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The English School: history and primary institutions as empirical IR theory?

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THE ENGLISH SCHOOL: HISTORY AND PRIMARY INSTITUTIONS AS EMPIRICAL IR THEORY?

Barry Buzan and George Lawson

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Summary

This paper examines what space there is to think of English School work as part of Empirical International Relations (IR) theory. The English School depends heavily on historical accounts, and the chapter makes the case that history and theory should be seen as co-constitutive rather than as separate enterprises. Empirical IR theorists need to think about their own relationship to this question, and clarify what “historical sensitivity” means to them. The English School offers both distinctive taxonomies for understanding the structure of international society, and an empirically constructed historical approach to identifying the primary institutions that define international society. If Empirical IR is open to historical-interpretive accounts, then its links to the English School are in part strong, because English School structural accounts would qualify, and in part weak, because the normative theory part of the English School would not qualify. Lying behind this judgement is a deeper issue: if Empirical IR theory confines itself to regularity-deterministic causal accounts, then there can be no links to English School work. As such, this chapter demonstrates how taking English School insights seriously helps to open up a wider view of Empirical IR theory.

Keywords: English School, history, norms, primary institutions, taxonomy, theory

The English School as Empirical IR?

Some readers may well wonder what a chapter on the English School is doing in an Encyclopedia of Empirical International Relations (IR) Theories. For the editor of this volume, Bill Thompson, the task of IR theory is to generate empirical, non-normative generalisations. As he puts it, theory should “steer clear of airing explicit normative considerations”. This definition does not sit easily with the English School, which is divided into normative theory and theory about norms (Buzan, 2014). Similarly, Thompson sees Empirical IR as “advancing a set of related generalizations that can be translated into more precise or narrow statements that are testable either through numerical operationalization, case studies, or some combination of quantitative and qualitative methods”. Again, few of those who identify with the English School would fit within this criterion. To the contrary, the English School is one of the only branches of contemporary IR theory that is concerned with generating grand narratives, i.e. arguments that seek to identify macro-patterns of continuity and change over potentially long periods of world history. At the same time, the school is

methodologically eclectic – if anything, its principal procedure should be seen, as with classical social science more generally, as historical-interpretative rather than contained within the narrow bandwidth occupied by contemporary quantitative vs. qualitative debates.

A strict definition of Empirical IR therefore leaves the English School outside its remit. However, there is a wider, potentially more generous definition of Empirical IR that holds more promise for constructive engagement with the English School. This is the claim by Thompson that a core component of Empirical IR is: “assessing the value of theoretical arguments in some explicit way”. It is often said that the English School lacks a clear set of precepts and mechanisms that can be operationalized and tested historically (e.g. Copeland, 2003; Finnemore, 2001). Yet at the core of the English School can be found historical analysis of how international orders arise, evolve and decay (e.g. Wight, 1977; Buzan and Little, 2000; Linklater, 2016). This focus opens up space for comparative work into international societies across world history, and up to a point to ideal-typical models of such societies. Such enquiry provides the capacity for fertile exchange between the English School and Empirical IR. For lying behind this form of enquiry are first-order questions regarding: a) what constitutes “proper” theory; and b) the relationship between theory and history. It is here that the English School stands to make its main contribution to Empirical IR. For responding to these first-order questions simultaneously means responding to those who argue that the English School lacks clarity about how its concepts and analytics can be empirically assessed. In other words, submerged beneath the question of how well the English School works as Empirical IR lies a deeper set of questions about the way that the English School approaches the history-theory nexus.

Our core argument is that the English School is empirical without being empiricist. Its principal contribution is to develop insights into how *international society* (defined below) emerges, develops and (sometimes) breaks down. The English School is cumulative in that many of its initial insights have either been strengthened or superseded by subsequent waves of scholarship. For example, work on the fundamental institutions that sustain international order has moved on from Bull’s (1977) initial set of five institutions to a richer set of primary and secondary institutions that change over time and place (e.g. Buzan, 2004). Similarly, Eurocentric accounts of the evolution of international society have been challenged both by accounts that stretch historical encounters across world history (e.g. Buzan and Little, 2000), and by those that stress the co-constitutive role played by “core” and “peripheral” polities in the formation of modern international order (Keene, 2002; Suzuki, 2010; Buzan and Lawson, 2015). The English School is therefore both “progressive” as a research agenda and necessarily empirical, if by empirical one means deeply immersed in historical forms of enquiry. It is also publicly testable if we open up ideas of causation beyond regularity-deterministic accounts and accept the validity of historical-interpretative modes of enquiry (Buzan and Lawson, 2016).

