Introduction

> The most fundamental question you can ask in international theory is,
> What is international society?   Wight (1987: 222)

After a long period of neglect, the social (or societal) dimension of the
international system is being brought back into fashion within Interna-
tional Relations (IR) by the upsurge of interest in constructivism. For
adherents of the English school, this dimension was never out of fash-
ion, with the consequence that English school thinking itself has been
somewhat on the margins of the discipline. In this book I will argue that
English school theory has a lot to offer those interested in developing
societal understandings of international systems, albeit itself being in
need of substantial redevelopment.

International society is the flagship idea of the English school. It carves
out a clearly bounded subject focused on the elements of society that
states form among themselves. This domain has been quite extensively
developed conceptually, and considerable work has also been done on
the histories of international societies, particularly the creation of the
modern international society in Europe and its expansion to the rest of
the planet. *World society* also has a key place in English school theory,
but is much less well worked out. While international society is focused
on states, world society implies something that reaches well beyond
the state towards more cosmopolitan images of how humankind is, or
should be, organised. Quite what that 'something' that defines world
society is, however, remains at best contested, and at worst simply un-
clear. Since world society can be (and is) easily cast as a challenger to
international society, ambiguity about it is a major impediment to clear
thinking about the social structure of international systems. A key cause
of this problem is a widespread failure in English school thinking to

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distinguish clearly enough between normative theory and theory about norms. It is a central focus of this book to address that problem. Fortunately, several other traditions of thought have grappled with world society, sometimes using that label, sometimes with variants such as 'global society' or 'global civil society'. Latterly, its popularity, or that of its synonyms, perhaps can be understood best as a way of getting to conceptual grips with the phenomenon of globalisation. These other bodies of thought provide useful insights applicable to English school theory.

Consequently, although this book is about English school theory generally, and will have a lot to say about international society, much of the argument in the early chapters will focus on trying to clarify world society. The concept of world society, and especially how world society and international society relate to each other, is in my view both the biggest weakness in existing English school theory, and the place where the biggest gains are to be found. John Vincent's (1988: 211) observation that the need to work out the relationship between cosmopolitan culture and international order was one of the unfinished legacies of Bull's work remains true today. English school theory has great potential to improve how globalisation is conceptualised, but cannot do so unless it finds a coherent position on world society. I plan to survey the basic ideas and approaches to world society, and to attempt a coherent theoretical construction of the concept. My starting position is that there is not much to be gained, and quite a lot to be lost analytically, from simply using world society as a label for the totality of human interaction in all forms and at all levels. Globalisation fills that role already. My initial strategy will be to construct world society as a concept to capture the non-state side of the international system, and therefore as the complement/opponent to the already well-developed idea of international society.

The book is aimed at two distinct but not mutually exclusive audiences. The narrower audience comprises those already working in the English school tradition plus followers of Wendt's mode of constructivism. For the English school people, it offers a comprehensive critique of English school theory and an ambitious, detailed attempt to address this critique by developing a more purely social structural interpretation of the theory to set alongside its existing normative and historical strands. For the Wendtians, the book offers a friendly critique, an extension of the logic and an application of the theory. I seek to create a synthesis between the structural elements of the Bull/Vincent side of English school theory about international and world society, and Wendt's (1999)

social theory of international politics. I take from both sources a social
structural reading of international society, and a methodologically plu-
ralist rejection of the view that paradigms in IR are incommensurable.
I insert into both two things that they ignore or marginalise: the inter-
national political economy, and the sub-global level. And I impose on
both a more rigorous taxonomical scheme than either has attempted.
The result is a radical reinterpretation of English school theory from the
ground up, but one that remains supportive of, and in touch with, the
basic aims of both English school and Wendtian theory – to understand
and interpret the composition and the dynamics of the social structure
of international politics.

