

# The English School Conception of International Society: Reflections on Western and non-Western Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The English School of International Relations has produced detailed studies of the development of the European society of states and its expansion to all parts of the world. Leading members have analysed the processes that led to the incorporation of non-Western peoples in the society of states. They have displayed satisfaction that those ways of life have accepted Western principles of international order. They have considered the challenges that exist in ensuring that a Western-dominated international society satisfies the interests of non-Western communities. The English School is a Western approach to international relations, but it invites more global orientations in which Western and non-Western scholars explain the expansion of international society in more detail and reflect on how to make it more responsive to the needs of the world's most vulnerable people.

The English School approach has its origins in what Martin Wight (1991) called the 'rationalist' conception of international society which had such major exponents as Grotius and Vattel. Wight described rationalism as the middle way between 'realism' and 'revolutionism' (or as an alternative to the 'Hobbesian' and

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'Kantian' approaches to world politics). Realism is the doctrine which maintains that states – and especially the great powers – are entangled in struggles for power from which there is no obvious escape as long as societies must provide for their own security. Wight used the term, revolutionism, to refer to quite different standpoints that included the Marxist-Leninist vision of a future world-wide socialist society and the pacifism of Tolstoy and Gandhi. What those perspectives shared was the belief that humanity has the capacity to move beyond geopolitics to a condition in which all communities can co-exist amicably without the threat or use of force. Rationalism, Wight argued, rejects both perspectives while recognising that they have their respective strengths and have left a distinctive mark on world politics. The essence of the doctrine is that states may never succeed in eliminating war but they have reached important agreements about how to control the use of force. States are not condemned to compete for power and security; indeed, they form a society that preserves a remarkably high level of order in the context of anarchy (understood not as chaos but as the absence of government). Political communities have mitigated the effects of that struggle by agreeing on principles that provide some measure of security for the parties involved. But achievements in that domain are always precarious and they are unlikely to survive indefinitely. For that reason, rationalism rejects the optimism of revolutionist approaches and the pessimism of realist standpoints. It occupies the middle ground between them.

To develop those points the following discussion summarises Hedley Bull's approach to international society and emphasises his distinction between international and world order that will frame much of the later argument. I then turn to a central theme in English School writings which is the expansion of international society beyond Europe where it first developed to the rest of the world. The discussion will focus on what different members of the School have regarded as the main constituents of global 'civility' or a 'global civilizing process' that promotes world as well as international order. Important here are different conceptions of human rights and humanitarian intervention in world politics, and ongoing debates about the ideal relationship between the former imperial powers and colonised groups. Those controversies invite further discussion of the relationship between Western and non-Western approaches to international relations and, specifically, they require a deeper understanding of the experience of being incorporated in the modern international society of states. The development of International Relations as a discipline outside the traditional centres in the West provides new opportunities for documenting how the

expansion of Europe and the widening of the society of states affected non-Western peoples. A more rounded perspective on that process –more rounded in that more attention is devoted to the historical experience of communities outside the West –requires advances in global outlooks that the English School did much to encourage.

## **International and World Order**

In an influential formulation Alexander Wendt (1992) argued that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ – and they can make a society from of it in the sense of discovering common ground in the desire to limit the use of force. That has long been a core element of rationalist thought, and a central theme in the English School standpoint which has flourished in the United Kingdom since the late 1970s. Particularly notable are Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society* and a sequence of works by Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, Martin Wight, John Vincent, Tim Dunne, Nicholas Wheeler, Robert Jackson, Barry Buzan and others that have promoted a distinctive English School approach to international society (see the discussion in Linklater and Suganami 2006: part one).

There is no space here to document the history of the English School. It is necessary however to focus on central elements of Bull’s perspective. At its heart is the observation that states have a common interest in establishing and maintaining international order: they have a shared recognition that their security and survival depend on a general willingness to control the use of force, to respect sovereignty, to observe the principle of non-intervention, and to ensure that treaties are kept. To that end, they have often agreed that they should work together to preserve the balance of power and to promote respect for international institutions, diplomacy and law (Bull 1977). Some members of the English School have argued that such agreements mark the existence of a ‘civilizing’ process in international relations where states collaborate to tame violence, albeit with limited success given the geopolitical dynamics that realists analyse (Watson 1982: 20). There is a rough parallel between that view and the sociological writings of Norbert Elias (2000) that explained the European civilizing process in which modern societies became pacified in large part because of the restraining role of the state’s monopoly powers (Linklater 2004). For the English School, similar civilizing processes take place in world politics even though no legal and political authority stands above nation-states and can enforce compliance with international standards and norms. That is why international society rather than

the realist system of states or the Marxist idea of global relations of dominance and dependence is its preferred level of analysis.

