave any rights to the local courts over criminal matters involving a foreigner.18

On the financial side, Sa’id’s European enthusiasms and those of his successor Isma’il (1863), combined with an inability to judge among investment opportunities offered by European ‘robber barons’, led to the growth of Egyptian government indebtedness held by private traders. These traders appealed, successfully, to their national governments to put pressure on the Egyptian state for regular payments.

In response to this situation, Isma’il’s foreign minister, Nubar Pasha (from 1867) persuaded him that by adopting a new legal code, he would have the possibility of controlling European activities. The strategy was to set up courts outside the capitulations to deal with litigation between Europeans and Egyptians. (First, however, Nubar Pasha had had to gain from the Porte the right of Egypt, an Ottoman province, to make independent arrangements with the Europeans and the right to conduct internal reforms.) Such a system could not be imposed; the Capitulatory Powers would have to agree to it. Accordingly, it would have to be a system in which they would have confidence. In 1872, after a protracted period of negotiation with the Capitulatory Powers, as well as with the Porte, Nubar Pasha hired a French lawyer to draw up the new codes.19 He, in turn, based the new codes on a mixture of French, Italian and Swiss codes; the latter two derived from
France’s Napoleonic code, but, drawn up later, they were more modern.\textsuperscript{20} He also made use of the Shari’a.\textsuperscript{21}

The central point of the reforms was the ‘Mixed Court’ system. This was a set of special courts that would deal with litigations that arose between Egyptians and Europeans, in which both would be dealt with in the same legal system, under the same laws, and within a system that was ‘Egyptian’ and not foreign.\textsuperscript{22} To increase confidence in the system, the government allowed that both European and Egyptian judges could sit on the bench of the Mixed Courts. For a brief moment, it seemed that the Courts would be supportive of the government’s position regarding the debt. But this was a brief moment only. The courts, as was to be revealed, were dominated by the European judges who quickly came to read the codes in a manner favourable to the foreign plaintiffs, particularly bondholders, and British and French government demands.\textsuperscript{23}

In consequence of Egypt’s indebtedness, the Khedive was also coming under direct pressure from the European powers, and in the critical area of Egyptian revenues. The powers demanded a secure revenue system, eventually set up in the form of the \textit{Caisse de la Debt Public}. This established a system which was to receive Egyptian revenues and distribute payments to debt holders. Half of the revenues of the state were received directly by the \textit{Caisse} for the payment of Egyptian debts, so long as the \textit{Caisse} existed, that is, well into the 1930s. But the British and the French were not satisfied that they were controlling the sum of the revenues—they suspected Isma’il of siphoning off revenues from the provinces before they reached the \textit{Caisse}. Eventually, the British and the French would set up the dual control system (1880).\textsuperscript{24} This would place a British and a French official directly in the Egyptian cabinet, controlling the finance ministry.

The failure of the Mixed Court system to mitigate the pressures falling on Ismail’s government led to a new legal strategy and one much more far reaching than the Mixed Courts. This was the Ahliyah legal system, a civil code, similar to the Mixed Courts code, which was to be applied uniformly over the whole country. This was not a code between foreigners and Egyptians, but a single code of a ‘European style’ legal system that would be applied to everyone living within the borders of Egypt. The hope was to set up a single legal order that could potentially absorb the Mixed Courts and then to hold an international conference with the capitulatory powers, to persuade them to integrate the two.\textsuperscript{25} The codes that had been drawn up for the Mixed Courts system were constituted into a new national civil code, with a bit more Shari’a added. The Shari’a courts, which had dealt with the majority of litigation among Egyptians, now handled only personal status matters (marriage, divorce etc.). From the point of view of the previous law regulating relations between Egyptians, the Shari’a had been pushed to the margins. From 1883, a single legal system in the European style, with a series of national courts, would be applied to the whole country.
With the establishment of the new Ahliyah, or national courts, Egypt hoped to dissolve the Mixed Courts into the new courts as soon as possible, but, again, the agreement of all the capitulatory powers was needed. Having set up an International Commission for Judicial Reform, a vehicle for the discussion of judicial reform, composed of all the signatories to the Mixed Courts, the Egyptian government attempted a new meeting with the aim of negotiating the absorption of the Mixed Courts into the Ahliyah system.26

British power and judicial reform

Prior to the occupation, Britain had scarcely been concerned about the process of judicial reform. Once in place, it supported the Mixed Court system. However, the comparative unexpectedness of the occupation left Britain with little or no forward planning concerning its role in Egypt: the National Assembly had prevented France sending accompanying French forces, and without the French participation, Britain was isolated among the Concert powers, which looked jealously at the British gain and muttered about compensation. On the other hand, there was a lack of internal justification for any long-term British presence. Britain would insist that the occupation was ‘temporary’ (British forces would remain in Egypt until the Suez crisis of 1956). Baring, eventually Lord Cromer, who would become consul general, would agonise continuously over the ethical and legal basis of Britain’s presence in Egypt.27 These uncertainties led to ambiguous and equivocal attitudes to judicial reform, including the reform of the Mixed Courts.

Given that Egypt wanted the Ahliyah courts to take over from the Mixed Courts, the Ahliyah courts should have represented for Britain a progressive development of good government in Egypt. Superceding the Mixed Courts would also limit the influence of the other capitulatory powers—and Britain wanted to protect the prerogatives of the British position as well as the favoured position of British traders. (Salisbury had expressed concern about the Mixed Courts enhancing the influence of the other powers in Egypt, and he was concerned about internationalisation, which might be encouraged by the International Commission for Judicial Reform (ICJR).) Now, as an occupying power, the British government had to have a policy in Egypt and more importantly it had to justify the occupation to Parliament. From this point, Britain would, on the one hand, promise that its occupation was temporary but on the other begin to speak of a ‘civilising mission’ (without however precisely using those terms), and would begin to involve itself even more closely in a widened range of Egyptian affairs. The original thrust of British and French policy in Egypt had been financial. Now, however, Britain sent advisors into the justice ministry (and eventually into the ministry of the interior in 1892). And Malet, consul general from 1879, would urge the Egyptians to hire foreign judges for the Ahliyah courts, using the justification that true reform would be thereby encouraged.28
From the Egyptian perspective, the occupation opened up several new prospects, not all of them negative. On the one hand, there is the suggestion that some in Egyptian authority saw the possibility of using the occupation to remove Egypt from the suzerainty of the Ottoman Porte. Sherif Pasha, prime minister after the occupation, even suggested to Malet that Britain should be active in freeing Egypt from the Porte, by placing Egypt under a British suzerainty (which, from the Egyptian perspective, promised to be temporary). There was also the possibility that occupation might in fact speed up the process of judicial reform and get rid of the capitulations. Malet had suggested that, if the Egyptian authorities put foreign judges in the Ahliyah courts, the capitulations might be nullified. In short, Egypt sought to use the occupation to revise its status, both as a subject of the Ottoman Porte and as a subject of European colonialism.

The immediate question concerned the status of the Mixed Courts. Within eight months of the occupation, Sherif had sent a circular to the capitulatory powers proposing the extension of the Mixed Courts for a further five years. This proposal appears to have been consistent with the aim of using the occupation to get rid of the relationship with the Porte. If the European powers stayed heavily involved in a Mixed Court system, this would lessen the legal relationship between Egypt and the Porte. Equally, however, it would also lessen the immediate relationship with Britain. (In response, Britain became a stronger advocate of reducing the role of the Mixed Courts and absorbing them into the jurisdiction of the Ahliyah system. It also simultaneously began to support the ICJR in a somewhat vain attempt to convince the other Concert Powers that Egypt was not becoming a colony of Britain.) The other question, which became more pressing after the occupation, was the status of Articles 9 and 11 of the ROJ, the Regulations of Judicial Organisation. These regulated the Mixed Courts, and were the critical articles that undermined Egypt’s internal sovereignty with respect to foreigners. Finally, there was the need to expand the Mixed Courts’ jurisdiction to try criminal cases, still held within the consular courts. The thriving and lucrative criminal activity of the foreign community could only be dealt with by extending the jurisdiction of the Mixed Courts to include criminal litigation to which foreigners were a party. Absorbing criminal activity into the Mixed Courts was central to the strategy of extending the jurisdiction of the Ahliyah courts. If, when the Mixed Courts were absorbed, these courts did not have jurisdiction over foreign criminal activity, a critical area of regulation would be denied to the Egyptian authorities. If, moreover, this could be accomplished, any new laws enacted by the Egyptian government would pass directly into the Egyptian legal system without having to be approved by the capitulatory powers as was currently the case.

