



Chris Brown

### World society and the English School : an 'international society' perspective on world society

Originally published in the European journal of international relations,  
7 (4). pp. 423-441 © 2001 European Consortium for Political Research,  
SAGE Publications.

**You may cite this version as:**

Brown, Chris (2001). World society and the English School : an  
'international society' perspective on world society [online]. London:  
LSE Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/archive/00000743>

Available online: April 2006

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the publisher's version remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

'World Society and the English School: An 'International Society' Perspective on World Society'

*European Journal of International Relations* Vol 7, No. 4 2001 pp 423-441

## **Introduction:**

The aim of this essay is to stage a series of engagements between the English School's notion of an 'international society' and a variety of alternative conceptions of world or global society, including Luhmann's modern systems theory (MST). In this introduction the provenance of the approach will be addressed, in particular the relationship between English School thinking and 'realism'. A central tenet of the modern English School (hereafter ES) is that a clear distinction between realism and the ES can be established. That position, which is shared by recent attempts to re-vitalise the ES (here termed the New ES), is contested in what follows (Buzan, 1999).

There is general agreement that the Rockefeller-funded 'British Committee on the theory of international politics', formed in the 1950s constituted a kind of institutional core for the original ES (Dunne, 1998). This committee, to which Hedley Bull later acted as secretary and whose most influential member, arguably, was, Martin Wight, met, exchanged essays, and in 1966 published what is still the most impressive collection to be focused on their master-concept of 'international society', *Diplomatic Investigations* (Butterfield and Wight, 1966). In the 1970s, other collections were published, as well as Bull's major study of *The Anarchical Society*; Wight's post-war essay, *Power Politics*, was republished posthumously in an expanded edition, along with his influential essays on *Systems of States* (Donelan, 1978; Bull, 1977; Wight, 1977, 1978).

Although these are the founding documents of the ES, they were written *before* the term was coined, in a hostile essay by Roy Jones in 1981, and subsequently accepted by a second generation of scholars as a somewhat geographically imprecise intellectual identity (Jones, 1981).

Jones drew a distinction between the ES writers and classical realism, and this distinction has been adopted by such second generation authors as Nicholas Wheeler and Tim Dunne, as well as, in a different way, by the group of scholars - the New ES – associated with Barry Buzan and Richard Little who are attempting today to redefine the ES as a distinctive research programme (Buzan, 1993 & 1999; Buzan and Little, 2000; Dunne, 1995 & 1999; Wheeler, 1992 & 2000). The second generation visualise the ES as distinctively ploughing a middle way between realist and utopian formulations, with its key concept of ‘international society’ occupying a space between the ‘international system’ of realism and the ‘world community’ of utopianism, and while the New ES are less wedded to this middle way, they agree that the ES is not realist in any conventional sense (Brown, 1995).

As will be outlined in the next section, the notion of an international society does impart a particular spin to notions such as the ‘balance of power’, but, arguably, this spin operates within, essentially, a classical realist frame of reference. Certainly, in the 1960s and 1970s, authors such as Raymond Aron, Bull, Carr, Inis Claude, George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, Wight, and Arnold Wolfers were read as such without any great sense that the British-based members of this set had a position which clearly distinguished them from Aron or the ‘Americans’. Rather, the key contrast was between *all* of these writers on the one hand, and the advocates of the behavioural revolution in the social sciences on the other. The behavioural approach to IR was slammed by Bull in a much-anthologised paper mistitled ‘The Case for a Classical Approach’ - actually a root-and-branch attack on ‘scientism’, anathematising all model-building and attempts to quantify data (Bull, 1969). The classical/scientific divide was partly about methods but also about substance, some ‘scientists’ being less state-centric than most ‘classical’ scholars; it ran throughout the profession in the UK, where the ‘scientists’ were generally a minority, accused by the majority of seeking abstraction for its own sake, quantifying inappropriately, and, generally,

being too influenced by American behavioural science. The scientists in turn accused their accusers of resorting to anecdote rather than proper history, of a characteristically British high cultural ignorance of scientific method and basic statistics, and, generally, of reducing the study of IR to a branch of *belles lettres*.

This was a serious debate which reflected a real division of opinion in international studies, especially in Britain, but no such divide was perceived between theorists of international society and the other realists listed above. Morgenthau's approach to the balance of power might have been marginally different from that of Bull and Wight but these differences were not seen as defining distinct approaches to international relations. Wight's influential identification of 'three traditions of international theory' delineates 'realism' from both 'rationalism' and 'revolutionism', but the proposition that the international society approach is particularly associated with the second of these traditions – a proposition held by later adherents to the ES such as Nicholas Wheeler – is difficult to sustain from his or Bull's writings (Wight, 1991: e.g. Wheeler, 1992). An 'English School Realist' is not an oxymoron.

