

Global Disorder: A Blind Spot or Distinct Concept of the International Society Approach?

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The international society approach to the study of international relations has advanced a distinct understanding of international order in world politics. Does this approach therefore also implicitly have a distinct understanding of disorder in world politics, too? From a close reading of this literature, and the writings of Hedley Bull in particular, I argue that a “purposive” understanding of disorder in world politics is evident, as well as a set of sociological explanations of it, including hierarchy conflict, political value conflict, and the structural contradictions of international society. I suggest that this approach is more insightful and promising for studying increasing manifestations of disorder in world politics than alternative realist approaches. Finally, I make the case that this concept’s analytical utility and theoretical role in this approach is the assessment of the continued viability of international society as a path to order in world politics.

Con el fin de aclarar lo que significa un enfoque de la sociedad internacional respecto al desorden en la política mundial, se argumenta que la literatura del enfoque de la sociedad internacional contiene un enfoque distinto del concepto de desorden en la política mundial, así como un conjunto distinto de explicaciones «sociales» del mismo. Se sugiere además que la utilidad analítica del concepto de desorden en este enfoque reside en la evaluación de la viabilidad continuada de la sociedad internacional como camino hacia el orden en un mundo cada vez más desordenado. Se indican las direcciones para el perfeccionamiento y la utilidad de este concepto en literatura.

Afin de clarifier la signification d’une approche sociétale internationale du désordre de la politique mondiale, nous avançons l’argument que la littérature concernant l’approche sociétale internationale se distingue par la façon dont elle envisage le concept de désordre de la politique mondiale, mais aussi par les explications «sociétales» qu’elle en donne. Nous proposons par ailleurs de démontrer que l’utilité analytique du concept de désordre dans cette approche repose sur l’évaluation du maintien de la viabilité de la société internationale en tant que voie vers l’ordre, au sein d’un monde de plus en plus en désordre. Enfin, nous indiquons des possibilités d’amélioration et de renforcement de l’utilité de ce concept au sein de cette littérature.

Introduction

The international society approach to international relations (also known as the “English School” of IR) has advanced a perspective that sees a minimal degree of international order existing in a world of considerable disorder. Hedley Bull’s celebrated “study of order in world politics,” for instance, acknowledged that “the element of disorder looms large or larger in world politics than the element of order” (Bull 2002, xxxii). Advancing this perspective, the English School has become an established and growing literature (Buzan 2001, 2014a; Bellamy 2005; Linklater and Suganami 2006; Navari 2009, 2021a; Wilson 2016). Relative to the concept of order, it has said far less about the concept and sources of disorder in and surrounding international society, however, being preoccupied with explicating “the slender sources of order in a basically disorderly world” (Bull 1980, 437). Although ignoring the proverbial “elephant in the room” is not the same thing as being blind to it, the relative preoccupation with *order* in this literature, over the sources of *disorder*, nevertheless raises critical questions.

If this literature has a distinct approach to the concept of international *order*, does it therefore not also at least implicitly have a distinct approach to the concept of international *disorder*? Or, instead, does it revert or defer to realism or perhaps critical theory where disorder emerges? Critics have argued that this approach tends to exaggerate the extent and depth of international order in world politics (Copeland 2003; Callahan 2004; Bleiker 2005; Brown 2010). In a con-

text many describe as an age of “disorder,” moreover, these criticisms appear more challenging (Schweller 2011, 2014; Deudney 2018; Maull 2019; Thompson 2022). International disorder is in several respects increasing, in the crisis of the “liberal” international order, revisionist war and prospect of great power war, a populist “revolt against globalism,” a declining nuclear order and limited cyber order, a poorly managed global pandemic, and the encroaching consequences of mismanaged climate change.

How exactly does the international society approach conceive and explain “disorder” in world politics? In the literature of the international society approach, explicit discussion of the concept is sparse, but I find that the few explicit references to it, especially those of Bull, are illuminating, while I also find wide-ranging implicit and indirect references to the concept across this literature. In reviewing this literature, I find that it contains a “purposive” understanding of the concept of disorder in world politics, as well as a set of “societal” explanations of it. Although in places ambiguous and in need of refinement, I suggest that this concept and its “societal” explanation offers a more insightful and promising approach for making sense of international and global disorders in world politics than realist alternatives (Schweller 2011, 2014; McKeil 2022a). Finally, I make the case that the concept’s theoretical role and analytical utility in this approach is the assessment of the continued viability of international society as a path to order in world politics.