The English School as Theory

The English School is best known for counterposing the concept of *international society* to the IR mainstream’s preference for *international system*. International society is captured well by the notion of *raison de système*, coined by Watson (1992: 14) and defined as “the belief that it pays to make the system work”. This concept encapsulates the English School’s core normative debate between order (pluralism) and justice (solidarism), and stands as a counterpoint to the idea of *raison d’état*, a unit-centred logic of calculated self-interest, which is explicitly central to realism, and implicitly central to much mainstream IR theory. Like constructivism, therefore, the English School is concerned with intersubjectively held norms and values. Unlike (much) constructivism, the English School embraces ethical debates of a non-resolvable kind (Wæver, 1999). The normative approach to English School theory has tended to be the dominant one, strongly influenced by the core questions of political theory: “What is the relationship between the citizen and the state?”; “How is it possible to lead the

good life?"; "How is international order to be maintained?"; and "How is progress possible in international society?".

As Martin Wight (1991) set out in detail, the idea of international society established a kind of middle ground, or what later became labelled as a *via media*, between liberal and realist conceptions of international relations. Robert Jackson (1992: 271) nicely sums up the English School's conception of the subject of IR as:

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

As noted above, the English School's primary approach to these questions has been historical, tracking the ebbs and flows through which global international society has emerged. In some ways, the English School can be seen as a kind of constructivism before constructivism. It is constructivist in the sense that all societies must by definition be social constructions. But its origins and approach are drawn not from epistemological debates, but from international history, law and political theory.

What does this mean for how the English School functions as Empirical IR theory? To answer this question, one needs to first establish how theory and history relate to each other in IR. The next section sets out an understanding of what constitutes "proper" theory in IR. This is likely to be wider than most participants in this volume. That task accomplished, the chapter looks briefly at the relationship between theory and history in IR, rejecting the conventional construction of these spheres as polar opposites, with history simply acting as a point of data collection for theory. These discussions open up into a detailed examination of the English School, first as a mode of IR theory, and second as a form of Empirical IR theory.

Theory and Theorizing in IR

The form of causal theory that dominates contemporary IR (particularly American IR) scholarship can be described as "regularity-deterministic" (Buzan and Lawson, 2016). This scholarship sees theory as premised on a form of causal analysis that seeks to establish the associations between objects that are separated (or at least separable) in space and time (Kurki, 2006: 192; Wendt, 1998: 105). In regularity-deterministic enquiry, "efficient causation" acts as a "push and pull" between determinant and regularity: when A (determinant), then B (regularity) (Kurki, 2006: 193). If a particular outcome (y) can be traced to a particular cause (x), then the inference is that a set of outcomes (y-type regularities) can be traced to a set of causes (x-type determinants) (Kurki and Suganami, 2012: 403). Regularity-deterministic accounts of causation rely on a wager about what Andrew Abbott (1988: 170) calls "general linear reality". For Abbott, general linear reality is an assumption that "the social world consists of fixed entities (the units of analysis) that have attributes (the variables)". In this understanding, the interaction of attributes leads to stable patterns, whether these patterns are contextual or transhistorical. What lies behind this wager is the view that social entities are collections of properties that can be disaggregated and the co-variation between their various properties assessed.

This chapter sets out a different view. Following Richard Swedberg (2014: 16-17), it sees theory as "a statement about the explanation of a phenomenon" and theorizing as the "process through which theory is produced" (also see Mills, 1959). In Swedberg's (2012: 15) reckoning, theorizing is the act of "naming, conceptualizing, constructing typologies, and providing explanations". As shown below, some parts of the English School, particularly those that are oriented around "theory about norms" rather than "normative theory" qualify as theory in this sense. Up to a point, they also qualify as

Empirical IR theory in as much as the value of a theoretical argument can be assessed on the basis of conceptual clarity, internal coherence, and fit with the evidence. The obvious example is provided by structural English School approaches, which generate concepts, construct typologies, and provide historically grounded explanations.¹

What is needed, therefore, is a new, or at least enlarged, conception of what qualifies as “proper” theory. This, in turn, begins from an understanding of social entities – international societies, wars, revolutions, depressions, global transformations – as “webs of interactions” rather than collections of properties (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001: 13; Tilly, 2004: 9). In the view adopted here, such entities are assemblages that combine in historically discrete ways. As a result, all explanations are “case-specific” in that the processes within which social entities cohere is singular and, therefore, unrepeatable. What we name as social entities are sequences of events that attain their significance as they are threaded together in and through time. To put this in Abbott’s terms (1988: 179), social entities are “closely related bundles” whose meaning arises from the order and sequence within which their events are knitted together. In this form of research, the focus is not on the disaggregation of entities into discrete properties (as in regularity-deterministic accounts), but on the relational interconnections that constitute entities in the first place. Causal explanation relies on generating an “intelligible connection” between “closely related bundles” of historical events (Kurki and Suganami, 2012: 404; also see Suganami, 2008).

