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# A VIABLE PROJECT OF SOLIDARISM?

## The neglected contributions of John Vincent's basic rights initiative

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[note: the names should go in this order, not alphabetical]  
for  
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**Key words:** John Vincent, English School, solidarism, basic rights, subsistence, hunger, IPE, international trade, food.

### **Abstract:**

We analyse a part of Vincent's theory that has been neglected by the English School discourse: his idea of the right to subsistence, particularly the right to food, as the basis on which to build a cross-cultural human rights project across the societies of the world. Vincent insisted that starvation is the 'resident emergency' of international society and its elimination should be the minimum standard for the society of states to achieve legitimacy. We assess here the normative and practical viability of that enterprise as a project of solidarism in international society. Such assessment reveals that Vincent's work has made three contributions to English school thinking. In relation to the solidarist agenda, Vincent both widened the human rights agenda, and pushed the idea of developing a normative consensus around the basic right to food. More generally, his work forces the English school to think seriously about the relationship between international society and International Political Economy.

### **1. Introduction**

This article is built on Vincent's basic rights initiative, which has two dimensions: the right to security (meaning freedom from oppression) and the right to subsistence (meaning freedom from starvation). The first dimension reflected the concerns of his predecessors, especially Bull, and inspired a section of the English school that works on

the humanitarian intervention dilemma. This Vincentian branch is mainly represented by Dunne, Knudsen and Wheeler. The second one enters into the realm of international political economy by seeking to build a consensus in international society around a basic human right to be free from starvation. This idea aims at avoiding the ideological controversies of humanitarian intervention on individual security grounds. However, this dimension of his basic rights programme has not been developed either by him or by the authors who work in his tradition. The relevance of a right to subsistence has been pointed out by Dunne and Wheeler but the empirical side of Vincent's project remains unexplored.<sup>1</sup> Since Vincent defined the right to food as the foundation of his basic rights project, this gap is a problem.

By concentrating on this neglected aspect of Vincent's basic rights project, we will argue here that he has made a significant contribution to solidarism as a viable project in the society of states. First, we will track the development of Vincent's basic rights thinking, with particular emphasis on the right to subsistence, and its place in the English school. In the next section, we will document the normative and practical dimensions of the right to food and assess them in relation to Vincent's project. In the final section, we will consider the implications of the empirical reality for the viability of Vincent's solidarist project. We focus on three contributions by Vincent that have neither been adequately appreciated by those who have commented on him, nor followed up within the English school tradition.<sup>2</sup> For solidarists, Vincent both widened the human rights agenda, and pushed the idea of developing a normative consensus around the basic right to food. More generally, his work links thinking about international society to the agenda of International Political Economy.

## **2. Vincent and his basic rights approach to a viable project of solidarism**

In this section we document the development of Vincent's basic rights thinking, with particular reference to the right to subsistence, and then locate this argument in the wider framework of the English school. The whole of this section will provide a theoretical analysis of the implied, but never carried out, project of the right to subsistence in Vincent's solidarist understanding of the society of states.

Vincent worked within the English school tradition of International Relations, where he explored the possibilities for the practical realisation of a human rights agenda in the society of states. He developed his body of thought in the pluralist/solidarist framework set out by his predecessor Hedley Bull. The solidarist current of thought has traditionally opposed the pluralist by asking for, or pointing to, a higher degree of shared values than the mere pursuit of coexistence and preservation of difference, yet while maintaining the principle of sovereignty as the basis for the society of states. Vincent was searching for a way out of the pluralist frame set by Bull, particularly in seeking a way around Bull's concern that the cultivation of human rights law would almost inevitably be subversive of the key principles of international society (sovereignty and nonintervention) and therefore subversive of world order.<sup>3</sup> Solidarism has usually been

discussed in relation to human rights and Vincent is a clear exponent of this understanding. At the heart of his discussion, he introduced a basic rights project that tried to establish ‘a common floor under the societies of the world’ by creating a ‘global cosmopolitan culture’ that would offer consensus on essential values.<sup>4</sup> His proposal was an attempt to bridge the pluralist demands of international society (sovereignty and non-intervention) with the humankind that joins individuals across frontiers.

a) The place of basic rights within Vincent’s theory

Basic rights constitute a distinctive element in Vincent’s work and it is impossible to describe his conception of international society without reference to them. Vincent’s idea is the development of a more solidarist international society, in which states become more alike internally, and therefore more likely to find common ground in agreeing about when the right of humanitarian intervention overrides the principle of nonintervention.<sup>5</sup>

Vincent committed himself to the intellectual discourse of international society and accepted the principle of states being the main containers of collective identity. His interpretation of this has two phases: the early Vincent showed a pluralist direction under the influence of his mentor Bull and accepted a thin international society where states cohabit through their insistence on their separateness. The late Vincent, however, projected the need to bring morality into the schemes of international society and the way to do it was by states becoming more alike internally and, therefore, more prone to find a common ground.<sup>6</sup> At this stage, international society would not just be about the ‘separateness’ of states. The growing concern for human rights called Vincent to consider other shared values inside sovereignty. Still committed to the idea of states as the containers of collective identity, he hinted at a new approach to the principles of international society: ‘There lies a countertheme of human rights consolidating the state rather than transcending it... we might extent a cautious welcome to both the penetration of the state and to its strengthening itself in response’.<sup>7</sup>

In both early and late Vincent the basic idea is the same: state’s sovereignty and mutual acknowledgement of autonomy. The understanding of it, however, has changed. It is now the opening of the state within a thicker international society that strengthens sovereignty, and not the insistence on separateness. Vincent became an advocate of solidarism by calling for a cross-cultural consensus on basic rights to strengthen sovereignty, rather than insisting on separateness. This line of thinking is Vincent’s key to resolving the tensions between pluralism and solidarism.<sup>8</sup>