A Distinct Conception?

“International disorder” in plain or everyday language is often used to mean a condition of international instability and manifestations of war and revolutionary upheaval. “Global disorder,” in conventional usage, may be understood to mean a transnational level of disorder in world politics, above and across the international system. Moving from plain or everyday language, toward the theoretical, elsewhere I have offered the analytical definition of “international disorder as the disruption of ordering international behaviour, rules and norms, producing a condition of instability and unpredictability in international affairs” (McKeil 2021, 203). Another similar definition understands “disorder as those moments and events in which established configurations and operations of world order are widely understood as having been disrupted” (Johnson, Basham, and Thomas 2022, 608). In this sense, international disorder is conceived as action or inaction that *disrupts* ordered international relations, producing instability and the potential destabilization and collapse of those relations. This conception, as disruption, avoids a binary distinction between order and disorder. As realist conceptions suggest, the complete destabilization of international order, as in structural “entropy,” is an extreme measure of disorder, producing a condition of “chaos” or randomness (Schweller 2014, 1–13). Not all disorder in world politics is so extreme in intensity, however. Nor is disorder in world politics conceptually reducible to violence, because in principle some disruptions of international order can be nonviolent, and most political orders include relatively stable rules, norms, and practices ordering the legitimated use of force. Because it is the existence of relatively stable rules, norms, and practices shaping patterned relations that make their disruption possible, international order and disorder are not binary concepts, but nearer to co-constitutive (Lebow 2018, 310). Finally, although international disorder and change are often associated when change is rapid, the two should not be conflated, because patterns and processes of international change can also be gradual or evolutionary (Lascurettes and Poznansky 2021).

The question, however, is whether there is a distinctly *English School* understanding of disorder in world politics? We can distinguish different types of concepts an English School approach might contain or produce. An *empirical* concept, as might be interpretively found in diplomatic discourse or international law, for instance, can be distinguished from an *analytical* concept, as found in theoretical texts that abstract and refine the concept. Empirical and analytical concepts can also be distinguished from *normative* concepts of international disorder, which would define it according to its negative or positive moral connotations, relative to normative values and purposes. The rich and conceptually subtle literature of the international society approach, with internal diversity in places, is capable of producing and including all three of these types of concepts, while their distinctions can fit into an overall international society or English School framework.

There are few and brief explicit discussions of the concept in this literature, although an implicit understanding can be detected and discerned. In this literature, Hedley Bull’s writings include the most explicit references to the concept, although these references are limited to brief comments, remarks, and passing examples. Nevertheless, what he wrote about the concept is instructive and illuminating, because many of his comments are in service of clarifying his favored concept of order. Within his *Anarchical Society*, Bull explains,

when we speak of order as opposed to disorder in social life we have in mind not any pattern or methodical arrangement among social phenomena, but a pattern of a particular sort. For a pattern may be evident in the behaviour of men or groups in violent conflict with one another, yet this is a situation we should characterise as disorderly. Sovereign states in circumstances of war and crisis may behave in regular and methodical ways; individual men living in the conditions of fear and insecurity, described in Hobbes’s account of the state of nature, may conduct themselves in conformity with some recurrent pattern, indeed Hobbes himself says that they do; but these are examples not of order in social life but of disorder. (Bull 2002, 3)

This passage conveys Bull’s concept of a purposive concept of order, which he contrasts with the Hobbesian image of a recurrent but meaningless or purposeless war of all against all. In this sense, a purposive conception of order and disorder advanced by Bull offers a partly normative, partly analytical concept.

Bull’s discussion of war as an institution illuminates further complexities in his understanding of disorder. For Bull, “war has a dual aspect” (Bull 2002, 181). He explains that

On the one hand, war is a manifestation of disorder in international society, bringing with it the threat of breakdown of international society itself into a state of pure enmity or war of all against all. . . . On the other hand, war—as an instrument of state policy and a basic determinant of the shape of the international system—is a means which international society itself feels a need to exploit so as to achieve its own purposes. (Bull 2002, 181)

In one sense, the conduct of war produces “chaotic” violence, and the potential breakdown of order, in the Germanic sense of the word. In the second juridical sense, as an institution, war is conceived by Bull as the enforcement of international law and the maintenance order. In this dual sense, the disorder manifest by war is a means for enforcing order in international society. This suggests that while all wars manifest a degree of disorder, in the suspension and disruption of normal relations through battle and the fog of war, only some wars prosecute and enforce order in its juridical sense.