The problem is that all historical events are overdetermined in that there are more causes than outcomes (Adams, 2005: 10). As a consequence, all analysis underdetermines the “true causal story” *by necessity* (Little, 1995: 53). Indeed, all theoretical work is an act of foregrounding-suppression that simplifies history into hunches about “why this and not that”. Theoretical schemas of any kind denote what is significant and what is insignificant about a cluster of historical events. Regularity-deterministic accounts carry out this task by isolating and testing the weight of causal factors that are taken to be particularly significant. Yet these accounts do not eliminate the effects of the causal factors that lie outside the scope of a particular theory – they simply repress them. In this sense, there can never be theoretical “closure”, particularly given that such accounts are notably unsuited to examining the *interdependence* of causal processes (Adams, 2005: 11-12). All historical change is contingent in the sense of arising through unrepeatable nonlinear confluences. As such, distinct times and places require the formulation of distinct causal configurations.

The issues at stake here are not just about different approaches to causation, but about different conceptions of theory. Take as an illustration the work of William Sewell (2005) on “eventfulness”. Sewell argues that all historical events are part of broader chains of events. Chains of events have cascading effects in that they both break and reproduce existing social entities – they are “sequences of occurrences that result in the transformation of structures” (Sewell, 2005: 227). Because they transform fields of action, events are theorizable categories. This perspective points to a more pluralistic definition of causal analysis (Cartwright, 2004), understood as an explanation of how and/or why a particular outcome occurred where and when it did so. In other words, a causal explanation is a logical, systematic account of the sources and emergence of a particular outcome (also see Kurki and Suganami, 2012). This accords with Bill Thompson’s desire that Empirical IR should “value historical sensitivity”. But the view of “historical sensitivity” in this chapter runs deeper than the way it is approached by most contributors to this volume. Historical sensitivity does not mean fine-tuning abstract schemas by applying them historically. Nor does it mean testing hypotheses historically without recognising that history is multiple and, often, contested. Rather,

¹ That said, there are by definition limits to the extent that theory in this sense of singular configurations can produce replicable or even portable regularity-deterministic relationships. Up to a point it can recognise similarities between cases, but only up to a point.

being attuned to historical sensitivity means being aware that history represents the very seeds from which theoretical concepts and causal analysis emerge.

Theory and History

It is beyond the remit of this chapter to fully address the thorny issue of how theory and history in the social sciences relate to each other (for a detailed discussion, see Lawson, 2012). However, it is not stretching the point too far to say that most social scientists tend to apply theories *to* historical events, seeing history as a testing bed or as a site of relatively straightforward operationalization. For all the methodological prowess of many contemporary social scientists, discussion of *historical* methods and the complexities involved in conducting historical enquiry is often quite shallow (Lustick, 1996). For most social sciences, including IR, theory (as intellectual systems) and history (as events, experiences and practices) appear as distinct domains. These domains are differentiated by an elemental division of labor between theory-building social scientists and (putatively) chronicling historians (Lawson, 2012). This division of labor is premised on methods (a focus on secondary sources vs. primary sources); aims (the identification of regularities, determinations and continuities vs. the highlighting of contingency, ambiguity and change); orientation (nomothetic vs. idiographic); sensibility (parsimony vs. complexity); scope conditions (analytic vs. temporal/spatial); levels of analysis (structure vs. agency), and more (e.g. Elman and Elman eds., 2001). Such a division of labor is, in turn, premised on a mischaracterization of history as an enterprise concerned with “narrative” and “description”, but not theoretical work.

This unresolved tension in the relationship between history and IR is long-standing and reappears with regularity, even in those texts that explicitly bestride the IR-history frontier. The issue is revealed in a passage from one of the best known of these texts (Elman and Elman, 2001: 7):

Political scientists are more likely to look to the past as a way of supporting or discrediting theoretical hypotheses, while historians are more likely to be interested in past international events for their own sake. Although political scientists might turn to the distant past, the study of “deep” history is relevant to their research objectives only insofar as it enables them to generate, test or refine theory. By contrast, for the historian, the goal of theory building and testing is secondary – the past interests for itself.

Later in the book, the authors make this distinction even more starkly (Elman and Elman, 2001: 35),

Political scientists are not historians, nor should they be. There are real and enduring epistemological and methodological differences that divide the two groups, and there is great value in recognising, maintaining and honouring these distinctions.

History has always served as a tool for testing the validity of theoretical positions, and mainstream IR scholarship is perfectly content to use history as a barometer or litmus test for adjudicating between rival schemas (Hobson and Lawson, 2008).