Crucially, Bull (1977: 20-2) argued that ‘international order’ should be judged by its contribution to ‘world order’. That is a striking claim given his professed allegiance to non-partisan scholarship (Bull 1977: xv). He maintained that order between *states* (however challenging for the societies involved) is not an end in itself, but the means to higher objectives that include ensuring security for *individuals* in their own right. Bull did not think that states were poised to make significant progress on that front. Disputes over human rights have revealed that there are deep divisions in international society over the liberties and entitlements that societies regard as integral to a decent or civilized way of life. The pressing issue when Bull was writing in the 1970s was how to maintain order between states and particularly how to preserve stability between the two super-powers. But the belief that international society has unfinished business was central to his comments about the higher value of a world order that does more than preserve stability between states. That distinction was especially important for Bull given ‘the expansion of international society’.

### **Beyond European International Society**

Crucial for Bull and Watson (1984) was the question of whether the institutions that had long been central to the European society of states now command the support of the newly-independent states – the societies that had been colonies of the imperial powers until the process of decolonisation transformed international relations over a thirty year period following the end of the Second World War. To consider the political challenge, as Bull understood it, it is important to remember that the society of states developed within a single European civilization whose members were acutely aware of their cultural difference from, and alleged superiority over, other peoples (Bull 1977; Wight 1979: ch. 1). The sense of cultural and indeed racial superiority was strikingly expressed in the idea of the ‘standard of civilization’, the nineteenth century international legal doctrine that maintained that Europeans had the right to colonise other groups, to govern their future development, and to remake them in the image of Europe (Gong 1984; Suzuki 2009). The ‘standard of civilization’ also expressed the idea that the European colonial powers would decide when non-European societies had reached a level of social and political development that made it possible for them to join the European society of states. The possibility of admission to international

society on equal terms with the original members was recognised although most of those who designed the standard of civilization believed that would take several decades, and in some cases, many centuries. The main assumption was that entry into the society of states would require more than compliance with Western principles of international relations that were based on the idea of sovereignty and non-intervention, and on respect for Western diplomatic practice and international law; it would depend on parallel changes in the internal organisation of the societies involved. At a deeper level, the expansion of international society would only occur as a result of the Westernisation or 'modernisation' of non-European communities.

At the end of the First World War, colonial independence seemed a distant prospect although Lenin in Russia and Wilson in the United States encouraged that aspiration by defending the principle of national self-determination in the competition to extend their influence. Even at the close of the Second World War, few anticipated the rapid acceleration of the decolonisation process that would lead to a tripling of the number of sovereign states in three decades. Arguably, the most insightful account of the significance of that change for international society is to be found in Bull's essays on 'the revolt against the West' (Bull 1984; 1984/2000). Bull distinguished between five aspects of that revolt: the legal revolt in which societies such as China and Japan attempted to lift restrictions on their sovereignty; the political revolt in which the colonies demanded sovereign independence; the racial revolt in which societies such as Japan argued for incorporating principles of racial equality in international law; the economic revolt in which the former colonies called for an end to their subordinate role within a Western-dominated global economic system; and the cultural revolt in which new states challenged the ideas that had been enshrined in the 'standard of civilization', namely that the Western powers could rightfully stand in judgment of them, condemn what they regarded as 'barbaric' practices, and proceed to refashion other societies until they complied with the norms and practices of an allegedly more 'civilized' West.