A dual quality can be teased out in all the institutions of international society, because they are all conceived in purposive terms. Bull listed four institutions of international society, in addition to war: the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, and great power management (Bull 2002). In explaining great power management, as an ordering institution, for instance, Bull notes that “In fact great powers, like small powers, 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” (Bull 2002, 201). It follows that while other primary institutions such as international law, diplomacy, and the balance of power are considered to be sources of order by Bull and other international society scholars, these institutions can be abused or irresponsibly neglected in practice. Diplomatic networks, for instance, can be abused by using them to pressure and exclude some states for narrow interests, at the expense of common interests. International law can be used self-servingly too, as pretext and justification for destabilizing interventions, for instance. War can also be waged, and revolutions and civil wars can be encouraged and inflamed, moreover, in the name of upholding the

balance of power and collective security, but in reality actually to punish rival powers and undermine and revise international order to gain advantage. From the perspective of the international society approach, in these twisting ways, it is how international institutions are responsibly used or irresponsibly abused in practice, not their existence as such, that determines whether they are greater sources of order or disorder in world politics. In this outlook, international institutions serve common interests, or what this literature refers to as *raison de système*, in contrast to *raison d'état*. In this sense, disorder in world politics is closer to the idea of the unenlightened self-interested actions of states and groups. The disordering effects of these actions, in principle, however, can be intended or unintended (McKeil 2022c).

In this reading, as such, it is the purposive conception of international order that gives international disorder its meaning, relative to the common purposes of international society. What are these purposes? Bull offered three categories of ordering purposes, those of “social life” in general, those of “international order,” and those of “world order.” For order in social life in general, Bull offers a partly analytical partly normative purposive concept, including only “minimal” purposes, those “primary” or “elemental” purposes needed for societal order to exist, of which he includes “life, truth, and property” (Bull 2002, 5). Bull’s philosophical method encounters some difficulties, however. First, what counts as a minimal purpose is controversial. Bull’s purposive notion of “life” in his concept of order, for instance, has a negative sense, as freedom from physical violence, thereby conceiving disorder as physical violence. This excludes a positive sense of “life,” however, to include the needs of life, if not also the pursuit of happiness. Second, Bull draws inspiration from philosophical sources such as Augustine to make his conceptual claim about the minimal purposes of order, but this reveals the historically contingent genealogical sources of his conception, including theological antecedents (Bain 2017, 2020).

For international order, Bull suggests that it has four specific purposes in international society: “the goal of the preservation of the system and society of states itself,” “the goal of maintaining the independence or external sovereignty of individual states,” “the goal of peace,” and fourth, the same common goals of all social life in general listed above (Bull 2002, 16–18). The disruption or neglect of these purposes, in action or inaction, as such, constitutes international disorder, for Bull. World order, for Bull, entails the “elementary or primary goals of social life among mankind as a whole,” which he conceived as more fundamental, and the ultimate object of, international order (Bull 2002, 18). Again, the way Bull attempts to articulate the moral worth of international society, in abstracting its normative purposes (Keene 2009, 116), is difficult because of their political contestation and rival interpretations in world politics.

In practice, in history that is, specific combinations of predominant powers and prevailing moral purposes shape the political character of international order and disorder in world history (Reus-Smit 1999; Phillips 2011). A more thoroughly empirically “grounded” and interpretive “constructivist”-style approach may offer more insights, in these respects (Wilson 2012). Such an approach may, for instance, explore the narratives of world order and disorder deployed by participants in practice, through sites and historical contexts in practice that are perceived as manifesting order and disorder (Johnson, Basham, and Thomas 2022). A more thoroughly interpretive empirical approach to the concept would more readily consider the contesta-

tion of political purposes in international society, and the role of power in shaping which purposes become predominant in international orders. Such an approach is not without its own methodological challenges, although they are not insurmountable. First, the interpretation of normative purposes in world politics, in a broadly Weberian approach of ideal-type analysis, for instance, necessarily still includes normative assumptions at some level, making the utility of the analysis somewhat value-relative. Second, because moral normative purposes embodied in international orders and performed in international practices are not only numerous, but also politically and perhaps essentially contested, imputing certain purposes onto them, over others, still can be controversial. This suggests an emphasis on explaining the description of order and disorder by participants. In these respects, the exploration of concepts of “disorder” in non-Western political traditions and the use in practice (Zhang 2014; Buzan and Acharya 2021), for instance, would be warranted for an empirically interpretive approach to the concept.