However, Britain’s position in Egypt as an occupying power, even if ‘temporary’, worked, paradoxically, against judicial reform. Despite and because of the occupation, the other capitulatory powers became determined to
maintain their rights, and they would not agree to the absorption of the Mixed Court System. From the time of the occupation, Egypt would succeed only in minor adjustments to the Mixed Courts, and only those with which the capitulatory powers agreed. The courts would only be abolished by the Montreux Convention of 1938, which effectively removed all foreign legal structures, to take effect in 1949. Where Egypt would succeed was in keeping the issue of its dissatisfaction with the Mixed Courts clearly before the British authorities and the rest of the capitulatory powers. All subsequent meetings of the ICJR would reinforce the Egyptian position on the Mixed Courts, and would draw constant attention to the iniquities, especially of Article 11 of the ROJ.33 The major change which occurred during this period concerned the somewhat novel development of the Mixed Appeals Court into a form of legislative body, a development which Cromer would oppose, as well as the Egyptian authorities. This occurred because, in the absence of any body with clear legislative rights in Egypt concerning foreigners, the Appeals Court, which had to decide finally on the application of the law, became in effect a final arbiter of that law. Ismail’s early hope that by establishing a European style cabinet, he would be gaining in effect, legislative powers, was not fulfilled.

The outbreak of the First World War, with the Ottoman decision to join the Axis powers, gave Britain the opportunity to legalise its position in Egypt. It did so with the declaration of a protectorate, which gave sovereignty to the British Crown, and which made Britain the court of final appeal. Britain also became the guarantor of the legal rights of others in Egypt, including (unfortunately for them) those of the other capitulatory powers. Britain held, in effect, the sovereign power of Egypt. But the title protectorate implied eventual self-government (and this implication did not escape the Egyptians). Britain continued, also, with indirect rule, not to antagonise the Egyptians. The protectorate did not give the increased sense of security that the British had expected (the Egyptians would prove less amenable to British rule because of the protectorate). Nor did it offer any real opportunity to unilaterally set aside the capitulations, the long-term aim of both Egypt and Britain: the British government was not anxious to disturb its European allies. The Foreign Office declared it would deal with the capitulations after the war. The need was to break the Ottoman–Egyptian link in a way that would cause the least amount of damage to the British–Egyptian relationship and to Britain’s relationships with its war-time allies.

As the war progressed, pressure grew for a decision on the eventual status of Egypt. British officials in Egypt began to fear a failure to defeat the Porte, with consequences for Egypt’s largely Turkish ruling elite. There was also the increasing radicalisation of the Egyptian public, which was beginning to look for ways to throw off the Protectorate and gain full independence. Originally largely indifferent to the British occupation, the general public, under pressure of war and the demands Britain had to make on the Egyptian
economy, was being converted into a national independence movement increasingly hostile to British control. The wider debate among official circles in the Foreign Office and War Cabinet veered between annexation, informal empire under British guidance, more thorough penetration via Anglicising laws, customs and administration, or establishing British control on Indian lines. Support varied for each of these options. A committee composed of Balfour, Curzon, and Milner was constituted to consider which road to take, and what should be the eventual relationship between Britain and Egypt, although no firm conclusions were to be drawn before the end of the war.

Focus turned to the capitulations, an irritant to the British as well as to the Egyptians. As British ascendancy in Egypt grew, British officials came increasingly to look upon the capitulations as conduits for unjustified foreign influence. It was recognised that the Egyptians in an early and long-standing practice used the capitulations to limit British interference. (Also, the Egyptians had used the capitulations to play one power against the others.) The British intention came to be to revise or abolish the capitulations. Several Commissions were set up in Egypt and one in London to study the kind of judicial and legislative measures that would be necessary if the capitulations were abolished. These studies made it clear that no increase in self-government was intended: rather, the intention was to remove the avenues of foreign government influence in the Egyptian administration. The Brunyate report recommended a bicameral structure of government with some foreign representation in the upper chamber (the more important one). This would take over the legislative functions that had been vested with the Great Powers via the Mixed Courts. It would have an advisory and amending capacity only. But it would unify the different legal jurisdictions in Egypt—the Mixed, the Ahliyah, the consular, religious and personal status courts, as well as the Waqf administration (a repository for family assets). Once judicial reform was undertaken, it had begun to take on a life of its own.

The leaking of the Brunyate report in 1918 led to widespread expectations of major legal and constitutional reform that might even lead to independence and self-governance. This was encouraged by Britain's association with America and the declaration of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. For the British community in Egypt, a new fear grew that they would be excluded from any future consideration in Egyptian legislation; among the community there was a general rejection of the idea of Cromerite-style indirect rule. For the Egyptians, on the contrary, and somewhat paradoxically, suspicion of Britain increased. Journalists reported an increasing remoteness on the part of British officials. This perception may have contributed to widespread disturbances and discontent in the Egyptian population and a sense of the inadequacy of British rule. On 17 November 1918, six days after the end of the Great War, three prominent Egyptian lawyers
formed a self-professed delegation and demanded from General Wingate, High Commissioner, complete autonomy, leaving Britain to supervise only the canal and Egypt’s still considerable debt. The Prime Minister, Rushdi, requested permission to go to London for talks on the future structure of the Protectorate, in the event refused. Subsequent efforts to control political dissidence sparked the rebellion of 10 March 1919. On 17 March, the British authorities in Egypt informed the Foreign Office that they had lost control of Egypt.38

Disorder was put down and the Milner Mission was established. Milner’s terms of reference were to determine the cause of the riots and to satisfy Egyptian sensitivities while devising the future form of a Protectorate that would maintain Britain’s interests.39 Maintaining control by the use of force was not considered feasible. The riots of 1919 were not like the army revolt of 1882. At the very least, they were much more widespread.

In the course of the Mission’s investigations, Sir Cecil Hurst, the Mission’s legal advisor, reported on the background to the multiplicity of legal jurisdictions in Egypt, on the Brunyate report and the Egyptian responses to it. The responses reported by Hurst included a suspicion that unification of the jurisdictions would introduce foreign influence into the Ahliyah courts in the manner of the Mixed Courts, the creation of de facto British courts, and even the ousting of Arabic as a language of the court. (Far from wishing for the end of the Mixed Courts and the capitulations, the Egyptians now had become afraid of abandoning them, for fear of leaving Egypt alone under a more powerful British imperial rule.) Hurst also commented on the possible responses of the foreign powers and doubted that they would agree to put their nationals under the jurisdiction of the Egyptian courts. He proposed abandoning legal unification, and simplifying the judicial system, leaving only the Ahliyah courts and a revised system of Mixed Courts for dealing with foreigners. By this means, Britain could expect to gain the confidence of the other capitulatory powers that would recognise Britain’s dominant authority and defer to Britain in a British area of influence.40 In sum, the Mixed Courts had come to represent the continuation of internationalism in Egypt and had become difficult to amend in consequence, because they were the barometer by which capitulatory privileges were measured. (The other proposal put forward by Hurst was to rescind or reorganise the 13 different consular courts who administered their own national criminal codes. The existence of these courts severely restricted the powers of the Egyptian police to make arrests or deal with suspected criminal activity. Hurst made clear here, as well as with regard to the Mixed Courts, that Britain should not continue with the status quo.) He also ‘assumed that the foreign powers would agree to transfer their capitulatory rights to Britain’, because it was now a British sphere of influence and British arrangements for their own subjects could equally also serve as a legal framework for other foreigners.41
The treaty solution
With the demise of the Ottoman Empire, and the clear evidence provided by non-cooperation that the Egyptians had rejected the Protectorate, the legal status of Egypt gave increasing concern to Milner. Officially, Britain could not decide between a continued protectorate, informal empire or outright annexation. The Egyptians, in any event, would agree to neither the first nor the third, and the notion of informal empire did not create confidence in London. The Milner mission returned to London, and Milner, probably because he thought the Cabinet would take no action, began a series of private negotiations with the leader of the Wafd party, the party which had approached Wingate to ask for autonomy, if not independence.42 In the process, Milner accommodated as many of the Egyptian demands as he thought would be acceptable to London. In the light of the legal as well as practical difficulties regarding the protectorate, he began to consider a form of a treaty of alliance between the two countries that would replace the protectorate. This could take the form of a ‘perpetual alliance’43 but one between two nominally equal partners.

The treaty proposal had features attractive to both sides. Such a treaty would give to the British government everything that Britain in the end actually required. This would include a permanent military presence, control of the canal, maintenance of key advisors, control of the police, and pre-eminence of the British representative over other foreign representatives in Egypt. Finally, as protector of foreign rights, Britain would work to end the capitulations. The Mixed Courts would continue requiring a British judicial advisor in the Ministry of Justice, but, finally, criminal jurisdiction would be added to the Mixed Courts. Sa’ad Zaghlul, the leader of the Wafd, agreed to gaining perhaps nominal independence but also, more importantly, the definitive end of the protectorate. Each agreed to recommend the treaty proposal to their respective sides, Milner to the British Government and Zaghlul to the Egyptians.

