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Exporting the English School?

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Barry Buzan's essay provides a welcome forum for discussion about the virtues and future direction of the English School as a resource for IR research. Like many American[1] constructivists, I am an admirer of English School scholarship and have found it extremely helpful in my own work. I am less optimistic than Buzan, however, about the prospects that the English School will become either a grand theory or the focus of new trans-Atlantic IR debates. It is not clear to me that grand theory status is necessary for the English School; it may not even be particularly desirable. Buzan does not define what he means by a grand theory, but, from the context of his remarks and the Wallerstein example, it would seem that grand theory requires a degree of cohesion and discipline that is antithetical to the methodological pluralism which has characterized English School work and which Buzan views as one of its strongest virtues. Giving the English School more salience in American IR debates, by contrast, would be a real improvement. Even if it does not become the focus of debate, American scholarship would be enriched by incorporation of the historical and normative orientations the English School brings. As the growing strength of constructivist scholarship in the US indicates, there is an eager audience for theoretical frameworks that provide traction on such issues. In what follows I sketch some reasons why the English School has had only limited impact on US scholarship. Specifically, I will argue that the School's lack of clarity about both method and theoretical claims has made it difficult for American scholars to incorporate it into their research. Addressing these issues might make the English School more useful to more US researchers. It might also have the converse effect of sharpening work within the School and assisting its advocates in constructing the research focus Buzan seeks.

For American IR scholars, English School work can be puzzling for at least two reasons. First, while Buzan argues that methodological pluralism is both a defining feature and a great virtue of English School scholarship, for many American scholars, simply figuring out what its methods *are* is a challenge. There is remarkably little discussion of research methods anywhere in the English School canon. Given the immensity of the topics that have been tackled, one might expect some discussion of such questions as how do you know an international society (or international system or world society) when you see one? English School authors sometimes give definitions for analytic categories, but they almost never provide systematic discussions about rules of evidence. Given that, as Buzan discusses, most

[1] With apologies to my Canadian colleagues, I use the term American to mean US. I am uncomfortable ascribing the concerns outlined here to scholars in Canada who have intellectual traditions of their own and may well have a different perspective on these matters.

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real-world cases involve all three of these traditional elements, one would need robust rules of evidence to untangle the interplay among them (Buzan, pp. 474–79). These are missing in most of the work. Similarly, one might expect some discussion of research design and why English School researchers consider some instances of their subject of study and not others. Thus, it is unclear why Adam Watson includes ancient China and Persia but not feudal Japan, Siam, or Abyssinia in his study of evolving international society.[2] It may not matter that these were omitted; there may be good reasons for the sample of societies chosen. But without knowing what those reasons are, we cannot judge the effects of these omissions on the work's conclusions.

I understand that English School scholars find some American treatments of methods excessive, even obsessive, and that there is justifiable suspicion about scholarship in which method triumphs over intellectual substance. My suggestion is certainly not for method obsession but rather for more clarity about the evidentiary bases for the conclusions of the research. English School analyses will be more persuasive to a broader audience if they provide answers to such basic evidentiary questions as how do you know that you are correct and, equally important, how would you know if you are wrong?

A second source of puzzlement to American IR scholars involves the theoretical ambitions of much English School work. What, exactly, are its advocates offering? What, exactly, are they claiming theoretically? American IR tends to be interested in causation. I am not sure that the English School shares this interest. As Buzan puts it, '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' (Buzan, p. 477). The word uncover could be construed in a variety of ways, but causal arguments in the two most common American senses of the word are not the centrepiece or motivator of most English School work. Most English School work does not fit well into the independent/dependent variable language that dominates American IR, nor does it make arguments in the constitutively causal sense described by Wendt in this journal.[3] Arguments that how things are constituted makes possible other things (and in that sense causes them) are a large part of American constructivist IR, yet the English School has not emphasized constitutive causality. Such arguments are implicit in many prominent English School works. For example, balance of power, diplomacy, international law, and war are arguably all constitutive of (and in that sense cause) international order in Hedley Bull's anarchical society, but the causal connections, constitutive or otherwise, are only implied. Bull, himself, does not make them and does not present his work in causal form.[4]

Of course, English School scholars need not make causal arguments. Valuable contributions can come from other kinds of research enterprises. But to understand, appreciate, and use the English School's contributions, we would need a better understanding of exactly what those contributions are. My point is simply that

[2] Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis*. (London: Routledge, 1992).
[3] Alexander Wendt, 'A Constitution and Causation in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 24:4 (Special Issue 1998), pp. 101–17.
[4] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 2nd edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

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English School scholars have not said much about exactly what kind of enterprise theirs is, theoretically, and what its contribution is, exactly, within the larger world of IR scholarship. This silence is notable because there has been so much debate lately in IR about the different kinds of claims and scope of various styles of analysis or theories. Constructivists have been busily debating with scholars we call rationalists in the US (not to be confused with rationalist in the sense Buzan uses it) about the nature and limits of theoretical aims in those two schools. Critical and postmodern theorists have also weighed in. Despite some hot air and miscommunication, one positive result of all this talk has been increased clarity about what scholars working in these different traditions claim for themselves and the standards to which they hold themselves.

Lack of clarity about both research methods and theoretical claims has limited the impact of the English School in the US. These two omissions make it difficult to assess the School's work, even on its own terms. Without a clearer sense of what constitutes good evidence for an argument and why the evidence offered for English School analyses is the right evidence to examine, scholars outside the school will have trouble deciding whether English School claims are persuasive or not. Without a clearer sense of what it is offering theoretically, scholars outside the School will be unsure how it can help them address their research questions and whether it can or should be coupled with other theoretical traditions to produce good analyses. Uncertainty on both these counts is likely to result in the work being ignored.