Although these methodological challenges make the contents of this concept somewhat ambiguous, a purposive conception of disorder in world politics is arguably more insightful than the Hobbesian picture of a meaningless war of all against all. Manifestations of international disorder such as in war and revolution are understood to be politically meaningful within the framework of international society and its political contestation in world politics. Manifestations of disorder in world politics are not mere gambits for survival and power. They manifest political contests over the underlying purposes and ordering principles of international society. To be clear, Hobbes himself in crucial respects was not a “Hobbesian,” because his image of a war of all against all depicted a state of nature among *individuals*, and in his view, a state of nature between *states* was less severe, and more tolerable, because states, unlike individuals, are more self-reliant and durable (Vincent 1981, 94). It is the tradition of realist international thought that has taken inspiration from the “Hobbesian” image, however, from Morgenthau to Mearsheimer, which is distinct from and arguably less insightful than the approach to international disorder offered by the framework of international society. Instances of international disorder, within an international society perspective, are understood as international action or inaction with purposes contradicting the common purposes and interests of international society.

Bull’s rigid analytical distinctions between international, domestic, and world order might offer some categorical distinctions between their counterparts of *international disorder* (as inter-state disorder), *domestic disorder* (as intra-state disorder), and *world disorder* (as international plus domestic disorder). *Global disorder*, beyond these, can be understood to mean disorder at the global level, including both states and transnational non-state actors. *Regional disorder* (as disorder between states and across states at a regional level) can be added too (Hurrell 2007a; Costa-Buranelli 2015). International order in world politics today can be said to be increasingly challenged, in the decline and challenge to the “liberal” order from domestic populist disorder, and from international disorder manifest in revisionist war and great power geopolitical rivalry at global and regional levels, undermining action needed to manage global disorders such as climate change, and further stressing local manifestations of disorder in world politics. In practice, that is, these categories intersect and are mutually affecting in a world system complex, through interactions of actors and forces across global, local, and international levels. In world politics, that

is, “Different types and ranges of order and stability (domestic, regional, and continental) may interact to produce global instability and disorder” (Lyon 1973, 58).

The above analytical distinctions are broadly distinguished by scale and actor-type, but a crucial aspect of their distinctions are the qualitative differences between the sources, manifestations, and effects of disorder between different actors at different levels. It is a point of contention within the literature of the English School that *domestic* disorder is qualitatively distinct from *international* disorder, and at best only comparable by analogy (Suganami 1989), because states in principle are not as vulnerable or mutually dependent as individuals. States it is contended can endure more disorder than individuals, hence the idea of an “anarchical” international society that enjoys a degree of order, however modest, without immediate need for a Hobbesian world leviathan. Much of the idea behind the notion of “global” disorder, however, is that while states may remain more durable than individuals, states are less self-reliant in a context of globalized security interdependence. In eras of intense revolutionary and counter-revolutionary waves, moreover, which divide international society horizontally as well as vertically, qualitative distinctions between international and domestic order become more tenuous and challenged (Armstrong 1993).

In this literature, potential for disorder in world politics has also been associated with the historical demands for justice made by individuals and classes of states in international society (Bull 1971; Foot, Gaddis, and Hurrell 2003; Kamal 2017; Reus-Smit 2017). Bull’s writings express concern with revolutionary demands for justice, as a potential source of international disorder, although his later writings came to appreciate the need for justice, in the maintenance of international order. In his *Anarchical Society*, he argued that the “revolt against the West” and demands of “the Third World are primarily concerned with the achievement of justice in the world community, even at the price of disorder” (Bull 2002, 74). He repeats this view in his later Hagey Lectures on justice, where he explains that for the “the revolutionary. . . it is the path of justice that should be preferred, even at the price of disorder, perhaps even if the earth should perish” (Bull 2000, 227). Later, English School writing on the “revolt against the West” and the era of decolonization instead suggests that it was an era “generative” of a changed and to some extent a more just order (Hall 2017).