In Milner’s justification to Curzon, several points stand out. First, he presented the alliance in terms of a basis for a continued British presence which was treaty based rather than based on a questionable occupation. It would be based moreover on ‘other grounds that the necessity of keeping Egypt in order’. In sum, the Egyptians would be signing up to an alliance in which they would be autonomously agreeing, in the event, to a military base and a permanent military presence. An alliance, in short, would give the Egyptians the outward sign of independence. The ‘weak point’, he felt, ‘was in according to Egypt the right of foreign diplomatic representation abroad’. In his words, ‘he only assented with the greatest reluctance but it is also just the point about which the Egyptians care most’.44

Eventually something along those lines was to be agreed, but only after an interval during which a less generous route was tried. The alternative route
was occasioned by the consternation of the British Cabinet over Milner’s advice, which it took to be virtual disengagement. Milner’s proposal was temporarily shelved, and Curzon was instructed to negotiate with Ali Pasha along lines recommended by General Allenby, then High Commissioner. Allenby’s advice was similar to Milner’s, that is an alliance among two parties, but without Egyptian rights to self-representation. Ali Pasha’s refusal put Allenby ‘in an impossible position’. In the event, and perhaps because he was a military man more concerned with strategic realities than the romance of empire, the High Commissioner recommended that Britain abandon the Protectorate. Helped by increased rioting in Cairo, the Cabinet gave into Allenby’s position on 16 February 1922. It drafted a Unilateral Declaration of Independence that contained four reserved points: security of communication, namely the Suez Canal, defence of Egypt against foreign attack or interference, protection of foreign interests and foreign minorities in Egypt, and British control of the Sudan.

As a result of the Unilateral Declaration, Egypt had become a nominally independent state. In 1923, a group of Egyptian lawyers proposed a constitution that was signed, reluctantly, by the new King Fuad. Modeled partly on that of Belgium, it established a Parliament with legislative powers and a Cabinet. But it was a somewhat anomalous independence. The Declaration of Independence did not have the initial agreement of the Egyptians. Britain retained advisors in the Justice Ministry, in the Finance Ministry, a British head of police and a Britain as head of the Parquet, the equivalent of the Crown Prosecution Service. The Mixed Courts were still there. The capitulations were still in place; that is, foreign powers continued to have special rights within the Egyptian legal system, which continued to qualify Egyptian sovereignty.

Between 1922 and 1936, when a treaty of alliance would finally be signed, the British Government arrogated to itself special rights for protecting its interests in Egypt. These included the four reserved points. But it did not succeed in dislodging the other foreign powers. Britain had offered to guarantee the interests of the 17 capitulatory powers in return for passing over their extraterritorial rights to Britain. But the proposal was not agreed to by these powers. The Egyptians were allowed to negotiate with foreign powers, including the capitulatory powers, but they could not negotiate in areas affecting the four reserve points. The foreign power in these areas would have to negotiate directly with Britain. Periodically, discussion would ensue between the British Foreign Office and the Egyptian authorities on ‘the desiderata’, as the Foreign Office began to refer to issues of judicial reform.

But the growing Egyptian nationalist movement was by now well-schooled in the ‘desiderata’ of legal reform and would brook no ambiguity with regard to the Mixed Courts. They would scupper any British attempt to establish a legal order that would preserve British interests while limiting the ‘interference’ of any other European powers in Egyptian affairs. A covert
symbiosis became apparent between the Egyptian government and the rising nationalist movement. Increasingly, the Egyptian government’s demands of Britain hardened and became more focused on the formal sovereignty issue. The Egyptian government would decline to participate in any way in the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Mixed Courts, because they constituted an infringement of Egypt’s sovereignty.\(^48\)

Since Milner’s initial proposal of 1923, a treaty of alliance had been discussed on and off, and there was a 1930 draft, in the drafting of which Egyptians had participated. But the seizure of Abyssinia, in 1935, made the issue suddenly critical to the British authorities. (Two Italian divisions had been moved to Libya.) In the event, the new negotiations were to be much tougher, with Egyptian attention directed to full internal sovereignty. The liberal constitutionalist, Muhammad Mahmud, proposed an exchange of the military provisions for complete abandonment of the capitulations; that is, Britain could have the Canal Zone for a specified period if it agreed to throw its diplomatic weight behind a conference aimed at the ending of the capitulations.\(^49\) In 1936, a new draft was agreed, in which Article 3 of the preliminary draft treaty of 1930 was incorporated into the new draft as Article 12. This article set out a plan by which Egypt would abolish the capitulations and afterwards the Mixed Courts, after assuming the jurisdiction of the councillor courts. It was regarded as a clear commitment on the part of Britain to support Egypt in any negotiations with the capitulatory powers. In a secret memo from Eden to the Cabinet of 4 March 1936, he wrote that ‘His Britannic Majesty recognised that the responsibility for the lives and property of foreigners in Egypt devolves exclusively upon the Egyptian government who will ensure the fulfillment of their obligations in this respect.’\(^50\)

As a result of the 1936 treaty between Britain and Egypt, there was convened the Montreux Convention, a meeting of Egypt, Britain, and the other 16 capitulatory powers. Egypt formally hosted the convention as a full international personality, albeit backed by Britain. All the capitulatory powers, including the French—the most insistent on their capitulatory rights—agreed to participate. Egypt set out the conditions under which it would deal with the former capitulatory states. It announced a proposal to abolish the capitulations and a time table for the gradual elimination of the Mixed Courts over a 11-year period.\(^51\) Under Britain’s influence, the 16 powers all agreed to abandon their capitulatory rights. No longer would their national laws apply in Egypt to their nations. The Mixed Courts remained but for a clearly delimited period. In 1949, the special juridical rights of foreigners in Egypt ended.

**Conclusion**

Egypt’s embarkation upon the reform of its judicial system brought Egypt into elaborate international negotiations with the European powers. The
success of these negotiations resulted in Egypt introducing a European legal system (1876) for Europeans—the Mixed Court system. The result was that a continental type of legal system began to take root in Egypt. The Egyptian political establishment confirmed this commitment to European legal norms by introducing a legal system (the Ahliyah Court system) for the Egyptian population as a whole similar to that which had been established for the Europeans in Egypt, thus marginalising the Shari’a. When order broke down, Britain occupied the country militarily. Initially indifferent, Britain then began supporting the Egyptian government initiative in judicial reform, primarily as a means of limiting channels of other great power influence in Egypt. As the occupation proceeded, Britain attempted to preserve its interest by searching for ways of legitimating its presence in the country rather than ruling as an occupying power.

While initially the legal approach taken by Egypt had been somewhat disappointing in that it did not contribute to a more autonomous relationship vis-à-vis the Europeans, eventually the use of European legalities became an Egyptian technique for dealing with Britain, as well as with the other powers. While wanting to be rid of the international legal constraints operating on them through the Mixed Courts and Capitulations, Egyptians did not show any interest in abandoning the modified European law itself. They wanted what it offered them both internally and externally: internally,—modernising and managing the activities of the foreigners in commerce and trade; externally, acquiring autonomy within the Ottoman Empire as well as attempting greater control of their trading relations with the rest of the world. While Britain searched for ways to find a legal formula that the Egyptians would accept which would leave Britain in ultimate charge of key areas in Egypt, the Egyptians were looking for ways through the same means to deny this to Britain without resort to violence.

As the Egyptian political elite matured in the course of the British occupation, it had absorbed the European norms not only for constituting the domestic arena in Egypt, but also it long since had understood the importance of the diplomatic rules of the game and requirements of behaviour in the international arena. The British, as well as the Europeans, through their belief in the values of imperialism, pursued a course of action in Egypt of expecting the Egyptian elite to recognise and accept an inferior relationship which, in the end, could only be maintained through force. The Egyptian government and political elite ultimately pursued a consistent policy of garnering autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. However, when Europeans began to impinge upon these gains in autonomy, a strategy was pursued by the Egyptians of emulating and absorbing the crucial legal norms that underpinned the successful European model in both internal and external arenas.

After the Ottoman Empire, with neither the British nor the Egyptians able to force their ultimate aims upon each other, the British pursued a negotiating strategy based upon achieving a legal outcome which would
secure its vital interests in Egypt which it believed depended upon Egypt legally accepting British rights in Egypt. The Egyptians, on the other hand, pursued both a political (nationalist) and a legal strategy in which the British were not allowed to be free of the powers in the background and in which the power of the army of occupation was not sufficient to be able to achieve Egyptian acceptance of a legal dependence on Britain. In the end, Egypt accepted, in the 1936 Treaty of Alliance with Britain, the requirements of the military clauses in exchange for Britain’s commitment to the abolition of the Capitulations and ultimately the Mixed Courts system—confirmed in the Montreux Convention of 1937.