Although Vincent does not discuss the solidarist/pluralist debate directly, his work offers an interpretation of solidarist international society locked into his discussion of human rights and, particularly, into his basic rights project. This is a specific understanding of solidarism. In the Vincentian sense, human rights capture the moral duties of international society. Consequently, solidarism asserts an obligation towards the protection of individuals beyond the political frontiers into which they are

organised.<sup>9</sup> However, Vincent does admit that only the state has normative capacity for implementing moral claims. Together with their moral responsibility in international society, states also sustain and shape the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. He refers to the possibility of basic rights being not a challenge to the society of sovereign states, but something that could add to its legitimacy on the basis of the common floor established by cosmopolitan consensus through an exchange among cultures.<sup>10</sup> In this context, Vincent notes that ‘the spread of a global culture makes international society work more smoothly’, and takes hope in the historical record by which the state has made deals with civil society ‘coopting the ideology of individualism by translating human rights into citizens rights’.<sup>11</sup> With this line of thinking, Vincent begins to blend together a state-based, solidarist international society, with an underlying world society of common culture.

Basic rights is about placing a common ground under the cultures of the world as the lowest common denominator among humankind. Drawing from the work of Henry Shue,<sup>12</sup> Vincent selects the right to security and the right to subsistence as those that belong to that common floor underpinning the cultures of the world. This does not mean that other rights are less valuable, but that the enjoyment of other rights cannot take place if these rights are not met. His project on basic rights, where he prioritises the right to subsistence, is connected to his idea that ‘for international society to become better founded, there must be a minimum standard of human rights observance’.<sup>13</sup> He selects the right to subsistence as the ‘basis of basic rights’ and insists starvation is the resident emergency of international society, meaning hunger as a routine phenomenon in the system. Given the size of this enterprise, Vincent compares its eradication with the elimination of the slave trade. By concentrating on the right to subsistence as the ultimate foundation of basic rights, Vincent tried to escape the ideological controversies of the rest of the human rights discourse. The right to subsistence allows both ‘unity and diversity’, as it is not reducible to any particular culture, and should be common to all understandings of civilisation.<sup>14</sup>

Vincent’s theory on basic rights, anchored in his universalist understanding of human rights generally, tried to explain if it is possible at a very basic level to talk about a global understanding (common floor) across the cultures of the world in order to avoid ideological obstacles and build an agenda for the practical realisation of human rights in international society. That way, Vincent drove attention away from humanitarian intervention, normally orientated towards crises created either by the breakdown of the state or by repressive and discriminatory state behaviour, and focused on the ‘routine practices’ of international society that have repercussions in the number of deaths by starvation. This move is the key to understanding the differentiation of Vincent’s basic rights approach from the human rights concerns that dominate the solidarist debate within the English school. In common with the other solidarists, Vincent saw the rights of states as deriving from their being manifestations of the right of self-determination of peoples. This right, in his view required that states have some minimum degree of civil relationship with their citizens. If a state was ‘utterly delinquent in this regard (by laying

waste its own citizens, or by bringing on secessionist movements)', and 'by its conduct outrages the conscience of mankind', then its entitlement to the protection of the principle of non-intervention should be suspended. He qualified such suspensions by saying that the circumstances triggering a right of humanitarian intervention must be extraordinary ones, not routine.<sup>15</sup> This way of thinking, with its focus mainly on the relationship between state and citizen, and on exceptional and extreme cases, is in line with solidarist orthodoxy. Vincent's basic rights approach offers a quite different path into human rights; while searching for a constructive engagement between governments, his perspective is not triggered so much by the relationship between states and their own citizens, but by the relationship of people to the global economy. It is not focused on the exceptional and extreme cases but on the routine practices. It is consequently not about the right of intervention but about the responsibility of international society, and particularly the great powers, to manage the global economy in a humane fashion.

Vincent's proposal is not about overthrowing the current system but about introducing into it a project of basic rights that adds to its legitimacy by correcting its current mistakes. Vincent looks at what international society can do about hunger along the lines of short-term measures (aid) and permanent structural reforms (trade). Vincent did not discuss the very complicated and multifaceted question of what could and should be done in practical terms about hunger. Instead, he focused on the international responsibility for the problem regardless of cause, and looked specifically at what international society could do about it without infringing on sovereignty. He suggested the possibility of having to restructure the international economic order to meet the right to subsistence of the 'submerged 40%' but did not pursue the practical implications of his statements.

### b) Vincent's basic rights project in the English school

The relevance of the subsistence dimension of Vincent's basic rights program was not tested by Vincent or by the Vincentian branch of the English school. Therefore, its potential contribution to solidarism has been bypassed in the English school account, although acknowledged by Dunne and Wheeler. They have manifested their concern with the problem of starvation, which they call the 'silent genocide'.<sup>16</sup>

In his account of Vincent, Dunne closes the chapter with a remark along the lines of the argument discussed earlier: 'For a solidarist model to be realised in practice... it means addressing the plight of the global poor, which Vincent regarded as the twentieth century's equivalent of the slave trade'. Dunne hints here at Vincent's major contribution but misses the achievements that the normative grounds of the right to subsistence have already provided for the solidarist project. He concludes with a major policy assumption not strictly in line with Vincent's project: 'Liberating the world from this Holocaust of neglect requires promoting welfare internationalism'. This statement opens a series of implications that Dunne did not explain. In this regard, Dunne's contribution has been to highlight how solidarism 'is about more than deciding on a

particular criterion for suspending the norm of non-intervention'.<sup>17</sup> However, he does not investigate this matter further and works instead along the lines of humanitarian intervention on individual security grounds.