Bleiker also makes the point that “Disorder can occasionally be required to promote orders that are more just” (Bleiker 2005, 180). In this sense, when international order is in tension with “justice,” temporary disorder may be understood to be a required corrective. Reflecting on the tensions between order and justice in Bull’s concepts, Suganami also suggests that

Clearly, if a people were to be subjected to conquest or forceful control by an imperial or hegemonic power, legitimated by international law or the special position of the great powers in the name of international order, not only could they, or their community, be said to suffer “injustices” but many of them would be forced to endure “disorder” in terms of the harms done to their lives, possessions, and wellbeing derived from the sanctity of contractual obligations. . . Indeed, we think of such a predicament as “unjust” precisely because of the “disorder” unfairly forced upon them. (Suganami 2017, 35)

In this sense, disorder may also be understood as relative to some basic moral purposes of people and humankind in

general, which an unjust international order may contradict and harm. Bull’s later writings are clearly more sympathetic to the demands for such justice in world politics (Bull 1984; Wheeler and Dunne 1996; Makinda 2002), but his promised study of justice in world politics was never completed. What he might have said about disorder in that project remains unclear.

This literature also stresses the related tensions between “pluralists” and “solidarists,” in an international society with “one order, two laws” (Bain 2007), torn between ordering principles of *state-centric pluralism* and *cosmopolitan solidarism* (Williams 2005; Weinert 2011; Stivachtis and McKeil 2018). The English School’s “pluralist” and “solidarist” debate explored these tensions in the context of globalization (Buzan 2004; Williams 2005; Weinert 2011), teasing out the ways in which the transnational rise of non-state actors, and their potential recognition in international law (Wheeler 2002; Ralph 2007), may produce new forms of “global” disorder (Little and Williams 2006).

In a more analytical vein, the analysis of the “strength” or “weakness” of international society in the literature of the English School offers another implicit or adjacent discussion related to international disorder. The “weakness” of international society in this sense is associated with its instability. In this literature, Buzan and Schouenborg (2018) have developed the analytical framework of “belief, calculation, and coercion” to categorize the mechanisms stabilizing the structure of international society (Wendt 1999, 266–73; Buzan and Schouenborg 2018, 37). Where and when the effectiveness of these mechanisms diminishes, the “strength” of international society is understood to be in decline. In this framework, although international *society* is not the same thing as international *order*, a “weak” international society is nevertheless expected to experience more numerous and potentially more intense manifestations of international disorder.

In sum, in this rich literature we can distinguish a Bullian concept of international disorder relative to philosophically imputed normative purposes from more thoroughly sociologically interpretive “constructivist”-style approaches to the concept. Common to each, however, is a purposive understanding of international disorder at work, often implicitly. Far away from the Hobbesian notion of a meaningless “war of all against all,” this literature suggests that it is the common purposes of international society and their contestation that give manifestations of international and global disorder their meaning and significance in world politics.

Distinct Explanations?

While Finnemore (2001) challenged the English School to clarify its causal explanation of *order*, this challenge may be more demanding for the English School’s causal explanation of *disorder* in world politics, since this literature has prioritized the explanation of order, relative to disorder. What exactly are the *sources* of international disorder, from the perspective of an international societal approach, and through what processes are they understood to give rise to its *manifestations*?

Within this literature, discussions of the sources of disorder in world politics have been broadly sociological and can be categorized into three types: hierarchy conflicts, political value conflicts, and structural contradictions. The first, *hierarchy conflicts*, refers to the imposition of stratified hierarchies lacking legitimacy, which generate resistance, manifest in challenges to the imposed order. The second category, *political value conflicts*, refers to the contest between political

values in international society generating the use of force, undermining order. These political value conflicts can be of a revisionist depth, or revolutionary. The third category, *structural contradictions*, refers to the internal contradictions of international society itself, when its institutions contradict one another, producing unavoidable disruptions and tensions. These structural contradictions can be at a deep structural level, in contradictions between primary institutions, or they can be at super-structural level, in contradictions between secondary institutions. These three types or categories of explanations of the sources of international disorder found in the literature of the English School are broad and overlapping, but they all suggest that the English School has offered a distinctly sociological set of explanations for the sources of international disorder, as well as order.

