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## **The English School's theory of International Society: a valuable concept to understand International Relations**

Teoria społeczeństwa międzynarodowego szkoły angielskiej:  
cenna koncepcja dla zrozumienia stosunków międzynarodowych

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This article aims to explore International Relations through the lenses of the English School and through the case study of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Cop26. In particular, the article aims to analyse the most notable concept created by the English School: International Society. To do so, the article starts off with a brief overview of the English School to cover its history and its place in IR, and then presents its three main concepts: International System, International Society, and World Society. Focusing on International Society, the article proceeds to describe the two main theoretical approaches of the International Society, that is Pluralism and Solidarism. Moreover, the article presents the debate between Order and Justice within the International Society. Finally, the article presents the existing international cooperation coping with climate change through the case study of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Cop26. The article presents it by applying the principles of the International Society and aims to demonstrate the reasons why the English School and International Society are better suited concepts than the more traditional theories of IR to understand why there exists international cooperation to deal with climate change.

**Keywords:** IR, English School, International Society, UNFCCC.

## The English School: A Brief Overview

The English School (ES) came into being in the late 1950s with the foundation of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics, when a group of UK scholars set out to explore international relations (IR) in a different way from the American scholars of IR. The ES scholars were more concerned “with the historical than the contemporary, with the normative than the scientific, with the philosophical than the methodological, with the principles than policy” (Butterfield, Wight, 1966).

The ES is usually considered to be the middle ground (Dunne, 2011) between neorealism and neoliberalism in the theories of International Relations (IR). Like neorealism and neoliberalism, the ES too believes that states are the primary actors in the international anarchy. Unlike neorealism and neoliberalism, however, the ES adopts a historical, interpretive and normative approach (Jackson, Sørensen, 2013) to understand the complex world of IR.

The scholars of the ES refuse to believe in the neorealist premise that the world of IR is explicable through the competition, which is based on the material capabilities, among states. At the same time, the scholars of the ES do not believe in the neoliberal interpretation of IR as a community, based on human progress, which is in constant evolution and strives for a perpetual peace (Jackson, Sørensen, 2013).

The scholars of the ES regard “international relations as a society of states in which the principal actors are states-people who are specialized in the practice of statecraft. It views statecraft as a very important human activity” (Jackson, Sørensen, 2013, p. 134). The focus on human activity is what differentiates the international system from the international society. Barry Buzan, one of the most relevant personalities of the ES, defined the two in the following way: international system “is about power politics amongst states” (Buzan, 2001, p. 474); international society “is about the institutionalisation of shared interest and identity amongst states” (Buzan, 2001, p. 475).

Together with world society – understood as “individuals, non-state organizations and ultimately the global population as a whole as the focus of global societal identities” (Buzan, 2001, p. 475) – international system and international society are the three main concepts developed by the ES. International system, international society and world society should not be understood as separate, independent concepts; on the contrary, they are interdependent, and together they form the world of IR. Notably, international society is the ES’ most valuable concept to understand IR.

## **What is International Society?**

Hedley Bull, another prominent scholar of the ES, affirmed that international society “exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions” (Bull, 2012, p. 13).

States are the main actors in the international society. Once states realise that they have a certain degree of shared values, norms, identities and interests with other states, then they are likely to form an international society – which is based on such values, norms, identities and interests. However, states have to mutually recognise each other in order to create the international society.

Such mutual recognition is a form of social practice that is necessary to build an identity relationship. It is this societal element that brings states together in the first place, and that consolidates them throughout time. In Buzan’s words, indeed, international society “puts the creation and maintenance of shared norms, rules and institutions at the centre of the IR theory” (Buzan, 2004, p. 7).

An international society is not only about cooperation due to some shared norms, rules, values and institutions. Buzan believes that the international society is built upon five primary institutions: balance of power, international law, diplomacy, great power management and war (Buzan, 2004).

Although these five institutions are the pillars of the international society, they are not all about cooperation. Therefore, international society is not necessarily all about cooperation and shared interests, it is also about conflict and about the relationships between different institutions of international societies that ultimately shape international order.

## **Pluralist or Solidarist International Society?**

“Is international society a system for preserving the distinctiveness and independence of states within a limited framework of shared rules, or does it develop [...] into increasing degrees of harmonisation and integration [...], not to mention intervention?” asks Buzan (Buzan, 2001). The question can be answered differently according to how we understand international society – either a pluralist or a solidarist one.

The pluralist international society “adheres to a more traditional conception of IR” (Murray, 2016, p. 2) that highlights the role played by sovereign states. Indeed, in a pluralist international society, the institutional groundwork is based upon the presuppositions that states maintain order among them (Dunne, 2011). States are sovereign, and “sovereignty is about the cultivation of political difference and distinctness” (Buzan, 2001). This is why, in the pluralist international society, states adopt a non-interference policy and do not meddle with other sovereign states (Jackson, Sørensen, 2013). In this case, “the scope for international society is fairly minimal, centred on shared concerns about international order under anarchy” (Buzan, 2001, p. 478).