Wheeler provides insightful remarks about the ‘humanitarian intervention’ dilemmas linked to starvation, as will be quoted later. He calls for attention to the routine deaths by hunger within the system and highlights the need for commitment in liberal societies to overcome the phenomena of poverty and malnutrition.<sup>18</sup> However, he does not work further on those points, and diverts his focus into the extraordinary cases of hunger. He concentrates specifically on the famine that gripped Somalia in 1992 as a consequence of the collapse of the Somali state into civil strife.<sup>19</sup>

Another example of the literature’s neglect of Vincent’s contribution to the solidarist dilemma through his approach to subsistence can be found in Neumann’s work. He concludes that Vincent’s ‘preliminary’ investigation is ‘inconclusive’ about whether a common culture exists.<sup>20</sup> Although it is certainly the case that Vincent does not provide conclusive remarks about the empirical dimension of his project, Neumann’s evaluation too easily dismisses the relevance of Vincent’s basic rights project, especially with regard to the normative viability of his approach to subsistence, as we will review in the next section.

In order to analyse how viable this is as a project for a solidarist international society, another key point in Vincent’s solidarism must be highlighted: his defense of the existence of a relationship between theory and practice. This applies to both academic theorising and political practice and to the normative and practical realms of international relations. On academic-political grounds, Vincent insisted that academics should remain independent from political advocacy but not separated. Theory, in his opinion, is a guide to policy with the duty to clarify and confront fundamental questions that practitioners may take for granted.<sup>21</sup> In his own words, ‘theory cannot be an intellectual exercise divorced from the requirement ultimately to deliver a position on policy’.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, he observed state practice in order to develop his innovative project on the right to subsistence.

This attitude connects with his view on solidarism, which has a normative side that describes how states ought to behave and a practical one that looks at how they actually behave: ‘the central distinction becomes that between theory (policy) and practice (experience), a distinction akin to that between values and facts’.<sup>23</sup> This normative-practical interaction is fundamental when analysing the room for basic rights in international society, which varies on the basis of Vincent’s understanding of the theory: a division between what is the current practical situation of the basic right to subsistence, what are its connections with the theory, and what does a normative explanation of basic rights offer to the future of practice in the context of international society?

When applied to the right to food, the normative dimension occupies the territory of positive law, where international agreements, even if at the level of soft law, have given a rights framework to the access to food. The practical dimension refers to the

state of food insecurity in the world, the current profile of which will be sketched in the next section.

### **3. The right to food in global practice: normative commitment and practical default**

Although Vincent was not able to elaborate his project on the right to subsistence before he died, two clues define the direction of his thinking. First, the drive in his basic rights project to respect and even strengthen sovereignty means that he did not intend to overthrow the current system, but to ‘add to its legitimacy’ by pursuing a solidarist project that allows for a greater degree of economic equality. Second, when referring to what international society could do about the problem of hunger, he led his argument towards permanent structural reforms of the global economy that would benefit the ‘submerged 40%’. International trade is the arena where his basic right to subsistence can be tested on these two fronts. The connection between international trade and hunger (via poverty) has been made explicit by several international soft-law agreements on the subject. Governments have agreed at different summits that the eradication of poverty is essential to improve access to food and emphasised that trade is a key element in achieving food security.

#### a) The normative-practical picture

The diplomatic landmarks in the normative evolution of the right to food within international society, and its connection there with the global structure of poverty and trade are as follows:

- The Universal Human Rights Declaration in 1948 set the international context for the right to food to become a global entitlement: ‘Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food’ (article 25).
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1966: Article 11 deals comprehensively with ‘the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger’. It has been ratified by 142 states.
- The Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition of 1974 was the first specific international treaty on the right to food. Its main statement pointed to the clear role of states: ‘It is a fundamental responsibility of governments to work together for higher production and a more equitable and efficient distribution of food between countries and within countries’ (para. 2).
- The Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989 insists that ‘States parties must take appropriate measures to combat disease and malnutrition, including through the provision of nutritious food and drinking water’. It has been ratified by 191 states.
- The World Food Summit in 1996, held in Rome, and attended by 185 Heads of State or deputies as well as numerous IGOs and civil society organisations, created what is

so far the highest international commitment on the subject. The Summit made a specific pledge to reduce by half the number of hungry people (800 million at the time) by 2015. State parties signed a plan of action with 7 commitments related to food security, including a ‘fair world trade system’.

- Following on from this summit, a series of consultations defined in greater detail the right to food. The highest legal interpretation was achieved in 1999 with Commitment 12 adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR). It is an authoritative interpretation of the right to food prescribed by the CESCR in its role of monitoring the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. As a consequence, a Special Rapporteur has been appointed to follow the progress on protecting the right to food. Further work is being done on the development of the legal mechanism in order to strengthen the bindingness of the final documents of the World Food Summit. Recent consultations carried out with that purpose have focused on the link between poverty and hunger, and called for the eradication of poverty to eliminate hunger, with international trade being a key tool in the process.

These developments brought into the rights framework an understanding of the role of the state and other actors in the measures needed to reduce hunger, and made explicit the link to international trade. They also elaborated a definition of the right to food itself, including a minimum measurement of the calories needed, which provides a clear reference on what hunger is and what is physically needed to overcome it. Even if the criteria for what constitutes adequate food are subject to cultural variations, the number of calories required for a healthy life is not, which eliminates a great deal of the relativism that underpins controversies about other human rights. The essential point about these developments is that the right itself has obtained a broad cross-cultural consensus across the society of states. Unlike with other aspects of the human rights agenda, Vincent’s aspiration to create a minimum world common culture around the right to subsistence appears already to have been achieved. Controversy remains around the difficult economic, social and political questions involved in its implementation, but the right itself is not contested. As the participants in the Rome Declaration said: ‘We consider it intolerable that more than 800 million throughout the world and particularly in developing countries do not have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs. This situation is unacceptable’.<sup>24</sup> The problem is that the normative consensus, at the level of international soft-law, defines the obligations of states but does not specify the policy measures.