The broader audience is all of those in IR who acknowledge that
'globalisation' represents an important way of labelling a set of sub-
stantial and significant changes in the international system, but who
despair about the analytical vacuousness of 'the "G" word'. To them, I
offer a Wendt-inspired social structural interpretation of English school
theory as a good solution to the problems of how to think both an-
alytically and normatively about globalisation. English school theory
is ideally tailored to address this problematique, though it has not so
far been much used in this way. The English school's triad of concepts
exactly captures the simultaneous existence of state and non-state sys-
tems operating alongside and through each other, without finding this
conceptually problematic. It keeps the old, while bringing in the new,
and is thus well suited to looking at the transition from Westphalian
to post-Westphalian international politics, whether this be at the level
of globalisation, or in regional developments such as the EU. English
school theory can handle the idea of a shift from balance of power and
war to market and multilateralism as the dominant institutions of in-
ternational society, and it provides an ideal framework for examining
questions of intervention, whether on human rights or other grounds.
Managing this expansion from interstate to world politics is important
to IR as a discipline. IR's core strengths are in the states-system, and it
needs to combine these with other elements of the international system,
and to avoid ensnaring itself in the trap of unnecessary choices between
state and non-state alternatives. In my view, English school theory shows
how this can be done better than any available alternative.

This broader audience includes practically everyone engaged in the
debates about IR theory. Some of them may baulk initially at the idea of
wading through a sustained critique of what they may see as a somewhat
marginal and traditional body of IR theory. Why, they may ask, should

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we bother with something so demonstrably flawed? They should take this book in three stages. First, it can be read as a relatively compact introduction to a stimulating and useful body of theory with which they may not be very familiar. Second, it is a sustained attempt to bring together the IR tradition of thinking about international society, and Wendtian constructivism, and to set both of these against more sociological thinking about society generally and world society in particular. Wendtian thinking is broadened out to include non-state actors, and English school theory is forced to confront neglected questions about the constitution of society in terms of what values are shared, how and why they are shared, and by whom. Third, it is about developing out of this conjuncture a theoretical framework that can be used to address globalisation as a complex social interplay among state and non-state actors mediated by a set of primary institutions. This interplay can be captured as a finite, though not simple, set of structural possibilities governed by a relatively small number of key variables. Using English school theory to address globalisation does not offer the predictive oversimplifications of neorealism and neoliberalism. But by opening the way to a wider historical interpretation, it does offer an escape from the Westphalian straitjacket. It gives powerful grounds for differentiation and comparison among types of international society, and ways of understanding both what Westphalian international society evolved from, and what it might be evolving into. In that mode, this book also speaks to those grappling with integration theory, and how to understand, and manage, developments in the EU.

The plan is as follows. Chapter 1 provides a quick overview of English school theory in order to set the context, and to note some of the problems that a more social structural interpretation might redress. Chapter 2 sets out a detailed exegesis of the world society concept in English school thinking, establishing the role it plays in the debates about pluralism and solidarism, the incoherence of its usage, and its importance to the whole structure of English school thinking. Chapter 3 surveys how others outside the English school have deployed the idea of world society, and looks for ideas there which can be applied to the English school framework. Chapter 4 engages four analytical tensions at the heart of English school theory (state versus non-state, physical versus social concepts of system, society versus community and individual versus transnational), and develops a revised framework for thinking about international and world society. Chapter 5 returns to the pluralist–solidarist debates, focusing on the neglected question of what

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counts as solidarism, and particularly the place of the economic sector.
It reconstructs this debate as a way of thinking about the spectrum of
interstate societies. Chapter 6 explores the concept of the institutions of
international society in English school theory, relating them to usage in
regime theory, and attempting a comprehensive mapping of them and
how they relate to types of international society. Chapter 7 introduces
geography, arguing that the traditional focus on the global level needs
to be balanced by an equal focus on international social structures at the
sub-global scale. Among other things, bringing in a geographic variable
opens the way into understanding the dynamics and evolution of inter-
national societies through a type of vanguard theory. Chapter 8 uses the
analytical lens developed in chapters 4–6 to sketch a portrait of contem-
porary international society, to look back at the institutional change of
the last two centuries that brought us to where we are now, and to think
about the forces driving it. The chapter concludes with a consideration
of the likely directions of its development, and with proposals for the
English school research agenda.

1   English school theory and its problems: an overview

> We need sharper analytical tools than those provided by Wight and Bull.   Dunne (2001b: 66)

This chapter starts with a summary of English school theory as it is conventionally understood. The second section looks at the different strands, tensions and potentials within the school, and locates within them the line to be taken in the rest of this book. The third section reviews the main areas of weakness in English school theory that subsequent chapters will address and hopefully rectify. The fourth section tackles the question of whether English school theory is really theory.