In summary, with the gradual, then rapid, absorption into Egypt of European legal norms, an Egyptian legal class trained in French law developed. Diplomatic dialogue involving Egypt in diplomatic protocols brought Egypt closer to internalising the legal norms of international society. Though the Egyptian government was held to the observance of the requirements of the Mixed Courts treaty, in time, not only the Egyptian government came to adhere to these common rules expressed in this international institution, the Egyptian political elite came to expect, particularly in the 20th century, the same rights and obligations of a sovereign state in the international system and to be a part of international society of states. Persuading the European powers and, in particular, the British government to make this adjustment in their relations with Egypt—through the elimination of the Capitulations and the recognition that Europeans would be subject to the law and order established by the Egyptian government within its own territory—begins to take shape in the 1920s and 1930s and is only completed in the 1950s.

It is often supposed that the standards of civilisation were ‘imposed’ by the imperialist powers on their conquests. In the case of Egypt the opposite maintains. The British were not particularly interested in any general standard of civilisation. What they wanted was that Egypt should pay its debts to British bond holders. It was Egyptian elites who began the process of introducing European legal norms into Egyptian law, and who relentlessly pursued this strategy, until all of Egypt had fallen under the sway of European-style law, and until all of the Egyptian legal system was under Egyptian sovereignty, excluding all foreign control.

By the time of independence, Egypt had acquired the legal norms of international society, the *acquis communautaire* of international law and the legal appurtenances of the UN membership, had developed patterns of internal and external relations that conformed to international value systems and had become a player in its own right in international politics. What legal borrowing as a theory implies is that the researcher should watch the work that legal concepts are doing and the sources from which they come.
Notes and references

1. British government policy had been to remain aloof from coming to the assistance of businesses or individuals who had made poor judgments in investing in insecure situations; Derby to Stanton, 23 May 1876, telegram, FO 407/9. See, for example, the statement of British policy regarding the refusal to support British investments in foreign countries and in foreign governments, Hammond to Mr Hyde Clark, 26 April 1871 in Hammond to Lyons, 29 April 1871, no. 318, FO 146/1519.


6. Watson notes that universities originated in Italy with the teaching of Roman civil law.


11. Duncan Kennedy, ‘Three Globalizations’, Paper given at Harvard Law School, 2003. Kennedy argued that America had a peripheral status up to the 1930s and that the American ‘synthesis’ had little effect on subsequent developments in France or Germany which had originally been very influential in the American legal system; p. 5.


15. Ibid., pp. 11–12.


20. The new codes included a civil code, penal code, maritime code.
21. Law of property, co-ownership in multi-occupation, water rights, windows overlooking women’ quarters and other Islamic rules, grave deception, hidden defects, sale with the power of redemption, loans, ban against sale of future crops, risk of loss or damage remaining on the vendor in certain circumstances, giving a buyer reasonable time after sale agreement to reject goods, legacies; Hoyle, *Mixed Courts*, p. 18.


23. Roberson, ‘Emergence of the Modern Judiciary’.

24. C. Rivers Wilson, *Chapters from My Official Life* (London: Edward Arnold, 1916); Rivers Wilson was a member of the Dual Control Ministry.

25. Granville to Lyons, 29 September 1881, in the context of reporting Malet’s advice to El, Fakri, head of Egypt’s judiciary; No. 943, Confidential, PRO 30/29/294.

26. It should be recalled that the capitulations were granted by the Ottoman government, and covered all of the Ottoman Empire, and that the Egypt, still a province of the Ottoman Empire, did not have the right to set them aside.


28. Malet pressed continuously for judicial reform, to balance the strong leadership he believed Egypt required, see, for example, Malet to Granville, 5 September 1882, PRO 30/29/160.


30. The Mixed Courts were established for 5 years, to be renewed at 5 years intervals.

31. Article 9 gave exclusive jurisdiction on all matters concerning foreigners to the mixed courts.

32. Sherif to Malet, 30 June 1883, in Malet to Granville, 2 July 1883, No. 274, PRO 30/29/287.

33. Article 11 failed to distinguish between administrative measures and sovereign acts, leaving to the Mixed Court judges the power to determine this critical question; they in turn, dominated by European judges, tended to treat all measures as ‘sovereign acts’, and hence legislation requiring the agreement of the capitulatory powers. But, in effect, it was the Mixed Court judges who were exercising the legislative function.


35. The British were unhappy about the influence the capitulations gave to foreign powers from the moment of their entry into Egypt, but it became a serious anomaly after the establishment of the Protectorate; B. A. Roberson *Judicial Reform and the Expansion of International Society: The Case of Egypt* (PhD London School of Economics, 1998), Chapter 5, p. 289.


38. Cheetham to Foreign Office, Telegram, Very Urgent, 17 March 1919, FO 371/3714/42905; Wingate to Lord Hardinge, 14 November 1918, FO 848/2; Zaghlul et al had gone to see Wingate two days after the armistice and Brunyate’s report came a day later. Note on Constitutional Reform by Sir W. Brunyate,
18 November 1918, enclosed in Wingate to Balfour, secret, 24 November 1918, Docs. collected for the information of the Special Mission appointed to enquire into the situation in Eg. (DSCM), Vol. II, p. 16, Milner Papers 162.

41. Ibid.
42. Milner, The August Memorandum, 18 August 1920, FO 848/20; the talks were ‘feelers’ not negotiations; see also Meeting at the Colonial Office, 21 June 1920; meeting with the Egyptian delegates 22 June 1920, FO 848/20.
44. Milner to Curzon, 11 August 1920, very confidential, ff.120–30, MSS. Eur. F.112/217.
45. Allenby to Curzon, 24 December 1921, No.686, political, decode, urgent, MSS.Eur.F.112/262, where he reports nightly rioting, and his inability to control the situation.
46. Appendix 1: Draft Declaration to Egypt, 16 February 1922, in Cabinet 10 (22), 16 February 1922, Secret, MSS.Eur.F.112/262.
47. Sir Cecil Hurst had devised, with a committee of judges and lawyers in Alexandria in 1920, a scheme by which the criminal jurisdiction of the consular courts would be made subordinate to the Mixed Courts ‘under increasing British control’, together with all litigation between foreigners of the same nationality. The foreign powers would pass to Britain their capitulatory powers regarding legislation; Lloyd to Chamberlain, 15 May 1927, No. 302, J1357/637/16, FO 371/12384.
I must begin with a confession. I am a reluctant methodologist. Indeed, it seems to me that the English School serves its method when it wears it lightly. Stanislavski, who inspired the method school of acting, has more to offer on this score I believe than armies of theoretical social scientists. He advised his actors to provide a truthful representation of those they portrayed not only by studying their lives, characters and beliefs, but also by looking deeply into themselves to find emotional and psychological experiences as points of identification. In most human activities, the most that one can aspire to is honesty, to be true to one’s experience of the external world, and to the understanding one can arrive at through its study, combined with such intuitive insights that can be gained through introspection.

For human beings, who are themselves subject to all kinds of different cultural and environmental conditioning, and whose memories notoriously play tricks on them as they grow older, to aspire to be true to experience is to set the bar very high. If this is true of our own lives, it must be doubly so when we seek to represent something as complex as the social and political world of international relationships. One is almost bound to make mistakes of both fact and interpretation, for the simple reason that neither facts nor the interpretative gaze we turn on them ever stay still. The best that one can hope for is a report on work in progress, which will continue to throw a sliver of light on the way the world looked at the time that it was written. The book under review, whose normative architecture I have been asked to restore, was written nearly a decade ago. Much has happened in the intervening years, so that if I was to rewrite it now there would be corrections and reinterpretations to be made. But I think it unlikely that my normative approach—and its central belief that there are limits to the possibility of political progress—would be likely to alter.
The foundations of the argument

Why should this book be regarded as an argument in the English School tradition, and why may it be regarded as a normative argument? It was conceived in the English School tradition in the obvious sense that it argues from a society of states position. Like other works within the tradition it is primarily concerned with practice, not theory; that is, with the way the society of states has been understood. It is also a normative argument, in that I have tried to evaluate various claims made for how international society is evolving and the choices its evolution presents to us.