The view underlying this chapter is that the relationship between history and theory is better conceived as co-constitutive. Understanding theory, and understanding history, requires inquiry attuned to the entwinement of theory and history. Theory is not something “out there,” removed from history, even retrospectively. Rather, theories are assessed and reassessed, made and remade through ongoing encounters with history. Despite appearances to the contrary, theory does not inhabit a realm that is exterior to history. Rather, theories arise historically, formed amid the encounters between theorists and the events they experience and, sometimes, take part in: Marx the revolutionary, Clausewitz the soldier, Freud the analyst. In this understanding, theory is a living archive of events and experiences: “living” because theories are not only derived in and from history understood as “the past”, they are also recrafted as they encounter new histories. In other words, theories are assessed

and reassessed, made and remade through ongoing encounters with history.² Theory is made in history, and it simultaneously helps to make history. If “theorizing” (in Swedberg’s terms) is alive to the co-constitutive relationship between history and theory, theory is often marked by its abstraction from history. In effect, the historical tracks in which theory is formed are subsequently covered up.

This is a crucial point when it comes to assessing the background assumptions the lie behind most contemporary IR theories. Despite its pretensions to universalism, much mainstream IR theory, including realism and liberalism, are abstractions of modern European historical practices. Realism takes one aspect of that practice – the power politics of the 18th and 19th centuries – and generalises it to all times and places. Liberalism is one of the “ideologies of progress” associated with the revolutions of modernity that flowered during the 19th century (Buzan and Lawson, 2015: Chapter 4). For its part, the English School has its roots in European practices of sovereignty, territoriality, diplomacy, international law, war, the balance of power and great power management that evolved from the 15th to the 19th centuries (Buzan, 2014). If the discipline of IR had started in some other place and some other time – contemporary China for example – it would take a quite different form from the one it currently assumes (Acharya and Buzan, 2010).

Problematizing the history-theory relationship in this way means acknowledging that history is an integral part of social science just as social science, including IR, is necessarily historical. In this context, history is *empirical* in the sense that it deals with observable facts, and has a public, recognized procedure for assessing and validating what counts as facts. The value of its argument can thus be assessed in an explicit way. But it does not allow for regularity-deterministic assumptions that reduce sets of events into discrete phenomena whose properties can then be abstracted and tested through inference and cross-case variation. What it does allow is identification of types of events – wars, depressions, revolutions, and suchlike – whose similarities and differences can be compared. Since the English School is notable among IR theories for its interest in history, this is where both its comparative advantage amongst IR theories, and its claim to contribute to Empirical IR theory, resides.

Theory and History in the English School

“Middle-way” approaches to IR theory such as the English School claim a close association with historical research. And it could be argued that the English School has the most intimate association with history of any of the major approaches to international relations. Several members of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics – the institutional font of the approach – were practicing historians (including Martin Wight and Herbert Butterfield), while many contemporary advocates of the English School (such as Barry Buzan, Ian Clark, Kalevi J. Holsti, Richard Little, Hidemi Suganami and Edward Keene) continue to play an active role in bridging the theory-history divide (e.g. Buzan and Little, 1996, 2000; Suganami, 1999, 2008; Holsti, 2004; Clark, 2007; Keene, 2008).

Yet even the English School has a tendency to replicate core features of the history-theory divide. On the one hand, some of the founding English School theorists saw history as a means of illuminating concrete puzzles in world politics. But they were suspicious to the point of hostility of attempts to capture history within broader explanatory frameworks or, indeed, to generate causal accounts at all which, Herbert Butterfield believed, belonged to God alone (Hall, 2002). This understanding of history as a necessarily limited realm stands some distance away from attempts by later English School figures such as Barry Buzan and Richard Little to test the utility of “international system” as a

² One well-known example of this is the shift within structural realism that took place after the end of the Cold War. Wohlforth (1999) remains the landmark statement.

transhistorical theoretical toolkit (Buzan and Little, 2000) or to interrogate the impact of globalization on the institutional architecture of international society (Buzan, 2004, 2014). Thus although there is certainly an underlying historical sensibility to English School theory, there is no consistent philosophy of history or historical method that can be clearly associated with the approach (Linklater and Suganami, 2006). With this in mind, the first need is to assess the standing of the English School as IR theory, and then to examine whether, and to what extent, parts of the approach can claim to function as Empirical IR theory.

The Standing of the English School as IR Theory

Given the increasingly firm hold of positivism on American IR since the 1950s, there have been longstanding questions put to the English School about its methods, theoretical standing and place in the discipline of IR.³ Is the English School a theory? Does it have a specific methodology? Are its terms sufficiently specified? Does it hold a distinctive position within IR, or is it best seen as a soft version of realism (“realism-lite”), or as an early (and by implication primitive) version of constructivism? Does it represent some kind of Atlantic divide between an American IR, which is based on regularity-deterministic causal logics, and a European IR that takes a more historical and sociological view of the subject?