English school theory: a summary

The English school can be thought of as an established body of both theoretical and empirical work dating back to the late 1950s (Dunne 1998; Wæver 1998; Buzan 2001). Robert Jackson (1992: 271) nicely sums up the English school conversation by seeing it as:

> a variety of theoretical inquiries which conceive of international relations as a world not merely of power or prudence or wealth or capability or domination but also one of recognition, association, membership, equality, equity, legitimate interests, rights, reciprocity, customs and conventions, agreements and disagreements, disputes, offenses, injuries, damages, reparations, and the rest: the normative vocabulary of human conduct.

Two core elements define the distinctiveness of the English school: its three key concepts, and its theoretically pluralist approach. The three key concepts are: international system, international society and world

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society (Little 1995: 15–16). Within the English school discourse, these are sometimes (and perhaps misleadingly) codified as *Hobbes* (or sometimes *Machiavelli*), *Grotius* and *Kant* (Cutler 1991). They line up with Wight's (1991) 'three traditions' of IR theory: *Realism*, *Rationalism* and *Revolutionism*. Broadly speaking, these terms are now understood as follows:

- *International system* (Hobbes/Machiavelli/realism) is about power politics amongst states, and puts the structure and process of international anarchy at the centre of IR theory. This position is broadly parallel to mainstream realism and neorealism and is thus well developed and clearly understood. It also appears elsewhere, as for example in Tilly's (1990: 162) definition that states form a system 'to the extent that they interact with each other regularly, and to the degree that their interaction affects the behaviour of each state'. It is based on an ontology of states, and is generally approached with a positivist epistemology, materialist and rationalist methodologies and structural theories.
- *International society* (Grotius/rationalism) is about the institutionalisation of shared interest and identity amongst states, and puts the creation and maintenance of shared norms, rules and institutions at the centre of IR theory. This position has some parallels to regime theory, but is much deeper, having constitutive rather than merely instrumental implications (Hurrell 1991: 12–16; Dunne 1995: 140–3). International society has been the main focus of English school thinking, and the concept is quite well developed and relatively clear. In parallel with international system, it is also based on an ontology of states, but is generally approached with a constructivist epistemology and historical methods.
- *World society* (Kant/revolutionism) takes individuals, non-state organisations and ultimately the global population as a whole as the focus of global societal identities and arrangements, and puts transcendence of the states-system at the centre of IR theory. Revolutionism is mostly about forms of universalist cosmopolitanism. It could include communism, but as Wæver (1992: 98) notes, these days it is usually taken to mean liberalism. This position has some parallels to transnationalism, but carries a much more foundational link to normative political theory. It clearly does not rest on an ontology of states, but given the transnational element neither does it rest entirely on one of individuals. Critical theory defines some, but not all of the approaches

to it, and in Wightian mode it is more about historically operating alternative images of the international system as a whole than it is about capturing the non-state aspects of the system.[1]

Jackson (2000: 169–78) puts an interesting twist on the three traditions by viewing them as defining the diverse values that statespeople have to juggle in the conduct of foreign policy. Realism he sees as giving priority to national responsibilities, rationalism he sees as giving priority to international responsibilities, and revolutionism (which he prefers to call cosmopolitanism) he sees as giving priority to humanitarian responsibilities. He adds a fourth, more recent value – stewardship of the planet – in effect, giving priority to responsibility for the environment.

The classical English school framework is summarised in figure 1 below. So far, the main thrust of the English school's work has been to uncover the nature and function of international societies, and to trace their history and development. The basic idea of international society is quite simple: just as human beings as individuals live in societies which they both shape and are shaped by, so also states live in an international society which they shape and are shaped by. This social element has to be put alongside realism's raw logic of anarchy if one is to get a meaningful picture of how systems of states operate. When units are sentient, how they perceive each other is a major determinant of how they interact. If the units share a common identity (a religion, a system of governance, a language), or even just a common set of rules or norms (about how to determine relative status, and how to conduct diplomacy), then these intersubjective understandings not only condition their behaviour, but also define the boundaries of a social system. Within the idea of international society, the principal debate has been that between pluralists and solidarists. This hinges on the question of the type and extent of norms, rules and institutions that an international society can form without departing from the foundational rules of sovereignty and non-intervention that define it as a system of states. Pluralists think that the sovereignty/non-intervention principles restrict international society to fairly minimal rules of coexistence. Solidarists think that international society can develop quite wide-ranging norms, rules and institutions, covering both coexistence issues and cooperation in pursuit of shared interests, including some scope for collective enforcement. As indicated on figure 1, pluralism and solidarism define the boundary zones, respectively, towards realism and revolutionism.