The revolt of the West had particular significance for the analysis which can be found in Bull and Watson (1984) because it immediately raised the question of whether the majority of non-Western powers have accepted European principles of international relations. It is useful here to distinguish between the *sense of relief* and the *sense of the continuing challenge* that runs through Bull and Watson's discussion of the expansion of international society. The sense of relief is evident in the argument that, for the most part, non-Western communities have

accepted the principle of the equality of states which has been central to modern international society and crucial for the maintenance of international order. It is apparent in the observation that non-European societies that had believed in their superiority over other groups have come round to the European idea that order between societies is more likely to survive if they recognise each other as political equals. The 'hegemonial conception of international relations' that societies such as China had espoused had been replaced by acceptance of Western standards that had long been central to relations *within* international society but not to Europe's relations with the rest of the world. For that reason, Bull and Watson (1984) ended their influential study by arguing that an international society that includes the Western and non-Western powers on equal terms is to some degree already constructed.

The sense of challenge was expressed in the view that Western societies also had to make significant adjustments to the new global realities. It was not enough for them simply to recognise the legal and political independence of the former colonies. A major diplomatic initiative was required to ensure that legitimate demands on the part of former colonised groups for racial, economic and cultural justice were satisfied. Bull maintained that the European interest in order (which reflected the desire to control violence between states and which grew out of an earlier attempt to bring a permanent end to the religious conflicts that had plagued the continent) had to be complemented by efforts to promote justice between rich and poor in world society. In short, international society in the post-European era could not stand still. It must be stressed that Bull, Wight and others always emphasised that order is the precondition for making progress towards justice. They argued that without order between the great powers, movement towards a more just international society simply cannot take place. That conviction was linked with the belief that international society is a precarious achievement that can all too quickly be weakened by conflicts between the great powers where the pursuit of short-term goals replaces the belief that long-term interests require self-restraint and support for the institutions of international society. It is worth adding that, for Wight (1979: ch. 1), all past states-systems were consumed by violence and replaced by empire. The fragility of international society demonstrated the continuing centrality of the problem of order in world politics. But Bull and Watson emphasised that the assumption that order was the pre-eminent political value would no longer suffice in the first universal society of states.

## **Towards a Global Civilizing Process?**

By a global civilizing process, I mean patterns of development that allow all communities to live together amicably, with the minimum of violent and non-violent harm (Linklater 2004). The point has been made that the non-European acceptance of the traditional principles of international society was an advance towards the condition in which remarkably different ways of life co-exist peacefully. No less important for Bull (1977: 316-17) was the belief that an emerging 'cosmopolitan culture of modernity' could help to bind different societies together. What he meant was that at least the modernising elites in the newly-independent societies have become committed to modern notions of scientific and technological knowledge and to related orientations to society and politics that are essential for the functioning of advanced industrial societies. The supposition was that the cosmopolitan culture of modernity could play an equivalent role to the idea of European civilization in an earlier stage in the development of international society. It could facilitate understanding between culturally-diverse groups, and in so doing contribute to the survival of an international society that has outgrown Europe.

The question that arises is whether Bull and other members of the English School were convinced that the future of international society depended on what Wight (1966) called the global spread of 'Western values'. A related issue is whether Bull and others defended a Eurocentric conception of international relations that is ill-equipped for analysing the challenges facing 'post-European' international society. An initial response is that Bull and others were Western-trained scholars with a specific interest in the development of a distinctively European way of conducting international relations. Reflections on the history of Western international politics rather than consideration of broader global developments that would have required an acquaintance with non-Western societies and international relations lay at the heart of their analysis. But, in their defence, it must be emphasised that Bull and Wight were highly-conscious of the fact that international society was not just a European invention but an arrangement that largely worked to the advantage of the dominant powers. They were aware that international society is essentially a 'Western club' that needs to be reformed if it is to command legitimacy in the wider world. For that reason, Bull was especially critical of the failure of the superpowers in the late 1970s to offer a vision of world order that addressed the needs and aspirations of 'Third World' societies. So absorbed were the superpowers in their immediate fears and

anxieties that longer-term measures that could strengthen international society largely escaped their attention (Bull 1983). Also worth noting is Bull's stress that Western liberals have often been too inclined to believe that their values are self-evidently true, and they have often been blind to the evidence that their preferences do not resonate in many other parts of the world (Bull 1979). Here, it should be stressed that Bull (1984/2000) wrote as a liberal, but as one who appreciated that liberal principles had no automatic claim on other peoples.