These kinds of questions were given a particular edge by the robust stance taken by Hedley Bull (1966), a leading figure in the English School, against the “scientific” (positivist) approaches and methods that, under the label *behaviouralism*, came to dominate American IR during the 1950s and 1960s. Bull defended a so-called “classical approach” to the subject based more on history, law and political theory, and for some (more obviously Wight and Butterfield rather than Bull), a close association with Christian theology. This “classical” approach aims to combine the normative and the analytical, and is most clearly represented in the work of Jackson (1992, 1996, 2000, 2009) and Hurrell (2001, 2007). Bull’s view was fairly representative of the attitude in the British Committee (Dunne, 1998: 117-24; Linklater and Suganami, 2006: 97-108; Navari, 2009: 5-14), which sought to distinguish the English School from mainstream American IR theory, a strategy that served to marginalise the approach within the American IR academy. From a behaviouralist perspective, the English School represented soft logic, fuzzy methodology and a confusion between the normative and the empirical (Copeland, 2003). As Finnemore (2001) notes, and as discussed in the Introduction to this chapter, the English School did not generate much traction in American IR debates because it did not do enough to specify either its methods or its aims, and did not sharpen its own understanding by submitting its precepts to explicit testing against other theories. Finnemore (2001: 509, 513) raises two important questions in this regard: “how do you know an international society (or international system, or world society) when you see one?”, and “How is it, exactly, that politics moves from an international system to an international society, or from an international society to a world society?”.

English School scholars have generally been more interested in analysing social dynamics than answering these questions, focusing on the ideational forces, rules of conduct, intentionality of actors, and the normative tensions and problems generated by the interplay of these dynamics. Their sustained engagement with how to balance the demands of order and justice, and their understanding of this dynamic as a permanent, unresolvable tension signalled a close interest in sustaining the normative engagement with the study of IR that “scientific” approaches tended to marginalise. Where realists abstracted their work *from* history by assuming the permanent domination of power-political and survival motives, alongside the timeless logics of anarchy and the balance of power, the English School embedded their work *in* history, seeking a wider vision of both state motivations and the social structure of international orders – hence their favoured term: *international society*. This commitment

³ This subsection and the next one draw on Buzan (2014).

explains the methodological choices made by English School scholars. Whereas the study of *systems* lent itself to regularity-deterministic causal analysis, *societies* could only be explored through the consciousness and moral character of the actors within them. Not until the rise of constructivism in American IR made intersubjective understanding legitimate, at least up to a point, did the English School achieve recognition there as a mainstream approach to the subject.

As a result of the pressure arising from this epistemological divide, as well as the questions posed by critics such as Finnemore and Copeland, there is now a substantial literature on English School methodology (Little, 1995, 1998, 2000; Jackson, 2000, 2009; Linklater and Suganami, 2006: 81-116; Navari, 2009, 2010). If the English School deserved the brickbats it received for not having been rigorous enough in defining its core terms, the earlier indifference of the School to methodological specification has given way to a greater awareness of the need to position itself within epistemological debates. Holsti (2004) has led the way in providing greater specificity to the concept of institutions (see also Buzan, 2004: 161-204; for a dissenting view, see Wilson, 2012). There is now also more debate, building on James's (1993) critique of Bull, about whether or not the distinction between international system and international society is necessary, or whether a typology of international societies, such as Buzan's (2004: 190-95) categories of power political, coexistence, cooperative, and convergence, can capture both terms (Dunne, 2008: 276-9; Little, 2009: 81-7; Williams, 2010; Buzan, 2014: 171-72).

Perhaps the most common depiction of the English School in the contemporary discipline is that it is theoretically and methodologically eclectic or "pluralist".⁴ This understanding has been most prominently developed by Linklater (1990) and Little (1995, 1998, 2000, 2009). It is closely linked to the triad of international system, international society and world society, which requires the English School to address the ontologically distinct aspects that compose the international sphere as a whole (Buzan, 2004: 6-10, 22-4). Little (2009) has attempted to link the pillars of the English School's triad to different methodological approaches, defending his broad view of the English School and the necessity within this breadth for the School to be methodologically eclectic. Linklater (1990) associates international system with positivism, international society with hermeneutics, and world society with critical theory. Little (2009) agrees with the first of these categories, but assigns hermeneutics to both international society and world society (see also Epp, 1998). Whatever the intricacies of this debate, the key point is that both Little and Linklater see methodological eclecticism as a necessary consequence of the English School's triad of core concepts.