Why then has the idea that the ES, international society perspective is distinct from realism come to be widely accepted? Here a new factor must be brought into play. Kenneth Waltz, author of *Man, the State and War* (1959), and former secretary of the American equivalent of the British Committee was seen as a classical realists in the 1960s and 1970s and it was not anticipated then that the argument of this book, when reworked and repackaged in 1979 to constitute *Theory of International Politics*, would prove to be the foundation document for a major restatement of realist thinking. In this restatement, traditional realist conceptions such as the balance of power were married to the methodology of rational choice theory, itself the end-result of the behavioural revolution's impact on American political science, in order to create structural (or neo-) realism. It was not until Richard Ashley's brilliant polemic 'the Poverty of

Neorealism' (1984) that the extent to which Waltz's ideas (possibly against his will, see Waltz, 1997) would become the basis for neo-utilitarian IR theory was understood.

In any event, the emergence of structural realism, and the way in which its problematic came to dominate US academic International Relations, raised interesting issues about the relationship between this new mode of thought and the realism of the pre-1979 era. In effect, older realists have been divided into two camps – those who can plausibly be regarded as prototypical neo-realists, and those who cannot. Who falls into which camp is, of course, disputable but, broadly speaking, it is more difficult to assimilate to neo-realism those past realists who stressed notions such as culture, identity, norms and agency – and these are themes that characterise the work of the ES. On this basis, the relatively marginal (albeit significant) actual differences between Bull's *Anarchical Society* and Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* can be elevated into major points of principle; the ES approach becomes a way (one way) of preserving the classical heritage of IR theory from the ravages of rational choice theory. And when the neo-utilitarianism of rational choice IR theory created the reaction now termed 'constructivism', the constructivists with *their* stress on agency, culture, identity and rules have recognised their affinity with the ES (Wendt, 1999: Dunne, 1995). The New ES writers, while less radically hostile to neorealist formulations than their predecessors still retain this distinctive focus.

The point of this discussion is to situate international society theory and the ES; contrary to some of its adherents, the work of the ES cannot be easily distinguished from realism – indeed, in so far as it gives voice to the conventional wisdom about statecraft accumulated over the last three and a half centuries (a much wider European experience of international relations than the sobriquet 'English' would suggest), it can claim to be closer to traditional realism than the structural variety of the latter currently dominant.

## **The Distinctive Features of International Society Theory**

If there is one proposition that most ES theorists, with the exception of some members of the New ES, *can* agree on, it is that their referent object is not ‘world society’ but a ‘society of states’, an ‘international society’. ES theorists do not necessarily deny that there exist the kinds of patterns of social interactions that have led others to talk of a world society, indeed, they do not necessarily object to the latter term itself; rather, their point is that these patterns take place in a context provided by a nexus of inter-state relations, and it is this context, the society of states, that is the proper focus for study. So much is agreed, but the idea of a ‘society of states’ requires exegesis.

The first point that needs to be stressed, especially in the context of this volume, is that the noun ‘society’ and the adjective ‘social’ are used by IS theorists in ways that most sociologists would frown upon. Sociologists tend to regard ‘society’ as conveying something highly significant and specific about the relationships it summarises – this is, perhaps, particularly true for Parsonian sociology and MST. For IS theorists the term is used much more loosely; the ‘society of states’ means little more than an association of states whose mutual relationships are norm-governed. This loose sense of the term society may upset sociologists, but as long as they realise that this is a term of art (a placeholder even) without the connotations their *Fach* would insist upon, mutual understanding need not be impeded.

The state-centric notion of an international society stands against the notion of an international system; both societies and systems are characterised by the existence of regularities (otherwise neither could exist) but in an international society these regularities are held to be norm-governed, whereas, in an international system, they are understood as the product simply of objective forces. To illustrate this distinction, consider briefly Bull and Waltz on the balance of

power. For Waltz, the balance of power *is* the *Theory of International Politics*; balances are what *may* happen when states, seeking survival, respond to changes in the capabilities of other states – there is no guarantee that balances *will*, actually, emerge, but since states do not wish to suffer the damage which is a likely consequence of allowing another state to gain preponderance there is a tendency for balancing behaviour to take place (Waltz, 1979). No-one actually wants to create a balance of power; it occurs, if it occurs, as an unintended consequence of the anarchy problematic. Bull examines this possibility and dismisses it; such a balance would be ‘fortuitous’ and unstable (Bull, 1977: 100). Balances of power will only exist if a significant number of powerful states choose to create and sustain them. The choice of and for a balance of power is not simply the product of a neo-utilitarian calculation to the effect that other strategies (predominance, band-wagoning, indifference) are non-viable at a reasonable cost – which would be consistent with neo-realist analysis – but rather is based on the positive position that the preservation of a society of states is desirable in its own terms. A balance of power ultimately rests on the self-restraint of states, and not simply on their ability to restrain others. In practice, there is only a small difference here between Bull and Waltz; in policy terms they would almost always produce the same advice, and a rational Waltzian world would be barely distinguishable from a norm-governed Bullian world. But the difference in terms of the structure of the argument is quite sharp.