The plan to reduce by half the number of hungry people was renewed at several international summits, such as the Millennium Declaration (2000) and the Johannesburg Summit (2002). An in-detail review of the 2015 deadline came in June 2002 with another World Food Summit where states reported their achievements towards the goal. A major point here was the acknowledgement of the great progress made in the normative sphere, while disappointment was expressed at the slow progress registered in the practical realm. New statistics published by the FAO in October 2002, revealed that

this problem of too-slow practical progress was much worse than thought. The FAO now said that instead of a reduction of 6 million people per year during the 1990s, the true figure had been only 2.5 million. These new figures show that if changes are not applied to the current policy structure, then the aim of halving the number of undernourished will not be achieved for over a century. In order to reach the 2015 goal, reduction in the number of hungry people would have to be accelerated to 24 million a year, almost 10 times the current pace.<sup>25</sup>

Since the pace of reduction is now too slow to meet the existing commitments, hunger is now a much more pressing problem. If the normative commitment against hunger is to retain any credibility, the new figures require heavy reformulations at the level of policy-making and action. Unless the significant commitments in the normative realm (signed by states across the international spectrum), can be coupled with higher levels of practical action to reduce the number of hungry people, the normative commitment will be exposed as hollow. Out of the 800 million hungry people that the world has right now, only 67 million are a consequence of man-made or natural disasters. The rest are due to routine economic-socio-political failures, which indicates that the need to tackle structural problems is now pressing.<sup>26</sup> The choice is between accepting the collapse of the normative commitment to make substantial reductions in the number of hungry people, and undertaking the sorts of economic reforms that will achieve such reductions. In terms of Vincent's project, the question is whether international society will abandon its commitment to a basic right of subsistence, or find ways of improving its performance in reducing the number of hungry. The FAO's new statistics strip away the comfortable position of the 1990s in which existing policies seemed to be producing substantial reductions in the number of hungry even if not fast enough. Now the question is posed in much starker terms: abandon the normative position or change the economic structure. The scope for action for international society to address this problem lies in the linkage between hunger and the international economic system, and therefore in reforms to that system.

Two alternatives to the existing global economic structure are currently under heated debate: one radical, the other more moderate. The radical one asks for eradication of the WTO-based system and the creation of a new economic order that avoids the anomalies of the present system. This option encompasses several proposals along the lines of the anti-globalisation movements. Their common denominator is their rejection of the liberal economic structure, and claim that the exclusion of millions of people from access to food is 'a consequence of economic, agricultural and trade policies that have been imposed by the developed countries'.<sup>27</sup> However they assume that globalisation is reversible without adequately considering the consequences of such a policy, and they do not offer a firm alternative that has proved to be successful in practice. Much of their emphasis is on local self-reliance, which does not constitute an adequate response to the problem of how to feed a world heading for a population of 9 billion people.<sup>28</sup>

The more moderate option is to keep the existing economic system while introducing substantial reforms in it that will address the problem of hunger by

benefiting the developing countries in which most of the hungry are to be found.<sup>29</sup> This includes a review of the international trade mechanism that starts inside the richest core of the system (tariffs, development box...) and external measures such as an increase in aid, which has seen a sustained decrease from the 1990s. Official aid to agriculture in developing countries went down from US\$14 billion in 1988 to US\$ 8 billion as of 1999.<sup>30</sup> This view is backed up by FAO research affirming that the world produces enough food to feed 12 billion people, but fails to feed its current 6 billion due to distribution and accessibility problems.<sup>31</sup> It can be argued that this approach does not involve only costs for the rich, but that there are economic benefits for the richer countries to cut down their protectionist measures.<sup>32</sup> Such a policy would translate into savings in the subsidies to agriculture that come from the taxpayer and in cheaper food for the consumers of wealthy countries. The actual solution could thus be in terms of negotiations that in the long term would favour both parties, although Vincent was more radical and simply asked for action from those who have the power to do something about hunger. The possibility of mutual gain should, however, ease the politics of such a reform. This option is in line with Vincent's thinking, which did not ask for the destruction of the existing system but the correction of its anomalies in order to introduce his project of basic rights.

b) Obstacles to the implementation of the right to food

The empirical examination of Vincent's project has proved that the basic right to subsistence is already a fact in positive law (on international soft law grounds), since the agreement on the value of the basic right to food is universal and has been signed by states across the spectrum. Therefore, normatively and as a philosophic-political construction it is well established in positive law with unanimous agreement, which already gives the concept an advantage with respect to the rest of the human rights discourse. As previously noted, there is even a general agreement, in terms of international law, about what constitutes the right to be free from hunger with a specific measure about calorie levels. This normative viability shows that Vincent's proposal to build a common floor under the societies of the world through an inter-cultural dialogue was perfectly realistic and achievable. It also underlines the importance of the global economy as a domain within which to pursue the solidarist project.