It might be thought that Bull believed that Western liberals had somehow to persuade other societies of the superiority of liberal values. Perhaps that was his personal view although there is little evidence in his writings that he believed that liberals should spearhead a global effort to disseminate their values. If anything, Bull's writings point in a rather different direction which stressed that liberals had to do more to promote the transfer of wealth and power from the North to the South (Bull 1977: 316-17). He also argued that non-Western ideas had to be incorporated into international law (Bull 1977: ch. 13). Those are hardly the sentiments of someone who believed in the self-evident superiority of Western liberalism or in the necessity of a one-way transfer of ideas from Western to non-Western societies. But they are liberal in the deeper sense of recognising the existence and importance of cultural diversity and in arguing that order depends on living with and respecting a plurality of radically different ways of life.

It is important to add that Bull's protégé, John Vincent, addressed those themes in his major study of human rights. Vincent (1986) wished to avoid two polar extremes: the belief that the rights that liberals regard as fundamental are self-evidently valid for all communities, and the doctrine of cultural relativism that maintains that the world consists of societies that are committed to equally valuable moral standards. His solution was to argue that the right to be free from starvation was the most fundamental of all human rights; other rights have no meaning unless people are assured of their survival. Vincent (1986) referred to the 'resident emergency' in which millions face starvation. He argued that a global consensus on the necessity of eradicating starvation is possible whereas other approaches to human rights tend to be ideologically divisive (Vincent 1986: 2). Different societies can at least agree that something must be done to end starvation. They can avoid disputes about who is to blame and who has most responsibility for taking action to end the permanent emergency. The United States, Vincent (1986: 147-8) added, might be invited to assume a leading role in organising the necessary international effort just as Britain had taken the initiative to eradicate the Atlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century.



Vincent argued that the United States and the diplomatic community in general have responsibilities as 'civilized' ways of life to ensure that others can enjoy the benefits that are largely taken for granted in the affluent regions. In the terms discussed earlier, his analysis of human rights offered a distinctive account of how a global civilizing process might develop. Crucially, Vincent opposed the attempt to link the defence of human rights with a doctrine of humanitarian intervention. Other members of the English School, most notably Wheeler (2000), defended that line of argument in the late 1990s. For Vincent however, the doctrine of humanitarian intervention is likely to produce more dissent than agreement in the relations between states. In all probability, acting on that principle will weaken support for international society which may then be seen as an arrangement that legitimates Western domination over non-Western cultures. A global consensus on the right to be free from starvation can have different results – strengthening rather than weakening international society, making the latter more responsive to the needs of non-European groups and, crucially, requiring the Western powers to look at their own moral and political deficiencies and to rise to the challenge of eradicating global starvation.<sup>2</sup> To use the terms that were introduced earlier, any sense of relief that non-Western peoples have embraced European principles of international relations had to be balanced by the appreciation of the scale of the political challenge that face the dominant powers in a more inclusive international society.

Studies of humanitarian intervention in the late 1990s described the challenge that confronted the Western powers in rather different terms. In so doing they supported what Bull (1966) had called a 'solidarist as opposed to a 'pluralist' conception of international society (solidarism refers to the belief that individuals are the ultimate members of international society, and pluralism is the doctrine that sovereign states monopolise that position). They also argued that intervention is an important way of promoting world as well as international order (Wheeler 2000). For Bull and Vincent, non-intervention is a core principle of a pluralist international society and a vital one if there is to be stability in the relations between the great powers. But the increasing number of 'failed states' in the 1990s, the violation of human rights and the phenomenon of displaced persons provided the backdrop to the view that a collective right of intervention should be woven into the fabric of international society so that the world can deal

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2. For a recent assessment of the merits of Vincent's position see Gonzalez-Palaez and Buzan (2003). A forum that considers the importance of Vincent's book twenty five years after its publication will appear in the journal *International Affairs* in the middle of 2011.

with serious humanitarian emergencies. That society would be solidarist in that it would be prepared to use force to defend the rights of individual men, women and children. If sovereignty was overridden in the process it was because, in the circumstances described, world order goals had precedence over international order.