IS theorists agree that the preservation of a society of states is desirable. Why? Bull suggests that a balance of power is an important feature of an international order, but order as such can hardly be the goal of a society of states; it makes very little sense to think of preserving an order simply because it is an order. Rather there must be something substantive about a society of states that is desirable. Here the relationship between IS and various conceptions of the *Good* becomes important.

On one account, a society of states is desirable because it constitutes a rational political order for humanity taken as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Human flourishing requires social intercourse which in turn requires political order, that is, a context within which the general arrangements of society can be attended to, laws made and enforced, hard cases adjudicated. Problems of scale alone would make a single global political order impossible. Laws lose their effectiveness at a distance, and tyranny is less likely if political society occurs on a human scale. Thus, a multiplicity of political authorities – a society of states – is the best arrangement for realising the good for humanity taken as a whole. As Bull puts it, on this account, states are local agents of the common good. This approach to the society of states is to be found, amongst other places, in those eighteenth century writers who referred to the Europe of the day as ‘one great republic;’ the existence of separate states preserved the ‘liberties’ of each, but within a framework that provided the opportunity for the flourishing of all. This conception of a society of states does not, it should be noted, support a strong doctrine of sovereignty, and is, for example, consistent with the current international human rights regime. If the *telos* of international society is to promote human flourishing and, sovereign rights cannot be used as an argument to support tyranny.

A related but contrasting account, also with some Aristotelian roots, but given a particularist spin, argues that the justification for a society of states is that it allows for the flourishing of *different* conceptions of the Good. International society is a practical association which is not to be associated with any particular understanding of the requirements of human flourishing. These requirements differ from place to place – the good society rests upon the shared understandings of members of a political community rather than on natural reason, and the purpose of a society of states is to allow these shared understandings to develop. This position has been well articulated by Terry Nardin, who adapts Michael Oakeshott’s distinction between a ‘civil association’ and an ‘enterprise association’ in order to argue that international society is

analogous to the former, that is as a ‘practical association’ which allows states to co-exist in conditions of peace and justice (Oakeshott 1975: Nardin, 1983). Justice, in this context it should be noted, is to be understood in Oakeshottian terms as ‘procedural’ (fair rules applied fairly) rather than ‘distributive’ and is clearly related to classical conceptions of international law. Such an approach is less obviously tied to a European, Christian view of the world (which may be a major advantage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) more favourable to a strong doctrine of sovereignty, and somewhat sceptical of the legitimacy of an international human rights regime which is liable to rest upon one particular conception of the Good.

Neither version of a the justification for international society is compatible with the neo-realist vision of the world. The society of states has a *telos*, there is a reason why we have and need an international society, whereas, from a neo-realist perspective, the existence of plural political authorities is contingent – it just happens to be the case that we have an anarchical system, everything else follows from this. There is much more that might be said about these issues, - and a certain ambiguity about the notion that international society is norm-governed will be explored below - but further points may perhaps best be made by reference to the contrast not between IS theory and neo-realism, but between a society of states and the many different notions of world society.

### **International Society and the ‘Cobweb’ Model of World Society**

IS theorists have not engaged with Stanford School notions of world society, nor with Luhmann’s modern systems theory, but John Burton’s notion of ‘world society’ was, in the 1960s and 70s, a subject of great interest and hostility to the British IS theorists of the day, and, even though Burtonianism is not longer a major force, this engagement is worth considering for what it might tell us about world society more generally.,

Burton and his colleagues (especially Michael Banks, A.J.R. Groom and Christopher Mitchell) were simultaneously regarded as the London representatives of the behavioural revolution, and, rather more plausibly, as the proponents of a substantive view of global politics radically at odds with the IS perspective (Burton et al, 1974). IS theorists had no particular objection to the idea that it was possible to identify the kinds of ‘cobwebs’ that Burton’s analysis was based on; a world society in the sense of such a network of social relationships could happily co-exist with a society of states, indeed, Bull identifies just such a phenomenon, and the New ES is very interested in its dynamics (Bull, 1977: 269). But, crucially, Burtonian analysis denied the possibility of such a coexistence, arguing instead that insofar as there was an inter-state *system*, it was non-social, and parasitic on world society. The dispute here revolves around fundamentals: the nature of the state, the role of power in social life and the origins of conflict.