One clear point of overlap between the English School and Empirical IR is that neither approach sees inter-paradigm debates (better defined as "inter-ism" debates) as incommensurable. In its orientation around *raison de système*, the English School always retained its potential as a site for synthesising grand theory. In this sense, the English School tends to operate in a different register from the middle-range theory that characterises contemporary American IR (Lake, 2011). Dunne (2008: 280) similarly contrasts the English School with the "metatheoretical exclusionism" practiced in the US. He sees it as avoiding the conflictual "either/or" choices of rationalism vs. constructivism, or realism vs. liberalism, by offering an approach that combines agency and structure, theory and history, and morality and power (Dunne, 2008: 268, 271).

Another point of overlap between the English School and Empirical IR theory can be seen in the longstanding tension between normative (pursuit of progressive values) and structural (historical-empirical) approaches within the English School (Dunne, 1998: 99-104; Linklater and Suganami, 2006: 108-13; see also Jackson, 2009: 22-8). Within the British Committee, there was considerable

⁴ To avoid confusion with the normative meaning of pluralism, the term eclectic is used when referring to the English School's approach to method and theory.

debate about whether normative arguments could be separated from empirical concerns. Hedley Bull and Alan James were notable sceptics about explicitly normative research, but some of the most prominent figures within the second generation of English School writers, notably John Vincent and Nicholas Wheeler, aimed to combine normative and empirical registers. Bull remained suspicious of normative positioning, though his later work revealed his liberal proclivities (Bull, 1984). In more recent times, the dominant view is that the normative, empirical and structural components of the English School should not, and cannot, be separated (Cochran, 2009: 221).

For any attempt, like Empirical IR, to provide a common basis from which to conduct historical enquiry, English School concepts, such as primary and secondary institutions, international and world society, pluralism and solidarism, first and second order societies, and *raison de système*, hold considerable promise. These concepts form a new grammar for IR, and the basis of a distinctive taxonomy of what it is that IR should be taking as its principal object of study: the triad of international system, international society, and world society, and how the variation and interplay among them generate distinct types of international order. The debate within the English School about the relationship between international system and international society is much more promising than the theoretical silo-building that characterises contemporary IR theory – here, again, there is much common ground between the English School and Empirical IR. Because a taxonomy identifies what it is that is to be theorised about, it is foundational to any theoretical enterprise. To the extent that a taxonomy is flawed, the whole foundation of theory is weakened. The English School contains considerable potential in terms of its distinctive taxonomy, and the theoretical possibilities that are opened up by it.

Given this discussion, whether or not one can talk about “English School theory” depends on *where* this question is asked. Many Europeans follow Swedberg in using the term “theory” to mean an enterprise that organises a field methodically, structures questions systematically, and establishes a coherent and rigorous set of interrelated concepts and categories. Many proponents of American IR, however, require that a theory contains a regularity-deterministic account of causation, and is only valid if it contains – or is able to generate – testable hypotheses. English School theory clearly qualifies on the first (European) account, but mainly not on the second (for an exception, see Mendelsohn, 2009). In its constructivist and normative aspects, English School theory cannot (and does not want to) meet the strictures of neo-positivism (Jackson, 2010). Indeed, given its theoretical and methodological eclecticism, the English School *cannot* meet a requirement of theory that is linked to a single epistemology. While the English School as a whole can claim theoretical standing in Swedberg’s sense, and its historical approach has empirical standing in the closeness of its relationship to history, only part of the English School can make a claim to be Empirical IR in any stricter definition of this term.

The Standing of the English School as Empirical IR Theory

However, as argued above, a more open, generous reading of Empirical IR need not exclude the English School. As Navari (2009: 39-57) points out, English School scholars have not been completely closed-minded about formulating and testing causal hypotheses. For example, Watson’s (1990, 1992: 13-18, 120-32; see also Buzan and Little, 1996; Wæver, 1996: 223-5) pendulum theory offered a clear hypothesis about system structure: that international society ranged across a spectrum from anarchic to imperial, that both ends of this spectrum were unstable, and that the most stable, and most common, form was an intermediate position, which Watson defined as hegemony. For his part, Holsti (2004, 2009) specified how the institutions of international society arose, evolved, and sometimes declined. In both its historical and comparative work, the English School has been concerned with deducing patterns across space and time. This propensity to group and compare events works as Empirical IR theory as long as a wide interpretation of this enterprise is offered. So too does

the English School's regard for historical sensitivity, so much so that members of the school have no inclination to aggregate events into formal groups of like types, which subsequently serve as the basis for tests of cross-case variation. The criterion of historical sensitivity thus stands as a crunch issue: it is the hallmark of Empirical theory and, at the same time, a barrier to rigid forms of regularity-deterministic analysis.