First, discussions of hierarchy conflicts in the literature of the English School are numerous. The idea of international society as a constraining and moderating order of institutional rules and norms has been challenged by internal critics, who see international society's hierarchies as sources of disorder as well as order (Keene 2004). Suzuki, for instance, argues that international society has had a "Janus" quality, facing order on one side and disorder on the other. Considering the case of Japan, he argues that

if European International Society is supposed to have the effect of mitigating global disorder by promoting the mutual respect of sovereign independence, why did disorder—namely increased war or imperialism—take place *after* Japan's encounter with this Society? A better explanation of these questions obliges us to look beyond the intellectual constraints of conventional English School scholarship. (Suzuki 2005, 146)

Imperialism in international society as such manifests violence that disrupts and destabilizes local orders, while it also generates disruptive manifestations of counter-imperial resistance.

This literature has also explained and understood the "expansion" of international society as a source of not only order but also disorder, in its complex configurations of hierarchy conflicts (Bull and Watson 1984; Keene 2004; Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017). The literature of the "standards of civilization" has explored the imperial disorders justified by standards in the maintenance of modern international society (Gong 1984; Donnelly 1998; Fidler 2001; Stivachtis 2008; Buzan 2014b; Stroikos 2014, 2020; Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017; Linklater 2017). Historical studies in this literature suggest that the stratification of racial, gendered, and capitalist imperial hierarchies of modern international society generated disorder on a global scale, in their imposition and resistance, the consequences of which still manifest disorder and deeply configure world politics today. Weberian concepts of stratification conflict and legitimation crises have also been deployed in English School works on the emergence of international order and its contestation in hierarchical international clubs (Clark 2011; Goh 2013; Naylor 2018). The study of hierarchical orders in this sense explores how disorder is generated when stratified powers and authorities fall into legitimation crises.

Second, political value conflicts as a source of disorder in world politics is another major theme in this literature. Hurrell suggests, "The dangers of disorder are particularly pressing at the international level because of the weakness of international institutions above the state and because of the sheer range and diversity of values that exist across the world" (Hurrell 2021, 33). The explanation for why institu-

tions (meaning international organizations) are weak and limited at the international level, in this approach, is not simply the lack of their rational or sufficient organization, as liberal internationalist theory might suggest; international institutions are weak and limited in international society rather because of underlying value conflicts in world politics. For an English School approach, because the range of agreement on the values and purposes for which international organizations are enabled and constrained is so limited, so are the capabilities that states are willing to invest in organizations (Knudsen and Navari 2019). Counter-intuitively, from an international society perspective, value conflict is not only a major reason for why international organizations are limited, but also one of the reasons why they are needed, to provide stability to value conflicts that threaten to manifest outbreaks of disorder. Treaties and mechanisms of nuclear arms control, for example, are necessary and more conducive to order than disarmament, Bull argued, because political value conflict underpins the procurement and deployment of nuclear arms (Bull 1961, 1976). Without arms control, in this view, conflict over political values is liable to manifest excessive disorder, in arms races prone to crisis and strategic miscalculation.

Closely related to the idea of political value conflict as a source of disorder in this literature is the idea of conflict between culturally diverse values and their practices. Two ways of understanding cultural diversity and its relation to order and disorder have emerged in this literature. Some classic international society scholars argued that cultural diversity increases value diversity, and thereby potential for more value conflict (Kedouri 1984). This view suggests that through decolonization, the "global imperial order of insiders and outsiders deteriorates into an incoherent global disorder where everyone is inside" (Buzan 2010, 9). A second and more accepted strain adopts a "syncretist" or "cultural complexity" outlook that assumes that cultures are overlapping, mutually influencing, and internally diverse (Buzan 2010; Reus-Smit 2018; Phillips and Reus-Smit 2020). This latter and now more accepted view does not dismiss the notion that value conflicts can emerge and manifest disorder, but neither does it view such outcomes as inevitable between cultures.

Political value conflict in international society is understood to have two potential depths, either at a revisionist surface depth or at a deep structural revolutionary depth. Revisionist political value conflicts concern secondary institutions, rules, and norms, but political value conflict at a deep structural level is understood to manifest conflict between revolutionary actors seeking to overturn the deep ordering logics and primary institutions of international society itself. At a deep structural level, in other words, there can be more serious and radical political value conflict over constitutive ordering principles. For Bull, in Buzan's reading, because such "principles are usually zero-sum, contestation equals disorder" (Buzan 2014a, 98). Disorder in international society can take on the depth of a revolutionary struggle over its deep ordering principles, arguably for example in the Second World War, and arguably in the Cold War too, waged not only over the survival of several states and empires, or hegemony alone, but also over the deep ordering principles of the modern states system.