From Burton’s perspective, conflict is a subjective phenomenon, always dysfunctional and always avoidable. There is no such thing as an objective conflict of interests; conflicts occur because individuals pursue incompatible goals/values, but there is no reason why they should not adjust their goals/values until they become completely compatible, in which case conflict is resolved (Burton, 1969 & 1979). Since conflict is dysfunctional and avoidable, it is reasonable to ask why it is such a endemic feature of social life. Burton’s answer to this question rests on his account of the state. Systems of action, he argues, are, in principle, self-adjusting; the participants in ‘normal’ social systems have no way of effectively resisting the pressures to adjust when change takes place. The privileged will engage in role defence, but unsuccessfully, because they have access only to resources within the system itself; they are obliged to change their goals/values to make them compatible with those of others. Role-defence is a universal phenomenon, but role defenders lack power, power being defined as *the capacity to resist change*. So why does conflict occur? Because some systems of action are not ‘normal’:

administrative-political systems, i.e. states, cut across the boundaries of other systems of action, and claim the right to administer and regulate those systems within specific physical (as opposed to systemic) boundaries. States *do* have power, that is, the capacity to resist change, to act non-systemically – or at least think they do – and in the exercise of this power they *create* conflict.<sup>2</sup> This position can be summarised by a number of propositions, each contested by all varieties of IS theory.

First, all so-called international conflict is the result of the internationalising of domestic conflict. There is no such thing as a ‘security dilemma’; notions such as the balance of power are fictions serving the interests of state bureaucrats. Clearly IS theorists would not subscribe to the idea that *all* international conflict has domestic roots. Second, it is the state that creates conflict via its ability to resist change. Power is vested in the state and only in the state, because only the state has the capacity to employ non-systemic forces in order to resist change. From an IS perspective this is plain wrong; power is a feature of all social relationships and although the sovereign state may hold a monopoly of the legitimate exercise of force this does not mean it is the sole holder of power. Third, the state is, thus, the problem not the solution; in the absence of state power conflict would not arise, or would disappear, problems would be solved ‘systemically’ i.e. without resort to non-systemic resources. This applies to apparent conflicts over material resources, but also to the politics of ‘identity’ – from a Burtonian perspective, identity is a central need of individuals but a need that can be met without conflict. That identity often seems a source of conflict is misleading – it is the use of state power to buttress an identity that creates conflict.

IS theorists vehemently resisted this latter conclusion. A variety of different understandings of the nature of the state are compatible with an IS perspective, from the liberal notion that the state is the solution to certain problems of collective action through to the more

positive role assigned to the institution by Hegelians (and Kantians), but the notion that the state actually *creates* problems simply will not do. Burton denied that he was an anarchist, arguing instead that what he sought were ‘legitimate’ states, but it was difficult to see how his notion of legitimacy, which rested on the acceptance of the authority of the state by all its citizens, could plausibly be met.

As this sketch of the issues indicates, the confrontation between Burton’s vision of a World Society and the ES notion of an international society was more or less total. Indeed, in some respects Burton’s position was closer to that of a hard-line realist than to that of an IS theorist. His account of the state as simply a concentration of power, his belief that international law represented the will of the strong, his rejection of the idea that inter-state relations could be norm-governed and his scepticism towards international institutions all aligned him much more closely with the kind of extreme power politics that even the more ‘realist’ inclined IS theorists wanted to distance themselves from.

What is rather more difficult to predict is what the relationship between Burtonian world society theory and IS theory would have been had Burton’s formulations been rather less uncompromising, had he argued, for example, not that ‘all’, but ‘most’, or even ‘almost all’ conflict is of domestic origin? A Burtonian analysis combined with an openness towards different perspectives at the inter-state level might well have been able to strike a *modus vivendi* with ES thinking. As noted above, there is nothing inherent to ES thinking that leads to the denial that a world society could exist. What is at stake is the role (and relative importance) of a society of states as a subset, or special case, of such a world society. The pluralist, ‘complex interdependence’ school which flourished briefly in the 1970s treated conventional interstate relations as just such a special case. However, complex interdependence had a more conventional notion of power than that proposed by Burtonians. The Burtonian notion of ‘non-systemic’

behaviour – that is, failing to handle problems from the perspective of the system in which they occur, employing resources from other contexts in order to resist change – is difficult to fit into an IS perspective, and in so far as ‘world society’ is tied up with such a conception of power there is little chance of a meeting of minds. But is it? The Frankfurt-Darmstadt conception of world society (on which see, for example, Albert *et al* 2000) while sympathetic to Burtonian ideas is also open to an engagement with the ES. In effect, these scholars – who, not coincidentally, are more attuned to changes in the world economy than was Burtonian thought in the 1960s and 1970s – are taking up the notion of a world society of individuals identified by Bull and working through what such a society would mean for the society of states in a way that Bull never did. Second, however, there are contemporary writers on ‘world society’ who are relatively untouched by Burtonian thought, and the next sections of this essay will examine their work.