There are two senses of normative, often confused in discussion of the English School. One is normative in the sociological sense of discerning the norms or practices of a particular society; that is, an essentially descriptive or anthropological exercise. The other is normative in the philosophical sense of determining the right or the good or the proper form of action. My study examines the normative in both senses of the term, but its main purpose in using the former is to make an argument about the latter. In other words, in describing the practice of contemporary international relations, it seeks to offer a normative critique of this practice. The main reason for operating in this way is that it corresponds to how we normally discuss the world around us. Our moral preoccupations are normally embedded in everyday speech and the stories we tell to make sense of our lives. In the second part of this chapter, I will attempt to illustrate this claim by reference to the three central themes discussed, which deal respectively with sovereignty, democracy and intervention.

Before doing so, let me try to locate the argument in its broader intellectual setting. Like most English School works, it belongs to the tradition of English empiricism from Locke to Hume. Empiricists were originally known for their rejection of metaphysics, not to mention the miraculous, in the explanation of events, but more recently for not starting with abstract theory. As I understand it, empiricism involves not arguing beyond experience and observation; it attaches importance to the roles of sense and perception in the formation of ideas; and of causal connections in their fixing and legitimation. It also employs causal inference to provide us with an understanding of events beyond our immediate perceptions.

Acknowledged or not, Hume’s understanding of history is probably central to any English empiricist and certainly underpins the view of the state system presented in Progress and its Limits. History was for Hume the laboratory of the understanding and the source of the experience on which we build present knowledge. It was also to be understood as a narrative, made up of loosely causal links. In his historical writing, Hume distinguished between physical and moral causes. Moral causes were defined as ‘all circumstances which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons, and which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us.’ Amongst these, Hume
mentioned ‘the nature of government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which the people live, [and significantly] the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbours’ as examples of moral causes.  

His method meant selecting the events worth being narrated, understanding their inner dynamics and presenting them in a comprehensible way. Hume’s interest in historical causation was always bound to his attempt to grasp the rationale of the development of English, Anglo-Scottish and British civil society. There is no reason, however, why this method should not be applied to international, as to any other society.

By historical writing, Hume did not mean what we would regard as a purely technical history. First of all, according to Hume history writing originates within what we would today understand as a culture (as it derives from the ‘conversation and books of travellers and historians’). Secondly, history takes the shape of a field characterised by many relationships. In Hume’s account of his own historiography, he lists between Rome and the globe; between politics, religion and manners; between rises and declines; and finally, between the historian’s conception of his subject and what he has learnt in the writings of other authors. Finally, the ideas that we acquire about history, which Hume distinguished from the mere past, are ‘nothing but ideas’. However, their very connection (‘arising from… the relation of cause and effect’), combined with the continuity of witnesses, renders them different from mere ‘offspring of the imagination’.  

One of the lessons Hume wanted to stress was the prevalence of unintended consequences; that is, unplanned, contingent and fortuitous outcomes. The History of England abounds in explanations founded on the principle of unintended consequences. According to Hume the importance of history consisted in the fact that it showed ‘the great mixture of accident, which commonly concurs with a small ingredient of wisdom and foresight’. Among the forms of unintended consequences, Mandeville’s argument of ‘private vices, publick benefits’, destined to play a critical role in the thought of Hume’s friend, Adam Smith, stands out. According to Hume, the increase of industry and the growth of a social class devoted to commerce emerged in the context of the demise of the feudal barons and the attendant rise of the Commons, in effect a non-intentional process. The acknowledgment of the presence of unintended consequences was also connected to the traditional recognition of a disproportion between the factors leading to an event and its far-reaching consequences.

The influence of Burke on the argument

Empiricism is often confused with positivism but they are not the same. Empiricism is an epistemology—an account of the status of knowledge. Positivism is a method—a way of organising material and judging its validity.
As a method, positivism is a scientific model for verification of hypotheses, primarily by testing, and is concerned with what is sometimes termed theoretical reasoning, or the understanding of objective events. The method used in this work is not like that at all. It is concerned with practical reasoning, a way of arguing in which different outcomes are assessed and which has consequences for action. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines practical reasoning in the following manner:

Practical reason, by contrast, takes a distinctly normative question as its starting point. It typically asks, of a set of alternatives for action none of which has yet been performed, what one ought to do, or what it would be best to do. It is thus concerned not with matters of fact and their explanation, but with matters of value, of what it would be desirable to do. In practical reasoning agents attempt to assess and weigh their reasons for action, the considerations that speak for and against alternative courses of action that are open to them.

My form of practical reasoning involves understanding the historical development of a set of practices and unpacking their inner relationships. Specifically, it advances by the evaluation of opposed and contradictory claims. In considering the claims of solidarism, for example, I set up two arguments about the evolution of the current state system and demonstrate that both sets of claims are exaggerated, in the light of a previous analysis of the system. The underlying argument is that it is up to those who advance radical claims, of one sort or another, to prove their case, in the face of a system whose benefits, as well as flaws, are knowable.

This form of argument resembles that of Edmund Burke. Burke often combined identification of relations or connections in Hume’s sense, with relevant history, and treatment in language that would attach positive attitudes to one side or the other in a difference of opinion. This method is seen, for instance, in his Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents (1770). Its central statement is that the British constitution had been constructed in a manner that required the interdependence of the parts of the sovereign—in other words the monarch acting in and through parliament—in order to achieve mutual control. This statement contrasted with the historical statement that there was a new system of court politics which involved disconnecting those parts in order to make the king independent. Burke’s history showed the emergence of this new system, illustrating its pernicious results for both domestic and foreign affairs.

The contrast in Burke’s account between the older system—which was represented as having benign results—and the new system of court politics was clear, and the direction of his own advocacy obvious. It suggested the appropriateness of combining to counterbalance the efforts of court
politicians, so as to sustain parliamentary sovereignty and its benefits, which represent ‘the good’. Burke combined philosophical method and philosophical history to form an understanding of politics which was practical in the sense of calling for activity in one direction to counterbalance forces coming from another.

The picture of the older order was reinforced by a sense of Aristotelian connection that Burke’s society recognized and approved—that man was sociable, rather than being a solitary beast. Burke was able to attach the key elements that constituted those ‘connections’ to the side of the dispute that he favoured. In my view, the English School understanding of international society reflects this notion of connection as applied to international relations—indeed, international society is the name given to the institutions of sociability among states—and I willingly acknowledge the use I make of those connections in my arguments.

But Burke’s appeal was also, it seems to me, to the standards that his contemporaries would take for granted, namely those implied in their beliefs about parliamentary sovereignty. My own appeal is not dissimilar. I argue that the practices that underlie international society, like the practices that underlay the British constitution, not only have their inner connections, which are understood. I believe that they are also valued.

Reprise

The study is constructed in terms of two overlapping historical narratives. There is the history of the Westphalian order as it has evolved through the modernisation of the European states system. Secondly, there is the history of the contemporary system, dated conventionally from 1989 and the collapse of the Cold War order, which has raised various claims about what ought to be done to reform international order. These claims concern, centrally, sovereignty, democracy and intervention. In this section, I have attempted to evaluate each of the claims in the light of the historical evolution of the system.

The book opens by confronting an optimistic argument often encountered in the period immediately after the end of the Cold War. This view, which I term the ‘new solidarism’, held that there was no further need for principles of ideological coexistence and that it would now be possible to create a global community grounded on the principles of human solidarity. This is an attractive vision, but before Articles 2.4 and 2.7 of the UN Charter—both of which protect the member states from outside interference—are rejected, it seems sensible to reflect on the enduring principles of the system, and the reasons for them—the ‘connections’ as expressed by Hume. Since his views are so important to the way my own argument develops I will quote him at some length.
He begins his discussion of the Law of Nations by discussing the problem that arises from treating the State as a person:

...and indeed this assertion is so far just, that different nations, as well as private persons, require mutual assistance... But...as they are very different in other respects, no wonder they regulate themselves by different maxims, and give rise to a new set of rules, which we call the Law of Nations. Under this head we may comprise the sacredness of the persons of ambassadors, the declaration of war, the abstaining from poisoned arms, with other duties of that kind, which are evidently calculated for the commerce that is peculiar to different societies.7 (My italics)

Hume is also clear that although the laws of nature apply to all men, rules between separately constituted states also perform a vital function in making cooperation possible:

...the three fundamental rules of justice, the stability of possession, its transference by consent, and the performance of promises, are duties of princes as well as of subjects. The same interest produces the same effect in both cases. Where possession has no stability, there must be perpetual war. Where property is not transferred by consent, there can be no commerce. Where promises are not observed there can be no leagues, nor alliances.8

Sovereignty

Much of the debate over the reform of international society has been concerned with the alleged need to qualify the absolute nature of the concept of sovereignty. The debate was opened by the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in the Agenda for Peace, the document commissioned by the Security Council at its first ever summit meeting in 1992.9 Although he insisted that the State must remain the foundation stone of international society, he went on to explain that ‘the time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty has passed’; and indeed that ‘if every ethnic, religious or linguistic group claimed state-hood, there would be no limit to fragmentation and... well-being of all would become evermore difficult to achieve’. The way to resolve the rival claims of sovereignty and self-determination, he suggested, was via democratisation at all levels of social existence, that is, ‘in communities, within states and within the community of states’.