Wight's taxonomy of political traditions in this literature has provided shorthand categories for understanding a range of value positions in the politics of international society (Wight 1992). International theories as value-laden ideas about the world are also thought of in this picture as conflicting in the world, when championed by political actors.

Revolutionaries on the one hand, for Wight, prioritize values of justice, for humankind as a whole, where realists, on the other hand, are said to prioritize national security and power, as means to nationally valued ends. Between these Wight presented the politically moderate middle-ground “rationalists,” or Grotians, prioritize a minimal degree of order, as a partly instrumental value, without which it is suggested that other important values are unobtainable and meaningless.

Third, the structural contradictions of international society have been another source of international disorder identified in this literature. Even if there were consensus on international ordering purposes and values, that is, if these values are themselves in contradiction at times, then disorder may be unavoidable, even in the best of times. Keene, for instance, has explored how, historically, “Toleration and civilization were fundamentally different purposes of international order, and the effort to realize both at the same time has led to serious tensions, or even contradictions, in the internal structure of the contemporary international political and legal framework” (Keene 2004, 148). The institutions of international law, the balance of power, great power management, and war, moreover, do not always fit neatly together in application. Their application in practice needs to be negotiated and given different priorities at different times, in different contexts, in the maintenance of international order, virtually always with certain costs, trade-offs, and potential for unintended consequences.

Realist critics have argued that the English School has provided little insight into the disordering effects of uncertainty and fear in strategic interaction, as opposed to realist approaches that see causal significance in such things (Copeland 2003). This is a critique of misunderstanding, however, because strategic interaction in international society is not simply material capabilities’ calculation based on uncertain intent and fear of strategic reversals and surprise attacks, as realists see it. Rather, strategic interactions and their political stakes are only meaningful in the context of international society, where the perception and misperception of the “tells” of actors’ intentions (Goffman 1969) are made meaningful and even intelligible only within the context of the rules and norms of international society (Dunne 2001).¹ Strategic interaction in international society is not simply material maneuver, calculation, and miscalculation; it is this, but it is also simultaneously politically meaningful *within* international society, because political values as well as interests are at stake in strategic gains and losses. War, after all, is a political act and political instrument, as Clausewitz argued (Howard 2019; Coker 2021). Interaction across what Raymond Aron referred to as the “strategic-diplomatic chessboard” of international relations is a game of move anticipations, as well as expectations and signals over the rules of the game itself. If an actor betrays purely material-based intent, perceived in tells of rhetoric and action, that itself is meaningful and politically significant within the context of international society, because it is a rejection of the existence of any shared (albeit minimal) purposes that rules aim to uphold, and so can carry diplomatic costs that statespersons often strive to avoid. An international society approach, as such, does not revert to realism in the explanation of disorder, but rather offers a broader and arguably more

insightful and promising collection of broadly sociological explanations.

The international society approach as such offers a set of sociological explanations of disorder in world politics, as well as a distinct concept of it, even if there is some internal diversity within the English School on the precise way forward (Wilson 2016; Dunleavy 2019; Bevir and Hall 2020; Buzan 2020; Costa-Buranelli 2020). There are broad social and meta-theoretical concepts and causal claims shared across constructivism, critical theory, and the English School, while the English School’s prioritization of the concept of “international society” offers a distinct framing picture of disorder in world politics (Reus-Smit 2002; Neumann 2003). In this outlook, “international society is not wholly disordered. Sometimes states may find life nasty and brutish, but not always; and only infrequently is it short” (James 1973, 64). An international society perspective conveys an understanding closer to (although in no way synonymous with) a Humean image of a social order as always being present, historically, meaning that disorder is emergent from order, and in ways produced and generated by it (Van der Haar 2008; Mayall 2009; Kratochwil 2018, 373, 423).² Realist approaches in contrast suggest disorder manifests in the entropic breakdown of order (Schweller 2014), which unduly equates its sources with a diffusion of power, missing the larger picture of how orders themselves shape the conditions, political stakes, and meaning of disorder. An international society perspective, with its collection of “societal” explanations, offers a distinct and arguably more insightful and promising approach to explaining and understanding the sources of disorder in world politics.

Analytical Utility?