### **International Society and Contemporary Theories of World Society**

Non-Burtonian notions of world society, as developed by the ‘so-called’ Stanford School or, in the form of the ‘society of society’, by MST, have not attracted the attention of ES theorists, but we can still ask whether these newer notions can engage constructively with ES thinking. A structurally similar question can be posed from the other direction. ‘Stanford’ and MST have had some engagement with conventional international relations theory, but the theory in question is almost always ‘realism’, which, in this context is taken to encompass modern neo-realism, its classical realist precursors, and, sometimes, its modern ‘constructivist’ critics. The notion of a society of states as developed by Bull, Wight *et al* is rarely subjected to scrutiny. This neglect may be simply a matter of non-exposure to ‘English School’ thinking or it may be that, in so far as the latter is known, it is taken to be covered by the broad notion of ‘realism’. In other words,

the idea of an international *society* is taken to be a rather loose, sociologically imprecise, way of describing the inter-state *system*. As suggested above, this (implicit) equation of IS theory with realism may not in fact be unreasonable, but a question remains. Just as we need to ask whether contemporary theorists of world society are interestingly and relevantly different from Burtonian analysis, so we need to ask whether the neglect of IS theory by those contemporary theorists can be justified.

At the level of ontology, the gap between IS theory and both Stanford and MST appears great, indeed possibly unbridgeable. At a first approximation, ES thinkers take ‘the state’ to be ontologically prior to the ‘society of states’. Certainly, a major proposition of most IS theorists is that it is quite possible, probable indeed, that ‘states’ (using the term loosely to describe any territorially-based political unit) can exist without forming a ‘society’; the work of Martin Wight is instructive here and – although Alan James denies that there is a substantive difference between ‘system’ and society’ – expressive of a near-consensus (Wight, 1977; James, 1993). Moreover this is one area where ES theory and neo-realism make contact with each other – see, for example, Robert Gilpin’s defence of realism which stresses the ontological primacy of the group (Gilpin, 1984). Contemporary world society theory sees things radically differently. The ‘Stanford’ approach stresses the extent to which states are shaped by world-wide cultural and associational processes, and thus clearly assigns ontological priority to world society as such; ontology is a complex issue in MST, which Albert in this volume describes as ‘anti-ontological’, but the very notion of a self-reflective, autopoetic, system would tell against any notion of the primacy of the components of a system (which, in any event, are not states). There is, thus, a difference between both of these (very different approaches) and IS theory. But is this a difference that makes a difference? Not, perhaps, as much as one might have expected in the case of the Stanford School.

Although Stanford writers argue that nation-state identities, structures and behaviours are shaped by world society, this does not imply that for them states are weak actors, or that their behaviour is directly determined by world societal factors, that they have no positive role in meeting the needs of their populations, that they are the sole wielders of power in world society or, always, the source of conflict in world society – in other words, Stanford’s account of world society carries very few Burtonian over/under-tones. Rather, the proposition is that ‘.....world culture celebrates, expands, and standardises strong but culturally somewhat tamed national actors’ (Meyer et al, 1997, 173) a proposition to which most IS theorists could happily give substantial assent. A feature of the ‘society of states’ is that it also ‘tames’ national actors, socialising them to behave in particular kinds of ways. In the nineteenth century this was known as imposing the ‘standards of civilisation’ on regimes that did not practice the rule of law, or respect property rights in ways that the members of the, then predominantly European, society of states considered adequate; ‘cultural taming’ is a rather good, albeit somewhat euphemistic, term to describe this process (Gong, 1984). And, as in the case of the Stanford School, IS theory does not suggest that this process of socialisation turns states into weak actors, lacking in autonomy. Rather the proposition is that the self-restraint involved in being a member of the society of states, the willingness to accept certain authoritative practices of law and diplomacy, is ultimately a source of strength. Reversing the matter, one of the points of Wight’s studies of pre-modern systems of states was that the members of these systems may have been less constrained by such practices but actually were less secure, less capable of assuring their own survival as a result (Wight, 1977).