Many states in the non-Western world (including China) vigorously oppose what they regard as threats to pluralist principles. Moreover, many members of the English School reject humanitarian intervention on the grounds that it may endanger international order. Various arguments have been used in opposition to solidarism. They include the belief that the intervening powers may not be prepared to make the long-term investment that is needed to rebuild failed states, that they will become embroiled in local power struggles and condemned for becoming quasi-imperial powers and, furthermore, that the military occupation and governance of the target society will foster suspicion and rivalry between the great powers (Jackson 2000). Overall, the argument is that embedding a principle of humanitarian intervention in international society may save strangers in specific societies but not without major long-term dangers and costs. Not only is order likely to be endangered but the taboos on using force will be weakened in ways that should concern those who support world order. After all, many of the most serious human rights violations occur when societies are at war (Jackson 2000).

## **Conclusion**

There is no escaping the fact that the founding members of the English School were Western-trained scholars steeped in the Western intellectual tradition. It is perhaps unsurprising that Bull and others did not devote much attention to how the expansion of international society had appeared to non-European communities, although Bull and Watson (1984) contains chapters on Japan, China, the Islamic world and so forth. It falls to scholars outside the West to provide a more extensive discussion of the effects of the expansion of international society on non-European powers. Their intellectual training and cultural sensitivities may give them a clear advantage over Western scholars - which is not to imply that the latter are somehow debarred from providing a more 'global' perspective on the expansion of international society (see Gong 1984 on China and Suzuki 2009 on China and Japan). All that is suggested here is that the most influential works in the English School are well-disposed towards such an

enterprise. So much is evident from Bull's repeated comments about the challenge that faces international society, one that falls most heavily on the Western powers and requires them to take the initiative in reforming that society so that it responds to the need for justice for individuals as well as order between states.<sup>3</sup>

The penultimate comment is that international society developed in Europe in an era when most Europeans were convinced that they belonged to the only true civilization, other societies seeming to languish in a state of 'backwardness'. Many Europeans believed that they had the right to promote a global civilizing process that would remake other societies in their image. Such assumptions about cultural and indeed racial superiority have yet to disappear in the West, but they have lost much of their earlier power and influence, and they have certainly lost their legitimacy. The idea that one supreme 'civilization' is surrounded by an ocean of 'uncivilized' groups has lost ground to the view that the world consists of different civilizations (or different civilizing processes) that are still learning how to live together in a condition of mutual respect. The point is that different cultures are still at an early stage in promoting a very different global civilizing process from the one that had been contained in the notion of the 'standard of civilization'. Rather than following the lead set by Europe or the West, those steeped in different civilizing processes must decide amongst themselves whether they can agree on principles that can allow them to co-exist with the minimum of violent and non-violent harm. The English School may not be the last word on that subject, but it has strong claims to be regarded as the perspective that clearly explains what is at stake in understanding how the arrangements that served Europeans so well (or at least the dominant powers) can be reformed to ensure order and justice for peoples across the world.

Crucial is the idea that the society of states is the only workable form of global political organisation (Jackson 2000). The chances are that it will be replaced at some future point by a different set of arrangements. English School theorists defend the European society of states because it is the most effective way at this point in human history of promoting amicable co-existence between political communities – hence the sense of relief that its organising principles are now generally accepted across the world. But they recognise its imperfections in the post-European era, and they have identified some of the global reforms that can make the first ever universal society of states more legitimate from the standpoint of poorer societies and more able to function smoothly. The sense of the

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3. Bull planned to write a book on justice in world politics, but he did not live to complete it.

challenge that faces the most affluent and powerful societies has been understood in different ways by members of the English School, as the discussion of human rights and humanitarian intervention has shown. The English School is a Western theory that seeks to explain and indeed to defend a Western set of practices while recognising that international society must continue to evolve now that it has outgrown Europe and the West. It warrants respect as the perspective that most clearly understands the necessity of building bridges between Western and non-Western perspectives on international relations. Such bridges can explain in more detail the actual processes by which non-Western ways of life came to be incorporated in a European-dominated international society. They can contribute to future inquiries into how that society should be changed so that it promotes world as well as international order - so that it satisfies the needs of the people who are the ultimate members of international society as well as the interests of those states that best represent them.

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