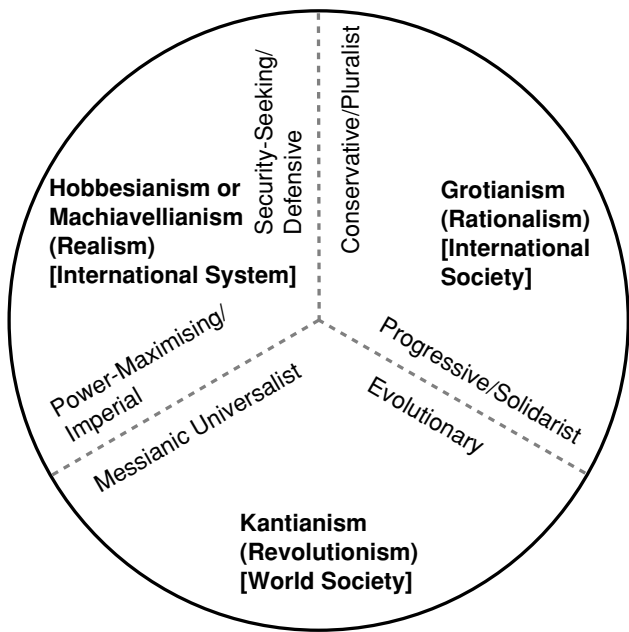[1] I am grateful to Ole Wæver for this latter point.

Figure 1. The classical 'Three Traditions' model of English school
theory
Note: Titles in ( ) are Wight's labels; titles in [ ] are the analytical focus;
titles along the border zones are where the traditions blend into each
other

The main focus of English school work has centred on a synthesis
of realism and rationalism. This focus is nicely captured by Bull and
Watson's (1984: 1) classic definition of international society as:

> a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent politi-
> cal communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that
> the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the
> others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common
> rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognise
> their common interest in maintaining these arrangements.

This definition neatly demonstrates the combination of the Hobbesian/
realist element of international system, with the Grotian/rationalist el-
ement of a socially constructed order. It interleaves the logic of more
material theories of the international system, driven by billiard ball
metaphors, with the view that sentience makes a difference, and that
social systems cannot be understood in the same way as physical ones.

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But the pursuit of international society has obliged the English school to engage with the element of liberal revolutionism. Once the idea of society was conceded, one had to think not just of international society (amongst states), but also 'world society' (the idea of shared norms and values at the individual level, transcending the state). It is clear from figure 1 that world society is fundamental to the ability of English school theory to focus enquiry along these lines.

As captured in figure 1, the idea is that these three key concepts form a complete and interlinked picture of the IR universe. Although each element is conceptually and methodologically distinct, they blur into each other at the boundaries. In the English school perspective all three of these elements are in continuous coexistence and interplay, the question being how strong they are in relation to each other (Bull 1991: xvii–xviii; Dunne 1995: 134–7). The three key concepts thus generate the second distinctive feature of the English school, its theoretical pluralism. Little (1998, 2000) makes a strong case that the English school should be seen not just as a series of ontological statements about reality, but more as a pluralist methodological approach. By introducing international society as a third element, not only as a *via media* between realism and liberalism/cosmopolitanism, but also as the keystone to an interdependent set of concepts, English school theory transcends the binary opposition between them that for long plagued debates about IR theory. By assuming not only that all three elements always operate simultaneously, but also that each carries its own distinctive ontological and epistemological package, English school theory also transcends the assumption often made in the so-called inter-paradigm debate, that realist, liberal and marxist approaches to IR theory are incommensurable (McKinlay and Little 1986).

World society, and the problems and potentials of English school theory

As just noted, the foundation of English school theory is the idea that international system, international society and world society all exist simultaneously, both as objects of discussion and as aspects of international reality. This theoretically pluralist formulation takes the focus away from the oppositional either/or approaches of much IR theory (interparadigm debate, realism-idealism, rationalist-reflectivist, etc.) and moves it towards a holistic, synthesising approach that features the patterns of strength and interplay amongst the three pillars. But world

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