'Normative viability' means here the fact that states from opposite corners of the world have come together on the grounds of positive law, and regardless of their cultural, political or social background signed international agreements that recognise the right to food. However, on practical grounds the scenario changes. According to Vincent's approach, taking the right to food as the minimum cross-cultural floor should avoid the controversies linked to most other aspects of the human rights agenda. While this seems true in the normative domain, it is much less so in the practical one. Even if Vincent's attention to the international economic structure in relation to hunger avoids the divisions over ideological relativism that plague humanitarian intervention on

individual security grounds, it generates new disputes around the nature of the concrete economic reforms necessary to implement the right to subsistence. This creates a problem not anticipated by Vincent: a disjuncture between normative consensus and practical implementation. The standard problem in the humanitarian intervention debate is why should a set of countries embrace policies in order to benefit other countries? Why should citizens of one country help citizens in another? The normative consensus on the right to food would seem to dispose of these problems and thus in principle open a smooth path to practical solutions. Wheeler appears to follow Vincent's expectations: 'feelings of sympathy for the suffering of others... might mean a willingness to bear the costs of a long-term strategy of forcible humanitarian intervention, but it most certainly requires liberal societies to take practical steps that would reduce the number of slow deaths through poverty and malnutrition'.<sup>33</sup> In practice, however, as seen in the previous subsection, the mechanics of implementation inevitably engage with wider ideological disputes about how the international economy should be organised and managed. For example, the commitments of the 1996 Declaration say things such as 'creating a stable political environment' where food security is respected as well as 'respect of all human rights and fundamental freedoms'.<sup>34</sup> These features are subject to a heated debate and are not as straight-forward or neutral as the commitment makes them sound. Because of this, normative consensus on the right to food does not lead to consensus on what practical policies to pursue. So long as the existing practices of the liberal international economic order seemed to be delivering substantial reductions in hunger, as appeared to be the case during the 1990s, this disjuncture could be ignored. But on the new FAO statistics it comes into sharp focus. The elimination of routine hunger within a reasonable timescale cannot be achieved without reforms to the global economy substantial enough to raise ideological discords located more in the debates about international political economy than human rights.

The answers to the question about why citizens of one country should take responsibility for the welfare of those in another can take different forms depending on the level at which the practical solution is sought: the individual (cosmopolitan solidarity), the state (sovereignty interpreted as self-responsibility for government and welfare), and the transnational (corporate and NGO rights and responsibilities). The parameters within which Vincent worked involved a society of states respecting each other's sovereignty, and that meant that the prime ground for implementation had to be in the international trade and financial structure, embodied in the global institutional framework of the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank. The legitimacy of this framework requires that all partners share in the joint gains, and therefore the conspicuous benefit of a group of them at the expense of others is a tension within the current system. The structure of the liberal international economic order is itself an expression of solidarism in that states agree to treat the market as an institution of international society. This normative agreement is backed up by practical measures both to ensure the efficient operation of the market on a global scale, and to guard against the instabilities and inequities that such a market generates.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the soft-law status of the right to

food, the liberal international economic order is embodied in much harder legal and organisational forms.

At this point a crucial irony becomes apparent. One of the key suppositions of all but the anti-globalisation positions is that opening up agricultural trade would produce major benefits in reducing both poverty and hunger in the poorer quarters of international society. Such opening is wholly in line with the general principles of a liberal international economic order, which means that there should be no ideological blockage between the right to food and the operation of a liberal world economy. Whether Vincent would have accepted the opening of agricultural trade as a means of implementing his project is a moot point, but the present practical reality is that the main industrial players in rich world (the US, the EU, Japan) all pursue highly protectionist policies towards their own agricultural sectors. They do this mainly for domestic social and political reasons, but the effect is to block the main path to the practical realisation of the normative consensus about the elimination of hunger. The blockage is an anomaly within the WTO framework, not between it and international society's goal of realising the basic right to subsistence. Proposals to reduce rich world agricultural subsidies encounter strong obstacles, the most recent being: the failure to drive the agricultural trade negotiations forward at the Johannesburg summit; the recent discord about Fishler's attempt to reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the European Union, which were strongly opposed by countries such as France; and the new USA farm bill, which will increase governmental agricultural support by 82 billion dollars over the next 10 years.<sup>36</sup>

This context sets Vincent's crucial conclusion into clear perspective: 'in regard to the failure to provide subsistence rights, it is not this or that government whose legitimacy is in question but the whole international economic system in which we are all implicated'.<sup>37</sup> This is Vincent's major statement linked to his claims about introducing reforms to the economic system. The reforms in the system are not just an option for helping out other countries, but an element that determines the legitimacy of the system itself. Without reform of the international structural elements that sustain hunger, the legitimacy of international society itself will erode. In the world after September 11 the amplified significance of this insight hardly needs to be underlined.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The previous discussion shows how crucial the distinction between the normative and the practical is for understanding Vincent's work, and therefore, for drawing our final conclusions in relation to the viability of his solidarist project. On the normative front, the right to food has undergone a thorough review in the last few years and reached a level of consensus across international society not seen in relation to any other human right. On the practical front, although progress has been achieved, international society faces a tougher test than ever after the latest statistics on hunger and the gap they show in relation to the normative commitments. The choice is radical: international

society has to abandon its normative goals or change significantly its economic practices. The first option has heavy moral implications, considering that it costs an average of 24,000 deaths per day. The second option requires as the key first step a significant and difficult change of political priorities within the main industrial powers in their policies on agricultural production and trade. As argued above, there is no conflict of principle between the WTO regime and the liberalisation of agricultural trade, but the blockage created by US, EU and Japanese agricultural protectionism nonetheless represents a major practical obstacle to the most obvious course of action open to international society to address the problem of hunger (the reform scenario described above). Despite some positive developments, Vincent's attempt to simplify the practical realisation of a human rights agenda through the right to food has thus proved to be more complicated in practice than his statements indicated. How international society reacts in relation to the 2015 goal will test the full viability of his ideas. The case of hunger does, however, support Vincent's idea that a more solidarist approach to human rights need not be incompatible with the principle of sovereignty that underpins international society. Vincent was cautious about this, writing his theoretical statements about the possibility of basic rights strengthening sovereignty in a hesitant tone: 'the state may be strengthened...' or 'we might extend a cautious welcome to both the penetration of the state' (our emphasis).<sup>38</sup> Yet the developments in international law regarding the right to food that followed in the 1990s corroborate how the achievements in this area are compatible with the principle of sovereignty.