Within this constraint, perhaps the strongest claim that the English School can make to Empirical IR theory lies in its approach to the social structure of international society through the concept of primary institutions. Primary institutions provide the English School with a major conceptual counterpoint to the more conventional ("secondary") institutions discussed in mainstream IR.

Primary institutions are deep and relatively durable social practices in the sense of being more evolved than designed. These practices must not only be shared amongst the members of an international society, but must also be seen amongst them as defining legitimate behaviour. Primary institutions are thus about the shared identity of the members of a particular international society. They are constitutive of both states and international society in that they define not only the basic character of states, but also their patterns of legitimate behaviour in relation to each other, and the criteria for membership of an international society. The classical "Westphalian" set of primary institutions includes sovereignty, territoriality, the balance of power, war, diplomacy, international law, and great power management, to which can be added nationalism, human equality, and the market (Buzan, 2004). But primary institutions can be found across history wherever polities have formed an international society.

Secondary institutions are those commonly discussed in regime theory and institutionalist analysis, and relate to the organizational meaning of the term "institution". They are the products of certain types of (most obviously liberal) international society, and are for the most part intergovernmental arrangements consciously designed by states to serve specific purposes. They include the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation regime. Secondary institutions are a relatively recent invention, first appearing as part of global modernity in the later decades of the 19th century (Buzan and Lawson, 2015: 85-91).

Primary institutions are what enable English School analysts to define, differentiate and compare international societies. They also underpin Wæver's (1992: 99-100, 121) observation that the English School has the ability to:

combine traditions and theories normally not able to relate to each other... It promises to integrate essential liberal concerns with a respect for a fair amount of realist prudence; it promises to locate structural pressures in specific historical contexts and to open up for a structural study of international history.

All general theories of international relations identify some mechanism or driving force that explains how and why things work the way they do. For realism, this is power politics and relative gains. For liberalism it is rationality, interdependence, and absolute gains. For Marxism it is class struggle over the means of production. For post-structuralists and constructivists, it is the constitutive force of discursive practices. For the English School it is the social dynamics that arise from the desire to create order and justice beyond the level of the state, and how these dynamics are expressed in the landscape of often competing primary institutions. In this approach, norms and ideas play roles as different forms of social structure: not normative theory, but theory about norms. Primary institutions are analytical constructs with which to describe and theorise what goes on in the world, and in that sense they constitute a key part of any Empirical IR enterprise. The English School eschews teleology, keeping an open mind about whether the social structure of international society will get weaker or stronger. Only if norms in this structural sense are accepted as empirical phenomena can

the English School's claim to be part of Empirical IR be sustained. If norms are excluded from empirical theory, so too is the English School.

The case for accepting norms as empirical phenomena is a strong one, and doing so offers a wealth of analytical and theoretical opportunities. Three brief illustrations make this clear. First is Little's (2000: 404-8; 2007) discussion of how English School theory leads to a different understanding of the balance of power (understood as an intersubjective value held amongst the great powers) than one finds in the mechanical idea of balance of power in neorealism (where state behaviour is determined by calculations about differences in capability). Putting empirical handles on the balance of power in its mechanical, realist sense has proved to be notoriously difficult (Wohlforth et al., 2007). Where the balance of power is an institutional norm, as amongst the great powers forming the 19th century Concert of Europe, this difficulty disappears, and its empirical form is observable in the agreements and discourses of the great powers (Reus-Smit, 1999: 134-40; Simpson, 2004: 96-7). A second illustration is the way in which the structure of primary institutions can be linked to securitization theory as facilitating conditions that set the normative framing for what makes things more or less difficult to securitize.⁵ As Buzan (2015) argues, understanding sovereignty, territoriality and nationalism as primary institutions explains why these values feature so prominently in the empirical realities of international security. Securitizing human beings or the environment is more difficult because neither human rights nor environmental stewardship are as yet consolidated globally as institutions of international society. It would be extremely difficult to securitise human rights when, as for most of human history, prevailing norms held that people were unequal, and on that basis made slavery, colonialism, racism and sexism legitimate behaviours. A third, related, illustration of the empirical utility of primary institutions is that they make it easy to spot embedded contradictions in the social structure of international society (Buzan, 2004). Such contradictions exist, for example, between territoriality and both the market and environmental stewardship; between nationalism and dynasticism, and between state sovereignty and human rights. In each of these instances, empirical observation and analysis tracks fault lines within international social structure.