But what analytical utility if any does the concept of disorder have for an international society approach? What role if any does this concept play in English School theory? My argument in this section is that its main analytical utility and theoretical role in this literature is the assessment of international society’s continued viability as a path to order in world politics. To say that “disorder will not be unleashed and world order will survive” (Navari and Knudsen 2022, 1), by virtue of international society, is not exactly the same thing as evincing that sufficient order will continue to exist, or that the emerging order will be of the qualitative kind and character needed to meet common interests. Leveraging the concept of disorder further, moreover, is also useful for the analysis of the extent to which international society itself is among the major sources of disorder in world politics.

The study of the sources of order in world politics has been the primary research agenda of the international society approach, from its classic to contemporary scholars (Suganami 2003, 2010). In this research agenda, the assessment of the continued viability of international society as a path to order in world politics has been a question logically following from the consideration of its sources. Has the framework of international society provided for the minimum requirements of order, and will it continue to do so in future, or are there alternative more viable paths to order in world politics? Bull first clearly advanced this kind of further assessment within the English School literature. He was not dogmatically committed to international society as a path to order (Humphreys 2020) and suggested that it is “a

¹ An international society approach in this sense is not a predictive theory, as Copeland (2003) challenged it to be. An international society approach instead explains strategic-diplomatic interaction through pluralistic qualitative methods including ideal-type *counter-factual* analysis, which set up *expectations* rather than *predictions* of what moves actors will take, in strategic-diplomatic interaction (Bull 1966; Navari 2009; Neumann 2012; Wilson 2012).

² The intellectual sources of the international society tradition are wider and older than Humean thought (Dunne 1998; Navari 2021b).

standing question whether world order might not be better served by such other forms" (Bull 2002, 21). For Bull, the viability of international society as a path to order "stands in need of continual reassessment" (Bull 2002, 308).

By the assessment of the viability of international society as a path to order in world politics, Bull meant the consideration of deep structural alternatives to it, not superficial modifications (Bull 2002, 225). While it goes beyond this article to conduct such an assessment, and while alternative hierarchical world order models such as the world state are widely considered to potentially pose greater sources of disorder, to conflict with other values, and to be presently infeasible, various alternative moderate and mixed models suggest distributing political authority and responsibility more widely than the great power-centric model of contemporary international society (McKeil 2022b). While a solidarist international society path to order (Hurrell 2007b) may also appear to be more elusive today, "deep" pluralist (Buzan and Acharya 2019) or modified pluralist (Reus-Smit 2021) world society models (McKeil 2018; Stivachtis and McKeil 2018) potentially offer alternative paths in the post-Western order's medium-term future. To consider alternative models, however, assessing the viability of international society as a path to order needs to be gauged against the analysis of the sources, character, and intensity of disorder within and surrounding it.

Such an analysis is arguably needed, given the considerable disorder manifest in contemporary international society, in the crisis of the "liberal" international order, revisionist war and returned prospect of great power war, a populist "revolt against globalism," a declining nuclear order and limited cyber order, a poorly managed global pandemic, and the encroaching consequences of mismanaged climate change (Little and Williams 2006; Kello 2017; Falkner 2021; Friedner Parrat and Spandler 2021; Hurrell 2021; Falkner and Buzan 2022). In explaining these manifestations of disorder, furthermore, if international society itself were assessed to be among the major sources of disorder in world politics, as a self-defeating path, then the consideration of alternative paths to order in world politics would become unavoidable.

Conclusion

Although this literature has been preoccupied with the study of order in world politics, it contains a distinctive approach to understanding the concept of international disorder, as well as a collection of "societal" explanations of it. The framework of international society and its set of explanations arguably offers a more insightful and promising approach than realist alternatives, for making sense of increasing international and global disorders in world politics today. Advancing this line of research is useful, moreover, for the assessment of international society's continued viability as a path to order in world politics.

In reflecting on Bull's contributions to this literature, R.J. Vincent asked, "Why this priority given to order in international relations?" To which he suggested, "Partly perhaps because of the unprecedentedly grave threat of disorder in contemporary international politics" (Vincent 1990, 39). Perhaps this is correct, that it has been a concern for disorder—rather than blindness to it—that has made order a priority interest for Bull and the literature of the international society approach in general. Yet, where this literature argues against the existence of a "Hobbesian" war of all against all, while also cautioning against the perils of revolutionary upheaval, the continued viability of international

society as a path to order in world politics should receive the same critical scrutiny.

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