We have argued that Vincent's key contribution to the human rights debate within the English school context was the idea that one should start bottom-up by finding the lowest common denominator normative commitment that could be agreed across cultures and using that as the foundation for building practical measures. The proposition is that starting with issues on which normative consensus can be, or has been, obtained is already a step in favour of a solidarist project of international society, and will bear more practical fruit than starting with issues where there is no such consensus, and not much prospect of building it. That said, Vincent also thought that those in a position to do something about the problem of hunger had a special obligation to do so. This analysis fits the present situation perfectly. The global normative consensus is in place, and those in a position to act are the wealthy group of industrial powers. The normative pressures on this group come not only from the moral obligation to do something about the problem of hunger, but also from the logic of the global trading regime that they should extend to agriculture the liberalising rules they demand for most other products and services. The present situation can thus be seen as a crucial test for Vincent's idea that a bottom-up, basic rights approach is the best way to develop a global human rights regime. If the normative consensus cannot produce action here, where it has both the hunger issue and the general principles of trade liberalisation in its favour, then it might be reasonable to conclude that it does not have the political potential that Vincent expected. In that case, Jackson's view that normative consensus is

mostly just insincere political posturing, often damaging to the structure of international order, would seem to be the more accurate interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

Considering that solidarism in relation to human rights has a prescriptive dimension on the level of what ‘ought to be’ and not just what ‘it is’, the remarkable consensus achieved recently on the right to food is already proof of the viability of one dimension of solidarism. It shows how solidarism is upheld in the normative sphere of international society, where the right to food as the highest expression of such viability developed during the 1990s. In the longer term, however, this will need to be coupled with a firmer practical application in order to keep its current value and avoid falling into empty rhetoric.

Therefore, the central issue in reaching some overall judgment on Vincent’s idea is the timescale over which it should be expected to operate. It is pretty easy to see that the practical application of Vincent’s basic rights project requires higher levels of legalisation at the normative level together with a series of reforms implemented in the international economic structure in combination with changes at the national level. Several proposals (including the international summits signed by the governments) show how this could be achieved within the parameters of the current system, and continuing with existing policy can no longer be taken as an adequate response: ‘A fair trading system, coherent international and national policies and targeted investment are all required if the world is to feed all its people. Trade reform that furthers this goal is both possible and of the utmost priority’.<sup>40</sup> But while the goal and the means are clear, the timescale is not. If no immediate action is taken that accelerates the reduction in the number of the world’s hungry should that be taken as reason to reject Vincent’s approach? What kind of process is it reasonable to expect when looking at the influence of normative consensus on practical action?

Perhaps the first fact to observe is that international efforts to eliminate hunger have been intensified in the last ten years, and this shows a rejection of leaving the numbers as they are. Efforts to narrow the gap between theory and practice through diverse proposals have taken place over the last decade and steps of progress on the practical solidarist side are illustrated by the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, in the United States) and the Everything But Arms agreement (EBA, in the European Union). These agreements offer incentives to the poorest developing countries to build their international market economy. The incentives include very low tariffs or no tariffs at all in selected products to enter the European and American markets respectively.

Even more important for Vincent’s argument is the observable dynamic of international society where a solidarist normative consensus is initially coupled with a pluralist practice, but later followed slowly by more solidarist actions. There are examples in international law that show this evolution, such as the international code of pesticides, which became internationally binding as a result of a progressive series of consultations over the years. The same applies to the WTO, which is today a stronger institution than the GATT of fifty years ago as the product of a continued effort in

expanding trade rules over the years.<sup>41</sup> Other testimonies of the practical movement towards the solidarist soft-law commitments are the just mentioned AGOA and EBA plans, though given their recent introduction, it is still too early to determine their impact. Specifically on the international trade-poverty-hunger link, concerns about agriculture have escalated in the rank of ministerial priorities over the last few years. Discontent about the process of agricultural liberalisation played a strong role in the collapse of the 1999 WTO Seattle meeting. As a consequence, a round of negotiations on agriculture was launched with the promise of delivering changes in the international trade system. The relevance of these normative steps is corroborated by the feelings of anxiety that have started to grow in both Brussels and Washington with regard to the fifth WTO ministerial meeting to be held in September. If, in the light of the latest FAO statistics, the richest core of countries does not provide substantial progress, different voices have warned about the possibility of a second collapse, something that the WTO cannot afford again.<sup>42</sup> On the issue of hunger, the immediate test confronting the international community arises from the latest figures. We cannot predict how this will be handled, but we can observe that the normative achievements on the right to food remain a potentially valuable foundation for a viable project of solidarism that international society has not seen on any other human rights front. The test of Vincent's proposition about basic rights is not yet complete, but there are precedents to suggest that over a longer period of time normative consensus can underpin a move from pluralist to solidarist practice.

This discussion leads to three observations about Vincent's contributions to English school thinking. The first, and most straightforward, is that there is more to the human rights agenda of the solidarists than the extreme and exceptional cases of citizens either oppressed by their state or finding themselves living in chaos without a functioning government. Those cases raise the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention. Vincent points to a different agenda triggered by routine practices and requiring not so much intervention as structural reform of the global economy. These agendas overlap where hunger is generated by famine or war, but they are fundamentally different, and the whole 'resident emergency' side of human rights has been relatively neglected in the solidarist literature that followed Vincent.