The Stanford School and the English School are not saying the same thing here, but in terms of their practical implications the two approaches are not always and necessarily incompatible. This connection may be due to the existence in both bodies of thought of

‘structurationist’ tendencies. From an IS point of view, states are ontologically prior to the society of states and there is no sense that they are constituted by that society – this is in contrast to a fully systemic theory such as that of Wallerstein, where the actors are understood as created by the system (Wallerstein, 1974). On the other hand, membership of a society of states is clearly understood to change somewhat the character of the state – how much this character is changed is a matter of dispute between the various branches of IS theory, but that there is some change seems undeniable. In other words there is a sense in which the state and the society of states are seen as ‘co-constituted’; it is this position that establishes a link between IS theory and ‘constructivism’, and establishes the difference between IS theory and constructivism on the one hand, and neo-realism on the other, the latter being committed to the idea that the collective identities of actors are irrelevant to their international behaviour. Constructivists may put much more stress on the importance of collective identity than IS theorists, but the underlying mechanism of co-constitution is present in both approaches (Dunne, 1995; Wendt, 1999). And, it seems, in the Stanford School’s approach to world society. Stanford may have a different starting point here (society rather than the state) but the shaping process is, surely, not in one direction only. The state is shaped by world society, but in turn shapes that society. The differences of emphasis here between Stanford and the IS approach are considerable, but there is an underlying compatibility.

A further element of compatibility between Stanford and IS theory lies in the role of international institutions (in the broad sense of that term). The Stanford approach places a great deal of stress on the role of institutions in building up the fabric of world society. This stress on the constructive role of institutions is wholly compatible with IS theory, most variants of which are happy to stress the importance of institutions in the broad sense of regular patterns of behaviour – the society of states could not exist without such regularity. From an IS point of view

‘institutions’ would include such practices as the balance of power (and, possibly, international war), which may not be where world society theorists would look, but, again, there is an underlying compatibility of approach here.

In summary, Stanford School theorists of world society are already interested in constructivism, and this interest might well be expanded profitably to include the International Society theorists. By the same token, ES theorists ought to pay more attention to the sociological approach to world society represented by Stanford. Martin Shaw rightly point to the state-centricity of IS theory as a barrier to understanding many social processes important in today’s world, but state-centricity is a defining feature of a ‘society of states’ approach and cannot simply be abandoned (Shaw, 1994). Rather, IS theorists need to be more open to exploring ways in which their state-centricity can be made compatible with the consideration of a wider range of global social interactions; the Stanford approach may provide an opening here which ought not to be as neglected as it has been.

### **Modern Systems Theory and International Society**

It is much more difficult to establish contact between MST and the English School. One of the defining documents of the ES is Bull’s critique of the ‘scientific’ approach to international relations, and one of the targets of that critique was the ‘general systems theory’ of the 1950s, an obvious precursor of Luhmann’s though. Bull saw such theory as excessively abstract, and divorced from the real world of politics, and no doubt he would regard the notion of a ‘society of society’ in the same light. Moreover, this is not simply a case of ignorance leading to dismissal – it is more plausible that the more the ES learnt about MST, the less they would like it!

The fundamental point here is truly basic and concerns Luhmann’s concept of a system.<sup>3</sup> From his perspective, societies are composed of systems which are self-reflective relations of

communication. Human beings are not the components whose interactions create systems, societies are not composed of human beings and thus the ‘society of societies’ is not composed of human beings at one remove. Societies are not normatively integrated. All of this contradicts the implicit ontology of the IS approach, which *does* see the state as in some sense a representative of society, and society as composed of human interactions. Societies generally are seen as normatively integrated, as is the society of states, in this case the normative integration is understood as taking place via the authoritative practices of international law and diplomacy. There is clearly an irreconcilable set of differences here, more stark than is the case with the other conceptions of world society discussed in this paper – even Burtonian analysis wishes to see normative integration taking place at some level (hence the importance of legitimacy to Burton). In short, IS theory, along with other branches of conventional IR theory, is wedded to the very notion of ‘society’ drawn from which Durkheim, Weber and the other founders of sociology that MST specifically rejects. The gap here genuinely is unbridgeable.

Because of this unbridgeable gap, apparent similarities and points of contact between MST and IS theory tend to dissolve under close analysis. Thus, the idea of ‘international society’ might be seen by a modern system theorist as a rather quaint, unsophisticated and misleading way of describing the territorially-differentiated political system of world society which could be corrected and insights produced incorporated by MST. This, however, would be to gloss over two key features of ES thought; on the one hand it would obliterate the distinction between ‘society’ and ‘system’ which, as we have seen, is central to ES thinking, while on the other it would deny the *sui generis* character of the ‘society of states’ – for the ES although states form (or can form) a society, this is a society which is distinctive from other societies, precisely because its members are states and not natural persons. In the context of this volume it hardly

needs to be stressed that every aspect of this position is denied by MST – the very idea that there could be a separate ‘society’ of states is denied in principle by the latter.