My own response to these somewhat high-minded pronouncements was to ask what more could be sensibly said about the relationship between nationalism and self-determination? I tried to answer my own question by advancing two arguments. The first was that there is not, and cannot be, any
final answer, because the meaning of both concepts is contested and can be shown to have changed over time. This process must be expected to continue since, contrary to what Francis Fukuyama may have thought at the time, there is no evidence that history has come to an end. The second argument is that, despite this indeterminacy, a conventional understanding of the relationship emerged after 1945. It is likely to prove more stable than many revisionists believe.

I illustrate these arguments by tracing how the principle of self-determination was injected into a world of pre-existing sovereign states. After 1919, sovereignty became generally popular, at least in theory. In other words, it was no longer an attribute or possession of a particular ruler but belonged to the people as a whole. If prescription was out, consent had to be in. Traditional states could no longer be viewed as so many pieces of real estate. This voluntary transfer of property, to use Hume's phraseology, posed an immediate question: Which collectives had a right to self-determination and hence to claim sovereignty for themselves?

The original Western answer to this question was the plebiscite. What could sound simpler than the proposition—let the people decide. But its failure was inevitable because as the international lawyer, Ivor Jennings, famously pointed out in 1956, ‘the people cannot decide until someone decides who are the people’. Without putting it in so many words, this was presumably what Boutros-Ghali was alluding to in his attempt to head off run-away state creation at the pass through democratisation. But the failure did not lead to the obvious, and in my view correct, conclusion that no objective definition is available; it led to a prolonged and largely inconclusive debate about the identity and origin of nations. Inconclusive, perhaps, but not pointless. The debate should not be ignored, if only because the rival positions have had an ongoing influence on the world of practice. The primordialist position, held by those who believe that nations have always existed—although often suppressed—and that their identity is self-evident, has an obvious appeal to nationalists themselves, particularly if they find themselves trapped within what they regard as an alien polity. But it is the modernist view, advanced by such writers as the late Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson that points the way to the practical resolution of the self-determination problem.

They argue that nationalism is essentially a modern phenomenon, that even when traditional agrarian societies happened to be politically centralised and/or ethnically homogenous, they did not constitute nations in the modern sense. For Gellner, it was the existence of a literary high culture, diffused widely within the population, which constituted the essential identity of a nation. This meant that with the rise of nationalism—that is the doctrine that political and cultural boundaries should be congruent—only marginal adjustments were necessary. This was the situation along the North Atlantic seaboard of Europe where these preconditions were largely
Elsewhere, in the former colonies of the European powers, and later in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, wherever possible, pre-existing administrative boundaries were used to define the international boundaries—and hence territorial identity—of the successor states. Implicit in the modernist argument is the recognition that political identity is a contingent matter. This is the crucial point. It cannot be settled by a rational argument or democratic vote.

It was the recognition of this uncomfortable fact by practical men and women that led to the gradual emergence of a conventional understanding of national self-determination as European decolonisation; that is, as a once and for all event, tied in time and space. This idea, codified as the legal principle *uti possidetis juris*, originated in South America in the nineteenth century, as a way of putting a stop to an endless round of irredentist disputes and wars, but it was reaffirmed after 1919, again after 1945 and yet again after 1989.

The main challenge to the conventional understanding has come, not surprisingly, from secessionists. They believe, after all, that they have been denied self-determination, after the drafters of the UN Charter had inscribed it as one of the inalienable human rights. But they have made little headway against the convention except in two cases where special circumstances prevailed—in Bangladesh in 1971 when the country was ‘liberated’ by the Indian army rather than by the Bangladeshi nationalists themselves, and in Eritrea after the Cold War, when the Soviet Union withdrew its support for the Ethiopian government and cooperated with the Americans in closing down a secessionist war that had been going on for more than 30 years. For a time during the closing days of the Soviet empire it looked as though the Western powers might substitute democratic criteria for the decolonisation model, but while continuing to pay lip service to democratic principles, they eventually closed ranks behind the idea that the successor states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia should be defined by their previously internal boundaries. Indeed, in the case of Bosnia, they expended huge amounts of diplomatic energy, as well as vast financial resources, to demonstrate that these boundaries could not be changed by force.

Why are governments, including democratic governments, so deeply opposed to territorial revision? There is no single or simple answer. The main difficulties in moving beyond the present position are practical. Three theoretical answers have been offered, but they all derive from historical experience and its interpretation not from *a priori* reasoning. The first is Lincoln’s argument, advanced in the context of the American civil war, that secession is equivalent to anarchy and that the only way for a minority to advance its cause is to work on public opinion so that it will be able to transform itself into the majority at the next election. The second argument was Mill’s, namely that in order to preserve democracy in a society divided
into two major, nationally self-conscious communities, it was preferable to partition the country. His reason was that if this was not done, the two major protagonists would seek to capture the State through the ballot box, in order to discriminate against their opponents. The third argument was advanced by the maverick British politician, Enoch Powell, during the wars of Yugoslav succession. He maintained that while a nation was an absolute prerequisite for democracy, nations would be forged in the future, as in the past, through a process of violent struggle and self-assertion against imposed imperial sovereignty.

These arguments are all plausible under certain circumstances but they also demonstrate the dangers of applying the lessons of history out of context. Lincoln’s impeccably liberal formula is difficult to apply in countries where there is no democratic tradition or overarching commitment to the constitution; and where minorities will be permanent because they define themselves existentially as members of a community rather than as citizens, who retain the right to switch loyalties at the ballot box. Mill’s version is essentially practical rather than humanitarian: he is worried about the wrecking potential of major groups, whose obsessive identity politics may undermine democracy; but he has little sympathy for the feelings of smaller minorities that lack the capacity to upset the democratic apple cart. Powell’s argument certainly has history on its side, but in so far as it condemns us to live by the sword, it is both morally repellent and flouts the legal prohibition in the UN Charter against the use of force except in self-defence.

So, if there is no unambiguous way of resolving the self-determination problem, what to do at a time when people everywhere are much more conscious of their rights, than in the past? The argument in Progress and its Limits is that inventiveness within the system is a more likely way forward than any radical recasting of the conventional interpretation of self-determination.

From an empirical and sociological point of view one might argue that Chechyna had a better case for independent statehood than Belarus. But the fact that in the Soviet period, Chechyna was part of the Russian Federation and not a putatively independent Soviet Socialist Republic undermined its case in international law. It might be argued that Eritrean and East Timorese independence point the way towards a new customary right of secessionist self-determination, but on the contrary these cases reinforce rather than undermine the conventional interpretation. Eritrea was absorbed into Ethiopia in 1952 in open defiance of a UN prohibition, and East Timor had been a Portuguese not a Dutch colony. Independence in both cases therefore upheld the uti possidetis principle. Nonetheless, the Canadian government took the precaution of seeking an Advisory Opinion from the World Court on whether a unilateral right of secession could be said to exist. The experts consulted said there was not, although they hedged their bets by saying that massive human rights abuse might in some cases create such a right, a qualification, however, that clearly did not apply to Quebec.14
This view is, of course, open to challenge, and the recognition in February 2008 of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence by the United States and European Union may suggest that the commitment to the conventional interpretation is weakening. But these recognitions, which are unlikely to be accepted in the near future by the UN, if only because of Russian objections, have by no means assured Kosovo’s international legitimacy. This will require much careful diplomacy and preparation. There is no objection to peaceful partition of a state as the break up of Czechoslovakia in the recent past demonstrates. But the premature recognition of Kosovo reopens the spectre of ethnic conflict once again threatening the fragile peace that has been established in the Balkans. The Kosovo dilemma is a real one, but the sense of the system, in Hume’s sense that I sketched at the beginning of this chapter, remains firmly on the side of the conventional interpretation.

By inventiveness within the system, I mean the kind of regulatory framework that the EU has established, which allows new and old member states alike to express their national identities, sometimes even at the sub-state level, while competing for market share in the global economy. The attachment to the sovereign state does not support the fashionable view that the state is in retreat, but it is certainly true that, under the pressures of globalisation, its competence has narrowed, particularly in the economic field. Indeed, in a sense the world of virtual states, and of juridical rather than empirical sovereignty, is now much wider than when Robert Jackson first coined the term to describe ex-colonies that were effectively wards of international society. There are obvious dangers assuming that the European Union is a model for other parts of the world, but, again to echo Hume, there is no reason why sovereign states in other regions should not prove equally resourceful and inventive.