The second, and still most controversial, is that Vincent's basic rights approach is a valuable, and also mostly neglected, pathway into the English School's human rights agenda. We have argued that Vincent's idea of building cross cultural normative consensus on the least controversial elements of the human rights agenda is worth taking more seriously than it has been. It contrasts sharply with the 'hardest case first' approach typified by Dunne, Knudsen and Wheeler. The two approaches both contrast and complement each other, and need to be considered together in a more balanced solidarist debate. We have been able to show empirically that the basic rights approach is capable of generating a broad normative consensus. Because the evidence is not yet in, we have not been able to demonstrate a conclusive link between this and practical policy, but we have established the potentiality for such a link, and with the issue of the right to

subsistence we have opened up a case that needs to feature in subsequent analysis of solidarism.

The third observation is that Vincent's work underlines the urgent need to open the English school's debates about international society to the economic domain. His basic rights approach to the problem of hunger, as we have shown, simply cannot be pursued without engaging with the core debates of International Political Economy about the structure and operation of the world economy. That the English school should take on board the economic sector in relation to international society is not contested, as evidenced by many favourable references to it in the English school classics. What one cannot find is any follow up to these references. This rather glaring omission is often pointed out.<sup>43</sup> Wight talks of the Rationalist position in terms of diplomacy and commerce.<sup>44</sup> Bull notes trade as one of the four institutions in Wight's understanding of a states-system, and he also mentions it in his discussion of rules about cooperation in society.<sup>45</sup> Although Bull is critical of Wight's disinterest in economics, he nevertheless failed to develop this aspect in his own discussions of international society, though his later work on justice can be read as raising the question of international political economy.<sup>46</sup> This is all the more surprising given that he made a feature of the economic sector in his critique of those who wanted to take a Hobbesian interpretation of international anarchy. Bull argued that 'trade, symbolic as it is of the existence of overlapping through [sic? though?] different interests, is the activity most characteristic of international relationships as a whole'.<sup>47</sup> James Mayall came closest to making the connection between English school thinking and IPE by beginning to think about economic liberalism in international society terms. At one point he even argued for the existence of a sense of community in the economic sphere despite difference between North and South.<sup>48</sup> Given that he was positioned at the LSE alongside Susan Strange, he was well placed to bridge between the English school and IPE. But he seemed to lose faith in his earlier interpretation,<sup>49</sup> seeing economic nationalism returning on the back of national security concerns, and in his more recent works has largely refocused his attention toward nationalism.<sup>50</sup>

As Buzan has argued, the cost to the English school of failing to make this link have been considerable.<sup>51</sup> By narrowing the debate down to human rights, it has impoverished the whole understanding of solidarism, and made it seem as if there has been much less solidarist development in international society than in fact has been the case. This, in turn, has unbalanced the positions between solidarists and pluralists, making the pluralist case look stronger than it is, and the solidarist case weaker. In addition, neglect of the economic sector has made it much more difficult for the English school to explore the relationship between international and world society. If one takes the commitment to trade as a key element of international society, as both Bull and Wight did, then the massive development of norms, rules and institutions around the global economy over the last half century have to count in favour of the solidarist position. The fact that the main advocates of pluralism ignore the economic domain underlines this. The fact that the advocates of solidarism also ignore it is less easy to

understand, not least because nothing conceptual stands in the way of doing so. The attempt by the founding fathers of the English school to find a *via media* between liberalism and realism points almost unavoidably to engagement with the agenda of IPE, which is very similarly positioned. Consequently, both the English school and IPE are in pursuit of a holistic, methodologically pluralist understanding of international relations in which states, transnational actors and individuals are in continuous coexistence and interplay. Perhaps, in the end, Vincent's main contribution to English school thinking will be to open the door to this long overdue connection.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> For Dunne, see Tim Dunne (1998) *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, pp 160-176. For Wheeler, see Nicholas Wheeler (1997) 'The Dilemmas of Humanitarian Intervention', *International Political Science Review* 18:1, pp 9-25.
- <sup>2</sup> Dunne, note 1, pp 161-80. See also Iver B. Neumann (1997) 'R.J. Vincent', in I.B. Neumann and O.Wæver (eds), *The Future of International Relations: Masters in the Making?* London: Routledge, pp 38-64.
- <sup>3</sup> R. John Vincent (1986) *Human Rights and International Relations: Issues and Responses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 113-18.
- <sup>4</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 126; and R. John Vincent (1992) 'Modernity and Universal Human Rights' in Anthony McGrew and Paul Lewis (eds.), Global Politics, Cambridge, Polity Press, pp 286.
- <sup>5</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 150-2.
- <sup>6</sup> Dunne, note 1, pp 163-174. See also Neumann, note 2, pp 58.
- <sup>7</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 150-2.
- <sup>8</sup> Dunne, note 1, pp 163-171.
- <sup>9</sup> Dunne, note 1, pp 175.
- <sup>10</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 151.
- <sup>11</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 151.
- <sup>12</sup> Henry Shue (1996) *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence and US Foreign Policy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press.
- <sup>13</sup> R. John Vincent (1994), 'The Place of Theory in the Practice of Human Rights' in Pamela Beshoff and Christopher Hill, *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners and the Trade in Ideas*, London, Routledge, pp 36.
- <sup>14</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 126.