### **Conclusion: Norms and the International Society Approach**

The claim that the society of states is norm-governed, denied by modern systems theorists, is regarded as tautological by IS theorists; as noted above, this is what ‘society’ means to ES theorists. There is, however, a certain amount of ambiguity connected to the notion of a ‘norm’ in ES thought. In ordinary language, reference to a norm conveys both the idea of a regular patterns of behaviour (‘a standard, a type: what is expected or regarded as normal, customary behaviour, appearance etc’ *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary*) and the idea that the pattern in question is morally or otherwise desirable. These two meanings are, in principle, separable – IS theory, on the other hand, characteristically allows one meaning to slide into another, without necessarily acknowledging that this is what is happening.

Take, for example, the widely-held proposition that non-intervention is a norm of (classical) international society; is this a statement about what *is* (or at least was) regarded as normal, customary behaviour in international society, or about what *ought to be* regarded as normal, customary behaviour? Since intervening in one another’s affairs has been a more or less constant feature of *actual* state behaviour in the modern period – as Stephen Krasner documents (Krasner, 1999) - it would be difficult to argue the former, but IS theorists are reluctant to acknowledge that when they write about norms they are actually making ‘ought-to-be’ statements. In effect, the two meanings of norms are elided, which causes confusion when there actually is another set of rules in operation – for example, during the Cold War, when ‘normal, customary behaviour’ was to prevent defection from one’s alliance, if this could be done at a reasonable cost.

The best defence of norms in international society employs some Wittgensteinian thoughts on game-playing and the rules of the game; Friedrich Kratochwil's brand of constructivism is particularly relevant here (Kratochwil, 1989 & 1995). Sovereignty is a constitutive rule of international society, rather than something that regulates a pre-existing society of states. Without this rule international society could not exist, hence when actually intervening, states are obliged to explain how such behaviour can be understood in terms of the rules (e.g. as misunderstood, or as a justified exception) because failure to do so would, as it were, end the game – and thereby end the capacity of rulers to claim the status of sovereign since this status only exists by virtue of the existence of international society. Since rulers do not wish to surrender their claim to sovereignty they cannot simply declare that they could and would do anything they could get away with in order to further their interests. This is why such declarations do not take place, and why international society can be seen as rule (sc. norm) governed. This is a compelling argument, and Krasner's response, which is, roughly, that the Westphalia system is not a game and therefore has no constitutive rules, misses the point of this kind of argument; the Westphalia system is a (Wittgensteinian) game because it is played as such, not because of some extra-game attributes observable in the 'real' world (Krasner, 1999). On the other hand, this defence of the reality of norms in international society although successful in its own terms, is much 'thinner' in content than most ES scholars would wish. To get back to the starting point of this digression, does it follow from the existence of such a set of constitutive rules that international society is actually 'normatively integrated'? Not if 'normative integration' implies that this set of rules actually describe the ways in which states behave.

In short, ES theory characteristically uses the same terminology of rules and norms to describe both the ways in which states *actually* behave (a matter for empirical observation) and the way in which they *ought to* behave (the product of a moral discourse). This procedure, when

acknowledged, is justified via an argument about the genesis of norms – norms are assumed to be both the product of the interactions of states and regulative of those interactions. Norms are, in this sense, similar to the rules of positive international law, generated by the practices of states but alleged to govern those practices; it should be noted, however, that this process produces a very ‘thin’ account of international society, and it is not clear how, for example, the thicker – solidarist – international society envisaged by N.J. Wheeler as created by ‘norm-entrepreneurs’ could emerge in this way (Wheeler, 2000).

None of this bring IS theory any closer to MST but it does suggest that one of the key factors that ES writers have regarded as distinctive to their work, and which certainly distinguishes it from Luhmann’s formulations, is a little less well established than they might wish to believe. To this point must be added another: the state-centricity of the ES and the insistence of its founders that international society is *sui generis* looks increasingly under threat in an age of apparent globalization, a point the New ES has recognised by shifting the emphasis of their research programme away from international society (Buzan, 1999). Taken together, these points suggest that both the normative and the empirical framework within which international society is conventionally located is somewhat unstable. This may leave the road open for a re-examination of both the notion of ‘society’ and that of ‘system’, and to this re-examination MST may have something to contribute. Still, as ought to be clear from the above discussion, for the ES human agency has always been, and will, I think, remain, central, and this represents a formidable obstacle for any serious engagement between Luhmann and even the New English School.