Democracy

After the Cold War, a mood of democratic optimism spread throughout international society. It was expressed, as we have already noted, by the Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutros-Ghali, and also by the Council of Europe and the European Union, which insisted that the former communist states would have to establish their democratic credentials in order to join, and by the Commonwealth, which set up a Committee of Foreign Ministers to deal with states that violated the Organisation’s principles. The mood was also enthusiastically endorsed by the United States. Anthony Lake, President Clinton’s Security Advisor, announced that George Kennan’s strategy of containment was to be replaced by a strategy of enlargement, by which he meant ‘the consolidation of democratic and market reform’ worldwide.15 These sentiments raise the questions to which the central part of Progress and its Limits is devoted: Can the internal constitution of states be determined by international society and can international society itself be democratised?
As the reader may by now have come to expect, the attempt to address these questions by a demonstration of practical reason is likely to yield unspectacular and indeed sceptical answers. But, in my view, it remains a better strategy than allowing hope to triumph over experience. These answers emerge from confronting the debate between the so-called ‘pluralist’ and ‘solidarist’ theorists of international society.

The pluralists, amongst whom I count myself, at least up to a point, contend that they have had the better of the argument. They base their case on the carryover of key aspects of the traditional into the contemporary order. On the other hand, the solidarists, who believe that a fundamental makeover of international society is possible, have not been and are unlikely to be driven from the field. The reasons are instructive on both sides of the argument.

At first sight one might have expected the nationalisation of international society after the First World War to have constituted a major normative shift in the solidarist direction. But if anything it had the opposite effect. Traditional international society was essentially based on a standoff between princes, who agreed to respect each other’s jurisdiction within their own lands. They might go to war, of course, in which case conquest allowed for the transfer of territory from one sovereign to another without challenging the law of coexistence on which the system rested at other times. Popular sovereignty sounded solidarist—it was after all based on the universalist ideals of the Enlightenment—but it had the effect of sealing the boundaries of the state and sacralising territory. Modern territorial disputes can no longer be resolved by conquest; the strategic facts on the ground may be altered by war, as they have been, for example, on the Golan Heights, but any final resolution would require a political agreement between Israel and Syria. As we have already seen, the absence of any such agreement between the Kosovar Albanians and Serbia continues to hold up Kosovo’s entry into international society. To this extent the society of states has not only survived, it has been strengthened.

The idea of a solidarist, that is, democratic, transformation of international society is unlikely to face final defeat, however, because another legacy of the Enlightenment was to entrench democratic values as the standard of legitimacy in international society. This did not happen immediately. The majority of states were no more democratic in the early twentieth century than they had been before the eighteenth-century revolutions, but after 1919, democracy was accepted as the standard everywhere, even while it was also accepted that, in most parts of the world, circumstances prevented its full implementation. There were several reasons for democracy’s appeal. One was its association with the most powerful states of the day. Anti-colonial nationalists might oppose first the Pax Britanica and its successor the Pax Americana, but this was in order to claim their democratic values as their own. Another was that the open political systems of Britain and
France allowed nationalists to turn their own values against the metropolitan governments in order to force them to transfer power. And finally democracy—and it is important to remember that until the end of the Cold War there was a multi-party and a centralist model on offer—was identified with modernity, the holy grail of political elites in all parts of the world.

Paradoxically, the competition between the two models of democratic modernization buttressed the pluralist structure of international society throughout the Cold War. Conversely, the collapse of one of the models internationalized liberal democracy almost overnight. This development raised a question that had never previously been considered relevant to the theory or practice of international relations but which must be answered if multi-party democracy is to be established as a world-wide system of government. Are there cultural preconditions that must be met before democratic values can become embedded in any political system?

My answer to this question is that there are. I attempt to illustrate this proposition by both ancient and modern example. The first is the famous encounter between Lewis and Clarke and the Missouri Indians, who had no hereditary chiefs or even the conception of a political class and needed war as a way of testing the courage of young men and their ability to lead. The modern example was the failure of the international community to resolve the Somali crisis. But much the same argument could be advanced to explain the difficulties that NATO has faced in its efforts to assist nation and state building in Afghanistan. The point is not that these societies do not understand the concept of democracy; it is that the pastoral, nomadic or semi-nomadic structure of society favours a clan-based and highly competitive system, and makes it difficult to establish a centralised rational bureaucratic state on the Weberian model. In other words, forms of life matter.

It does not follow that a commitment to democratic values should have no place in international relations, merely that the democratisation of international society cannot simply be imposed from outside, even if, as is usually the case, there is a local class of professional intellectuals who favour such an outcome. To quote Ernest Gellner, ‘[t]heorists of democracy, who operate in the abstract, without reference to social conditions, end up with a vindication of democracy as a general ideal, but are then bound to conclude that in many societies the ideal is not realisable.’ The gap between international aspirations and social reality means that the subject invites hypocrisy, the price, it has been said, that vice pays to virtue. Whether it is worth paying, it seems to me, is a question of judgement not principle, depending on whether innocent lives can be spared or high levels of arbitrary oppression reduced.

International law, the bedrock institution of international society, is not well suited to the discriminatory flexibility that seems to be required if
democratic values are to be seriously pursued at the international level. According to Professor James Crawford, it has traditionally ‘operated in at least six deeply undemocratic ways’. Since 1989, pressure for change has concentrated on two of these, namely that ‘the principle of non intervention extends to protect even non democratic regimes’, and that ‘the principle of self determination is not allowed to modify established territorial boundaries’. These pressures led to much discussion in the early 1990s about whether a right of humanitarian intervention was emerging as a customary principle of international law.

Enthusiasm for this proposition was already in decline by the millennium. When *Progress and its Limits* was published, opinion was divided over the legality of NATO's invasion of Kosovo in 1999, and support for regime change on humanitarian grounds has been further reduced by the unpopularity of the war in Iraq, even though that was not initiated for humanitarian reasons. Although there has been a shift in opinion against automatic sovereign immunity, and many still believe that the international community has done too little, not too much, for example, in dealing with the Darfur crisis in the Sudan, the reputation of the United Nations has undoubtedly been damaged by the willingness of the major powers to act without its authority.

There are two grounds for concern about the unilateralist turn that international politics has taken in pursuit of democratic values. The first is that unauthorised intervention inevitably weakens the prohibition on the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy, whatever well meaning democratic politicians may say to the contrary. The second is the issue of moral responsibility, which I examine with reference to the use of economic sanctions as an instrument of democratisation. This may seem a strange issue to raise in the context of a discussion of attempts to reform international society, but it reveals one of the central contradictions of liberal internationalism.

In their enthusiasm for economic sanctions, which many liberals believe to be a peaceful form of coercion, they often conveniently forget that sanctions are a modern derivative of medieval siege warfare, the purpose of which was to starve the enemy into submission. Sieges were a particularly unpleasant aspect of traditional warfare but at least the perpetrators accepted responsibility for their actions. This is not the case with modern economic sanctions. It is perhaps reasonable to assume that were they to be imposed on a democratic state, citizens would use their electoral power to force their government to comply. But the same assumption cannot be made with any safety when the target is a tyrant who controls all the levers of power in his own hands. When Tony Blair, then British Prime Minister, repeatedly insisted that Saddam Hussein could end the suffering of the Iraqi people by complying with the UN resolutions, so that the sanctions could be lifted, he was being disingenuous. He knew that the people could not be expected to
rise against the dictator, so they were in effect being made to suffer for their own good. Sadly, this passing of responsibility onto the victims is characteristic of much shallow liberal thinking in the contemporary world. Indeed, in cases like this, as the UN Secretary General recognised in a report to the Security Council in 1996, the cure of democracy can turn out to be worse than the authoritarian disease.

Fortunately, in most cases, such extreme measures have not been necessary, as authoritarianism has been on the defensive in most parts of the world since 1989. Without challenging the ‘deeply undemocratic’ principles of international law it has proved possible for the United Nations and other inter-governmental organisations, to support the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes in many countries. Help with writing constitutions, retraining the judiciary, establishing electoral commissions and rolls, and monitoring elections should not be dismissed merely because they are un-heroic and incremental in their impact.