The experience of constructivists in the US may provide some insight about how theoretical approaches gain a foothold in American IR. Constructivism has become influential in large part because it engaged dominant approaches directly on questions of theoretical contribution and research design. Work like Wendt's[5] and Dessler's[6] were able to articulate clearly the deficiencies in the theoretical capacities of dominant approaches (for example, what's at stake in the agent-structure debate) and articulate an alternative set of theoretical orientations which could provide remedy. Projects like Katzenstein's *Culture of National Security* then took up the challenge of articulating research designs and methods suited to the new theoretical aims and applying them to questions of common concern.[7]

One result of the constructivist challenge and its debate with what Americans call rationalism has been a mapping of new theoretical and methodological terrain in American IR conversations.[8] This is an opportunity for the English School. Where, in the constructivist landscape, do English School scholars see their contribution? The English School needs to articulate this clearly or it runs the risk of being bypassed in favour of other research frameworks. Thus far, US scholars have found far more help from sociology than from the English School in large part because the sociological arguments are more explicit about their theoretical claims and offer

[5] Alexander Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, 41(1987), pp. 335–70, and Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46 (1992), pp. 391–425.

[6] David Dessler, 'What's At Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?', *International Organization*, 43(1989), pp. 441–74.

[7] Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[8] For a recent prominent treatment of this debate see the 50th anniversary issue of *International Organization*, 52 (Autumn 1998), particularly the introductory essay by Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner.

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clearer research methods for investigating those claims. This is certainly true of the institutionalists in sociology as well as some of the social movement scholars who have inspired much of the transnationalism literature.[9] The sociological institutionalists have clear, testable hypotheses about basic features of world politics of direct concern to the IR scholars (including those in the English School), and have well-defined methods for investigating them. The social movement theorists offer something less grand—more like a set of concepts and propositions, rather than a fully articulated theory. Guidance for research is less clear from this source, but the fact that social movement concepts have been adopted by the large group investigating transnationalism suggests that scholars are open to new theoretical notions and will apply energy to the problem of making them useful for empirical work. Again, this suggests opportunities for the English School.

My own sense of the English School's theoretical contribution is that it offers something like a set of Weberian ideal-types about international social structures. The core of the English School, as I read it, is the three constructs of international system, international society, and world society. English School scholars have then focused their work on elaborating these different ideal-types, including the logics that underlie them (Hobbesian, Grotian, Kantian), and theorizing relationships among them. If this is correct, English School scholars need to say so and go on to articulate the kinds of work they believe these ideal-types can do in analysis. It might also be helpful to position these ideal-types more explicitly in IR debates, addressing questions about whether this exhausts the universe of possible types and how, empirically, one categorizes cases as one type versus another. Engagement with other related theoretical schemes would be enormously helpful here. For example, how do debates about globalization and neo-medievalism fit into systemic change as the English School understands it? Or how do the three types relate to the three logics of anarchy proposed by Wendt?

If the English School is concerned that other lines of scholarship are paying inadequate attention to it, one obvious remedy is to reach out and engage those other scholars directly. To his credit, Buzan himself has taken up this challenge, but few other English School scholars have shown interest in this kind of endeavour.[10] Lack of clarity about some core features of the English School does not make it easy for other scholars to make this connection on their own. Strong demonstrations by English School scholars of the kind of leverage they can bring to topics of general interest—changing sovereignty, globalization, transnationalism—seem the best means of attracting the kind of attention Buzan seeks. To be maximally effective, such demonstrations should situate English School claims in a broader theoretical landscape of contemporary IR theory, showing how its contributions are distinctive. Americans are fond of asking what the 'value added' is of a theoretical

[9] George M. Thomas, John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez and John Boli (eds.), *Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society, and Individual* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987); Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[10] Barry Buzan, 'From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School', *International Organization*, 47(1993), pp. 327–52.

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approach; providing a strong demonstration of this for the English School would be powerful for that audience.[11]

Engaging a US audience is not the most important reason for undertaking the tasks I have outlined, however. The primary payoff would be that undertaking such tasks would help energize English School research internally and generate the research foci Buzan seeks. Detailed examination of theoretical claims might prompt English School scholars to ask some interesting and productive questions about their own perspective. It might produce important debates about what, exactly, the English School's theoretical aims are (or should be). There may well be differences of opinion about this within the English School. Airing those differences might be productive for the research project as a whole. Detailed examination of theoretical claims might also focus attention on some important theoretical issues, hitherto neglected. For example, at the moment there is no clear theoretical motor for change in English School theorizing. In this, the English School is quite different from Wallerstein, to whom Buzan draws comparisons. How is it, exactly, that politics moves from an international system to an international society, or from an international society to a world society? Movement between what I have called these ideal-types is not well theorized; elaboration of mechanisms for change could galvanize English School scholars internally and open up new lines of research.[12] Similarly, clarifying research design and methods issues could have positive effects inside the English School. Lack of clarity about design and methods often obscures fundamental theoretical questions. More explicit discussion of these matters is likely to make English School scholars better able to critique each other's work internally and improve their research.

As I said at the outset, I am an admirer of the School as it stands and have no particular quarrel with it in its current form. I make these suggestions only in response to Buzan's concern that English School work should be more widely read and more influential. If others share these ambitions, and if the specific goal is to engage US scholars, then perhaps these suggestions might be useful.

[11] Buzan may, with some justification, be disappointed that his engagement of structural realism and regime theory (1993) did not generate more response in the US and not be eager to repeat that experiment. However, the US theoretical debate has changed enormously since 1993, and I suspect that American IR, notably constructivists, would be more receptive to overtures from the English School now, than they were to structural realism eight years ago.

[12] Again, Buzan himself (1993) has worked on this problem, but I am not aware of widespread effort among English School scholars to follow up on his work.

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