## References:

- Albert, Mathias (1999) 'Observing World Politics. Luhmann's Systems Theory of Society and International Relations' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 28 (2): 236-265.
- Albert, Mathias, Lothar Brock and Klaus Dieter Wolf (eds) (2000) *Civilising World Politics*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Ashley, Richard (1984) 'The Poverty of Neorealism' *International Organisation* 38, 225-286.
- Brown, Chris (1995) 'International Theory and International Society: The Viability of the Middle Way' *Review of International Studies*, 21(2) 183-196.
- Bull, Hedley (1969) 'International Theory: the Case for a Classical Approach' in Klaus Knorr and James Rosenau (eds.) *Contending Approaches to International Politics* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bull, Hedley (1977) *The Anarchical Society*. London: Macmillan.
- Burton, John W. (1968) *Systems, States, Diplomacy and Rules*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burton, John W. (1969) *Conflict and Communication: The use of Controlled Communication in International Relations*. New York: Free Press.
- Burton, John W. (1972) *World Society* Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- Burton, John W. et al (1974) *The Study of World Society: A London Perspective* mimeo.
- Burton, John (1979) *Deviance, Terrorism and War* New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Butterfield, Herbert and Martin Wight, (1966) *Diplomatic Investigations* London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Buzan, Barry (1993) 'From international system to international society: structural realism and regime theory meet the English School' *International Organisation* 47 (3) 328-350).
- Buzan, Barry (1999) 'The English School as a Research Programme' Mimeo, BISA Conference, Manchester. (see [www.ukc.ac/englishschool.html](http://www.ukc.ac/englishschool.html))
- Buzan, Barry and Richard Little (2000) *International Systems in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Donelan, Michael (ed.) (1978) *The Reason of States*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Dunne, Tim (1995) 'The Social Construction of International Society' *European Journal of International Relations* 1, (3) 367-89.
- Dunne, Tim (1998) *Inventing International Society*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Finnis, John (1980) *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Frost, Mervyn (1996) *Ethics in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilpin, Robert (1984) 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism' *International Organisation* 38: 287-304.
- Gong, G. C. (1984) *The Standard of 'Civilisation' in International Society* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- James, Alan (1982) 'Michael Nicholson on Martin Wight: a mind passing in the night' *Review of International Studies* 8, (2): 117-124.
- James, Alan (1993) 'System or Society' *Review of International Studies*, 19 (3): 269-288.
- Jones, Roy E. (1981) 'The English School of International Relations: A Case for Closure' *Review of International Studies* 7 (1): 1-14.
- Krasner, Stephen (1999) *Sovereignty: Organised Hypocrisy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kratochwil, Friedrich (1989) *Rules, Norms and Decisions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kratochwil, Friedrich (1995) 'Sovereignty as Dominium' in G. Lyons and M. Mastanduno *Beyond Westphalia: State Sovereignty and Intervention*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press: 21-42.
- Luhmann, Niklas (1997) *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (2 vols). Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

- Meyer, John et al (1997): 'World Society and the Nation State' *American Sociological Review*, 62: 171-190.
- Nardin, Terry (1983) *Law, Morality and the Relations of Nations*. Princeton NJ,: Princeton University Press.
- Nicholson, Michael (1981) 'The Enigma of Martin Wight' *Review of International Studies* 7 (1): 15-22.
- Nicholson, Michael (1982) 'Martin Wight: enigma or error?' *Review of International Studies* 8 (2): 125-128.
- Oakeshott, Michael (1975) *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Shaw, Martin (1994) *Global Society and International Relations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel (1974) *The Modern World System*. London: Academic Press.
- Waltz, Kenneth (1959) *Man, the State and War*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Waltz, Kenneth (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Waltz, Kenneth (1997) 'Evaluating Theories' *American Political Science Review* 91 (4): 913-918.
- Wendt, Alexander (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wheeler, N.J. (1992) 'Pluralist and Solidarist conceptions of International Society: Bull and Vincent on Humanitarian Intervention' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 21 (3): 463-87.
- Wheeler, N.J. (2000) *Saving Strangers* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wight, Martin (1977) *Systems of States*: Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Wight, Martin (1978) *Power Politics* Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Wight, Martin (1991) *International Theory: The Three Traditions*. [Gabrielle Wight and Brian Porter (eds.)] Leicester, Leicester University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> The positions outlined in this and the next paragraph are close to (but not identical with) those of the 'solidarists' and 'pluralists' identified by N.J. Wheeler (Wheeler, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> This account of Burton's theory is based on Burton, 1968, 1969 and 1979: the more extreme implications of these positions are not always apparent in texts such as Burton 1972.

<sup>3</sup> The characterization of Luhmann's systems theory is based on Luhmann (1997) and Albert (1999).