As Boutros Boutros-Ghali acknowledged, however, such useful measures are not sufficient. If the democratisation strategy is to have any chance of striking deep roots, it will also be necessary to revisit the issue of minority rights. The reasons for this are straightforward: if secessionist self-determination is to be ruled out under the conventional interpretation, then minorities will have to be reassured that their rights, including their right to political participation, will not be ignored if democratic government is to be sustained. Unfortunately, minority rights have not had a good press. They were deeply unpopular with the successor states to Europe’s dynastic empires, which were required to provide minority guarantees as the price of entry into the League of Nations. As a result they were abandoned in 1945 in favour of inalienable individual rights. The drafters of the Universal Declaration believed that these would be sufficient as all individuals would be free to associate with any community they chose.

There was nothing wrong with the logic of this argument; the problem was that where it mattered, no one believed it. Faced with this challenge European organisations have made considerable progress in establishing a non-binding framework for minority protection. The OSCE has even established a Commissioner for Minorities, with powers to investigate potential conflicts, receive petitions and make recommendations up to the point when conflict actually breaks out. This limitation strongly suggests that the spectre of irredentist conflict has not been finally eradicated, even in Europe. Elsewhere, there is even less inclination to redefine sovereignty. In China and India, the two most prominent Asian countries, which seem likely to exercise great influence on world politics in the years ahead, the issue of minorities tends to be viewed as a peculiar European cultural obsession. Indeed, it is in Asia that the solidarist arguments for eroding state sovereignty and territorial integrity are viewed with most suspicion.
If, as the argument of this section suggests, international society can only be democratized partially and incrementally, it still remains to ask what, if anything, the international community should do in the face of massive human displacement and inter-communal slaughter of the kind that was a defining characteristic of many conflicts in the decade after the end of the Cold War? This is the final theme that I discuss in *Progress and its Limits*.

**Intervention**

I will deal with humanitarian intervention, the last of the three themes examined in the book, more briefly since we have already encountered most of the relevant arguments in the discussion of Sovereignty and Democracy. To summarise the argument so far, we have seen how the attempt to reform the society of states in order to guarantee democratic freedoms and human rights has made only limited progress. This is because of widespread resistance to abandoning sovereignty as the basis of the system and to revising the prohibition on secessionist self-determination. Furthermore, we have also seen how the conservatism of international society is not merely reactionary but arises, on the one hand, because of the incoherence of national self-determination, and, on the other, because dramatically different social conditions across the globe means that cooperation must necessarily be based on consensus and coexistence rather than on a specious solidarity that experience shows will be honoured in the breach rather than the observance.

Good law must be able to yield, however, to exceptional circumstances. If it does not sooner rather than later, it will be held in contempt. The pressure to relieve widespread human suffering arising from oppressive rule, when it can be done, and more contentiously when it is in the interests of one or more countries to do so, can no longer always be resisted on the straightforward grounds that, say ethnocide, or even genocide, should be accepted as an internal matter with no implications for international society. Nor has it been. Between the first Gulf War and the Kosovo crisis, the UN was involved in 14 intra-state conflicts in Africa alone, in the majority of which intervention was driven by the need to provide humanitarian assistance. Action against Serbian misrule in Kosovo could not be routed through the Security Council for fear of attracting a Russian, and possibly a Chinese, veto, but it remains true that, moral considerations apart, Milosovic’s policy in Kosovo seriously threatened the stability of the Balkans, and indirectly as a result of refugee flows and the contagion of criminal violence, the wider European region as well.

The traditional view of international society was that it was a self-help system in which governments were responsible for their own survival and welfare. Democratic governments, which acted irresponsibly, would be thrown out at the next election; the misrule of tyrants would eventually lead to popular insurrection. The problem is that in an increasingly globalised world the consequences of savage misrule are unlikely to be contained
within the state in question. So the liberal dilemma of when to override the conventions of international society cannot always be avoided. This is not a new problem. In *A Few Words on Non Intervention*, John Stuart Mill provided a plausible defence of humanitarian intervention as part of his justification of the British conquest of the Indian princely state of Oudh. Essentially the argument was that where the destitution and misrule of a nominally independent state could be directly traced to the policies of a stronger and protecting power, the latter could not escape its responsibilities by hiding behind respect for sovereignty of the misgoverned state.

This justification has not been employed in the international defence of intervention since the end of the Cold War, presumably because of the difficulty of distinguishing between humanitarian and less worthy motives. Nor has it been used, more surprisingly perhaps, by the Western powers to justify their wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, where arguably both the rise of the Taliban and of Saddam can be directly traced to Western policies. But this would have required them to avoid the temptation discussed in the previous section to shift responsibility onto the victims. Instead, humanitarian crises have been discussed, on the one hand, in terms of the duties of governments to uphold their obligations to respect human rights and the sanctions that they will incur if they do not, and, on the other, the exceptional circumstances that may be held to justify intervention on an *ad hoc* basis.

There has been a tendency amongst critics of humanitarian intervention to argue that none of the post-Cold War interventions have been successful. This is not, strictly speaking, true. When intervention followed rather than accompanied the negotiation of a political settlement—as in Cambodia, Namibia and Mozambique—UN forces were able to reinforce the work of humanitarian agencies and to contribute to political stabilisation. Even in some of the other cases such as Bosnia and Somalia, lives were saved as a result of the intervention. Nonetheless in most cases where the international involvement was a consequence of the absence of a serious agreement, international intervention was more likely to become part of the problem than of the solution.

There were two reasons for this conclusion. The first is that throughout the post-Cold War period even when the Security Council was prepared to will desirable ends—for example by defining a humanitarian catastrophe as a threat to international peace and security in order to justify an enforcement resolution under Chapter 7 of the Charter—they were seldom willing to resource the operation adequately. The more serious weakness was conceptual: the search for what was called at the time a Chapter 6 1/2 solution, that is, a half-way house between peacekeeping, which requires impartiality and the careful building of trust, and enforcement, which requires the identification of an enemy, failed. No such half-way house exists. The Bosnian war was only brought to an end when the American government took it out
of the hands of the UN and changed the local balance of forces by arming the Bosniaks. Similarly, although the majority opinion on the Kosovo intervention was that even if it was moral, it was illegal, the NATO operation nonetheless resolved both of the problems outlined above: there was no contradiction between ends and means and there was no need for the force to aim at impartiality.

The underlying problem with humanitarian intervention is that in a post-imperial age, no one wants to accept that it is an imperial project. If the political circumstances of a society are so degraded that its government has become a predator on its own population and by common agreement must be removed—something that is conceivable but was singularly missing in Iraq—then logically the international community should be prepared to accept a long-term commitment to its reconstruction. The model should be the unconditional surrender demanded of Germany and Japan by the victorious alliance in 1945. This is not the world we inhabit, so even in the exceptional circumstances where intervention is unavoidable (or at least is not avoided) there is probably no alternative to a limited liability approach in which exit options are planned at the outset, with all the hostages to fortune that this statement implies. There has been a tendency since the millennium to regionalise peace support (a euphemism for humanitarian intervention) activities. This has obvious attractions but it does not really resolve the imperial problem, since those regional powers that are most likely to accept the responsibility are the most likely to have their own political agenda.

Conclusion

The normative conclusion that emerges from my engagement with the history of both the ideas and the practice of international society is, I fear, a pessimistic one, viewed from the hopes of progress. This is so whether one takes the long view or concentrates on the interpretation of more recent events. But it is not a cynical conclusion. If I appear to be advocating a return to realism, it is certainly not a version that considers that morality has no place in international relations. Indeed, I do not think that we can escape the idea of progress or that we should aspire to do so. As I wrote at the time, we are stuck with it because it is the coin of democratic politics, providing its underlying ethic as tragedy provided it when the fate of peoples was subsumed in the fate of their leaders whose humanity had to play second fiddle to their role. The question is how best to progress in a world where the concept itself has been drained of much of its nineteenth-century teleological force?

None of the theoretical paradigms—realism, rationalism and revolutionism—through which English School authors habitually analyse international relations have provided a satisfactory answer to this question.
I return therefore to where I began by advocating an ethic of prudence. It is no accident, it seems to me, that David Hume and other Enlightenment thinkers, who sought to ground their rationalism in empirical experience, devoted so much time to analysing moral reasoning. No one who has been involved in decisions that are weighed down with fateful consequences can afford to ignore the calculation of risks and probabilities. From this point of view, prudence is a virtue. Without prudence, all visions of the future degenerate into mere utopia, with all its well-known attendant dangers. Judging by the passionate conviction with which the US-led coalition went to war in Iraq, this lesson has not yet been fully absorbed.

Notes and references

1. I am greatly indebted to the editor for suggesting how I might organise this chapter and indeed for providing much of the material on which the introductory section is based. It was she who pointed out the similarities between my method of argument and that of Burke.
8. Ibid.
11. It had arguably become so in Western Europe during the nineteenth century.
17. E. Gellner, Conditions of Liberty, p. 87.


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