The solidarist international society, however, answers the question differently. Buzan affirms that “the potential scope for international society is somewhat wider, possibly embracing shared norms about such things as limitations on the use of force, and acceptable ‘standards of civilisation’ with regard to the relationship between states and citizens (that is, human rights)” (Buzan, 2001, p. 478).

A solidarist international society “was thought of as prioritising justice” (Kaczmarek, 2017, p. 8) because “states have duties to humanity” (Kaczmarek, 2017, p. 4). Indeed, the solidarist international society sees individuals as important actors in the international society – which is why individuals have the right to be protected by their states. This means that sovereign states can interfere with other sovereign states if, for example, the citizens are victims of great suffering perpetrated by their own state (Jackson, Sørensen, 2013).

### **Order and Justice in the International Society**

Because states are sovereign, they can recognise each other and form an international society. However, precisely because they are sovereign, states are also responsible for what happens in the international society. Thus, what is the scope of the international society?

Bull thinks that states should guarantee international order (Bull, 2012). Indeed, the responsibility to preserve international order – that is the order among states – lies in the hands of the sovereign states. States should do so by managing their relations with one another. However, as Bull affirms (Bull, 2012), this claim has a normative character: states should, indeed, guarantee order in the international society, but this does not mean that states actually do so. Bull remarks that “great powers, like small powers, frequently behave in such a way as to promote disorder rather than order” (Bull, 2012, pp. 199–201).

In other words, the main goal of international society is the promotion and preservation of international order. The responsibility for sustaining order between states belongs to the great powers (Jackson, Sørensen, 2013). The fact that states, being the primary actors in the international society, should be responsible for guaranteeing and preserving order in the international society is also connected with the concept of justice.

Bull affirms that justice “in any of its forms, is realisable only in a context of order” (Bull, 2012, p. 82). Therefore, “international society, by providing a context of order of some kind, [...] may be regarded as paving the way for the equal enjoyment of rights of various kinds. It is true also that international society at present, through such nearly universal organs as the United Nations and its specialised agencies, is formally committed to much more than the preservation of minimum order or coexistence: it espouses ideas of international or interstate justice, and of individual or human justice” (Bull, 2012, p. 82).

### **Case Study: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change & COP26**

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is an example that can help us understand how international society can work in practice. The UNFCCC was drafted in May 1992 and came into force in March 1994. As of today, 197 states have ratified the Convention and are its active Parties. The primary goal of the UNFCCC, as stated in Article 2, is “to achieve, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Convention, stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (UN, 1992).

According to the UN, this was a remarkable historical moment – several states around the world recognised that there was (and there still is) a serious threat related to climate change, which is caused by human activities, and that affects all individuals and states in the world (What Is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change? | UNFCCC, n.d.). Therefore, the Convention bounded sovereign states to act in the interests of human safety – a concept that is, indeed, connected to justice, as mentioned by Bull.

The elements highlighted in the UNFCCC were ratified and specified further in the Kyoto Protocol, which was adopted in December 1997, but entered into force in 2005. The main goal of the Kyoto Protocol is to bind “developed countries, and

places a heavier burden on them under the principle of common but differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities, because it recognises that they are largely responsible for the current high levels of GHG emissions in the atmosphere”. (What Is the Kyoto Protocol? | UNFCCC, n.d.).

As a consequence of the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol, the yearly Conferences of the Parties (COP) have been organised every year since 1995. The latest, COP26, took place in Glasgow in November 2021. There, states agreed on pursuing the following goals: secure global net-zero by mid-century (2030) and keep 1.5 degrees within reach, adapt to protect communities and natural habitats, mobilise finance, and work together to deliver (COP26 Goals – UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) at the SEC – Glasgow 2021, n.d.).

### **Conclusive remarks**

Why do almost all states in the world cooperate when it comes to climate change? Why do sovereign states – in spite of their different values, norms and identities – agree on certain common measures that they deem necessary to prevent global temperatures from rising even higher and causing irreversible damage? More generally, why are there norms of international character that prohibit certain behaviour of states, or that oblige them to behave in a specific manner and not in another?

Neorealism and neoliberalism cannot answer these questions satisfactorily. Neorealism affirms that states can cooperate if they are going to achieve something out of such cooperation. At the same time, neoliberalism cannot give a satisfying answer either because states do not necessarily cooperate all the time. International society, on the contrary, helps us answer the questions. Sovereign states, operating within the international society, recognise that there is a common problem and that, irrespective of their own values and interpretations of such problem, they need to act together to solve it.

International society goes beyond the dichotomy ‘either/or’: conflict and cooperation both exist in the international society because states are not constantly conflictual and/or cooperative. This is why the concept of international society is valuable: international society provides a solid framework to understand how IR works in a more comprehensive and inclusive way.

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