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- <sup>15</sup> The source of the ideas in this paragraph is Vincent, note 3, pp 113-126. In particular, the quotes are extracted from pages 115 and 125 respectively.
  - <sup>16</sup> This term is used by Wheeler in his 1997 piece, although in an email conversation he acknowledged Dunne's contribution in creating it.
  - <sup>17</sup> The quotes used in this paragraph come from Dunne, note 1, pp 175-76.
  - <sup>18</sup> Wheeler, note 1, pp 9-25.
  - <sup>19</sup> Nicholas Wheeler (2000) *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
  - <sup>20</sup> Neumann and Wæver, note 2, pp 51.
  - <sup>21</sup> Dunne, note 1, pp 165.
  - <sup>22</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 30.
  - <sup>23</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 29.
  - <sup>24</sup> FAO (1996) 'Technical Background Documents', *World Food Summit* <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w2612e/w2612e00.htm>
  - <sup>25</sup> FAO (1999) *State of Food Insecurity in the World* in <http://www.fao.org/docrep/> and FAO (2002) *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2002* <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/005/Y7352E/Y7352E00.HTM>
  - <sup>26</sup> FAO (2002) *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2002* <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/005/Y7352E/Y7352E00.HTM>
  - <sup>27</sup> World Forum on Food Sovereignty (WFFS) *Final Declaration of the World Forum on Food Security*, Cuba, 7 September 2001.
  - <sup>28</sup> See World Parliamentary Forum (WFP) 'Save the Earth Summit: a Sustainable World is Possible, Necessary and Urgent', *Declaration on the Rio + 10 Summit*, Johannesburg, 4 September 2002. See also People's Food Sovereignty (2002) *Food and Agriculture Statement* at [www.peoplesfoodsovereignty.org/new/new.htm](http://www.peoplesfoodsovereignty.org/new/new.htm) and National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) (2002) *Via Campesina Seattle Declaration* at <http://www.nffc.net/trade1.htm>
  - <sup>29</sup> See *Reducing Poverty and Hunger* (2002), a report elaborated by the FAO, IFAD and WFP, which has suggested a financial plan on the worldwide resources needed to overcome hunger: <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/004/Y6684E/Y6684E00.htm>
  - <sup>30</sup> Note 29, pp 21.
  - <sup>31</sup> UN (2001) 'Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: The Right to Food', Commission on Human Rights, Fifty-seventh session, 7 February.

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- <sup>32</sup> For specific data, see OECD (1998) *Open Markets Matter: The Benefits of Trade and Investment Liberalisation*, Paris, OECD.
  - <sup>33</sup> Wheeler, note 1, pp 22.
  - <sup>34</sup> FAO (1996) 'Food Requirements and Population Growth', *World Food Summit* <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w2612e/w2612e4a.htm>
  - <sup>35</sup> Barry Buzan (forthcoming-2004) *International Society and World Society*, Cambridge University Press, chapter 5.
  - <sup>36</sup> *Economist* (11/5/02) 'Trade Disputes: Dangerous Activities', *The Economist*, pp 91-93.
  - <sup>37</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 127.
  - <sup>38</sup> Vincent, note 3, pp 150-2.
  - <sup>39</sup> Robert Jackson (2000) *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp 122-129.
  - <sup>40</sup> WEF (2002) 'Agricultural Trade Task Force: Communique of Recommendations', New York. [www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf](http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf)
  - <sup>41</sup> For further details on these processes of legalisation, see Kenneth Abbott and Duncan Snidal (2000) 'Hard Law and Soft Law in International Governance', *International Organization*, 54:3, 420-456.
  - <sup>42</sup> See: Bruce Moon (2000) *Dilemmas of International Trade*, Colorado, Westview Press, and Joseph Stiglitz (2001) 'Protest and The Secret World of Financial Aid', *The Banker*, October. For the reactions on the latest hunger statistics, see: FAO (17 October 2002) *Progress in Reducing Hunger has Virtually Halted* at <http://www.fao.org/english/newsroom/news/2002/9620-en.html> and Environment News Services (16 October 2002), *850 Million Still Hungry on World Food Day* at <http://ens.com/ens/oct2002/2002-10-16-03.asp>
  - <sup>43</sup> J.D.B. Miller 'The Third World' in J.D.B. Miller and R.J Vincent, (eds) (1990) *Order and Violence: Hedley Bull and International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp70-4; James L. Richardson, 'The Academic Study of International Relations' in J.D.B. Miller and John Vincent, (eds) (1990) *Order and Violence: Hedley Bull and International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 148, 184; Andrew Hurrell 'Foreword to the Third Edition: *The Anarchical Society* 25 Years On', in Hedley Bull, (2002) *The Anarchical Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, xvii.
  - <sup>44</sup> Martin Wight (1991) *International Theory: The Three Traditions*. Leicester: Leicester University Press/Royal Institute of International Affairs, Edited by Brian Porter and Gabriele Wight. Pp 7-8.
  - <sup>45</sup> Hedley Bull 'Introduction: Martin Wight and the Study of International Relations' in M.Wight (1977) *Systems of States*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, p.16; Hedley Bull (1977) *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*. London: Macmillan, p.70.
  - <sup>46</sup> Hedley Bull (1991) 'Martin Wight and the theory of international relations' in Wight, note 45, xix-xx; Hedley Bull (1984) *Justice in International Relations*. Hagey Lectures, University of Waterloo, Ontario.

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- <sup>47</sup> Hedley Bull (1966) 'Society and Anarchy in International Relations' in H.Butterfield and M.Wight (eds) *Diplomatic Investigations*, London: Allen and Unwin, p42.
  - <sup>48</sup> James Mayall 'The Liberal Economy' in James Mayall (ed) (1982) *The Community of States: A Study in International Political Theory*, London: George Allen & Unwin.
  - <sup>49</sup> James Mayall (1984) 'Reflections on the “new” economic nationalism' *Review of International Studies* 10:4, 313-321.
  - <sup>50</sup> James Mayall (1990) *Nationalism and International Society* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; James Mayall (2000) *World Politics: Progress and its Limits*, Cambridge: Polity.
  - <sup>51</sup> Buzan, note 35, chapter 5.