For the purposes of this discussion, the key point is that primary institutions can only be discerned through empirical observation. They cannot be derived from any abstract set of social functions. Functional approaches do offer some capacity to group primary institutions. For example, Bull's (1977: 53-7) influential conception of society emerged from a form of structural functionalism in which all human societies must be founded on three basic concerns: security against violence, observance of agreements, and rules about property rights. It is quite easy to fit the primary institutions of international society into this functional template:

- *Security against violence*: non-intervention, balance of power, war (rules of), great power management, human rights.
- *Observance of agreements*: diplomacy, international law.
- *Property rights*: territoriality, sovereignty, colonialism, nationalism, dynasticism.

Buzan (2004: 187-90), with the particular needs of second order societies in mind, adds two more categories: membership (sovereignty, dynasticism, democracy) and authoritative communication (diplomacy). Donnelly (2006: 11-12) sees primary institutions as premised on six functions: making rules, regulating conflicts, regulating the use of force, regulating ownership and exchange, communicating and interacting, and aggregating interests and power (i.e. enabling collective action). Schouenborg (2011) constructs a set that is less tied to modernity. Buzan and Albert have pushed the functional line further by relating primary institutions to functional differentiation theory (Buzan and Albert, 2010, 2011; see also Donnelly, 2009, 2012; Albert, Buzan & Zürn, 2013). This posits three

⁵ On securitization theory see Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998.

modes of differentiation: segmentary (like units), stratificatory (hierarchically ordered), and functional (where subsystems are defined by the coherence of particular types of activity). This too provides a way of ordering primary institutions: nationalism, territoriality, sovereignty are segmentary; great power management, hegemony, colonialism, human inequality, and dynasticism are stratificatory; and international law, diplomacy, the market, and environmental stewardship are functional.

These approaches are useful in two main ways. First, they provide schemes for grouping institutions into clusters of like kind. Second, they provide a template that can be applied to historical cases in order to examine their primary institutions. But what they do not, and probably cannot, do is to provide any bookends that define or limit the whole set of possible primary institutions. In this regard, primary institutions are in the same boat as function systems in Luhmannian sociology. As Stichweh (2013: 58) says of the latter:

A theory looking for synthetic processes of system formation knows no inherent limits to the number of function systems it will be able to describe. It only needs an abstract catalogue of (necessary) constituents of any function system and can do historical analyses on the basis of such a catalogue of constituents which in itself has a provisional status. It can be enlarged and corrected on the basis of new analytical insights or from new insights won in historical studies about individual function systems.

In other words, there can be no fixed set of primary institutions (or function systems) because they are emergent from the complex processes of human interaction. Human societies can be, and have been, almost endlessly inventive about the social forms and structures that they generate. To date, human societies have exhibited considerable diversity over time and place, and there is no reason to think that all possible forms of interaction have been exhausted.

If the set of primary institutions is potentially infinite, then empirical identification is the only way of determining what institutions exist in any given time and place. Functional and comparative approaches can help with this task. But it is not clear that a comprehensive set of functions can be generated that would not itself fall victim to the infinite creativity of human societies, and even within the functional categories listed above, the possible institutions that might address each function is itself probably infinite. Relying on empirical identification means that the ways in which primary institutions are defined is crucial to the coherence of the theoretical enterprise.

Conclusions

In a strict definition of Empirical IR, the English School does not qualify. Rather than avoiding normative enquiry, it is either explicitly normative or concerned with theory about norms. It is inclined towards grand narratives rather than “precise or narrow statements”. And its methodological sensibilities are eclectic, if predominantly historical-interpretative, rather than contained by the parameters defined by regularity-deterministic accounts. However, a wider definition of Empirical IR holds out more promise. Given a more relaxed set of principles around which Empirical IR is organized, the structural wing of the English School qualifies as Empirical IR theory. The theoretical framing of the English School in terms of international society defined by a changing, often contested, set of primary institutions offers a powerful way of observing and analyzing patterns of continuity and change over time and place. In other words, the rise of, and contest between, primary institutions can only be analysed by empirical observation of practices and discourses.

More generally, this chapter draws attention to two bigger issues for Empirical IR theory. The first is that there is an important tension around the place of history in such a theoretical enterprise. On the one hand, history is a necessary feature of IR theory in general and of the English School in particular – for the latter, empirical is synonymous with historical. On the other hand, historical sensitivity

stands in the way of more rigid forms of regularity-deterministic analysis. It is a barrier to the kind of classifications that enable the construction of sets of events that are sufficiently alike as to be collectively testable by regularity-deterministic propositions. In this sense, therefore, the historical sensitivity that *includes* the English School in a generous definition of Empirical IR theory simultaneously works to *exclude* it from stricter definitions of this field of enquiry. The second issue is about whether norms, and therefore primary institutions, are accepted as empirical phenomena. If they are, then the English School's claim to be Empirical IR theory can be sustained. If they are not, then the main purpose of this chapter is to explain why the English School should not be considered as part of Empirical IR theory.

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