INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE CONCEPT OF "INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY": UNDERSTANDING THE RELEVANCE OF THE ENGLISH SCHOOL

AS RELAÇÕES INTERNACIONAIS E O CONCEITO DE "SOCIEDADE INTERNACIONAL": EXAMINANDO A IMPORTÂNCIA DA ESCOLA INGLESA

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Abstract: The End of the Cold War has cast doubt over the state-centrism of International Relations (IR). However, events in the 21st century, brought back an assertive United States and the sense of a return to extreme Realpolitik. Given these transformations, this paper asks if the so-called English School theory is still relevant to the understandings of international relations. This theory offers an important theoretical toolkit capable of critically reflecting on the complexities intrinsic to the contemporary world. Its strength stems from how the concept of "international society" provides students with a flexible instrument, that emphasises the relevance of the social character of interstate relations. Its features allow IR students to have a more historical and normative approach to the subject. This concept keeps the state at the centre stage, while not completely excluding neither a systemic nor a "human" oriented view.

Key words: English School, international society, International Relations Theory

Resumo: Com o fim da guerra fria, o "estado-centrismo" das Relações Internacionais começou a ser questionado. Contudo, eventos no século 21, trouxeram de volta um Estados Unidos assertivo e um sentimento de retorno à um viés realista. Dada estas transformações, este artigo questiona se a chamada teoria da Escola Inglesa ainda é relevante para compreender as relações internacionais. Esta teoria oferece ferramentas teóricas capazes de refletir criticamente sobre a complexidade do mundo contemporâneo. Seu ponto forte se baseia em como o conceito de "sociedade internacional" permite à estudantes um instrumento flexível, que reforça o caráter social das relações internacionais. Suas características também possibilitam uma abordagem mais histórica e normativa sobre o assunto. Este conceito mantém o Estado como protagonista, sem excluir visões sistêmicas ou mais "humanas".

Palavras chave: Escola Inglesa, sociedade internacional, Teorias das Relações Internacionais

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War has called into question traditional tenets of the discipline of International Relations (IR). New forms of thinking, such as Poststructuralism, Feminism and Critical Theory challenged the discipline's entrenched state-centrism. The globalisation debate was paradigmatic to this shift, in the way that it led to the perception that the state was irreversibly losing its sovereignty to non-state actors, such as transnational corporations, multinational organizations and supranational bodies. However, the new century and the attacks of 11 September, 2001, marked the return of an assertive USA, and a renewed reassurance over the role of the state in the international arena. More recently, the election of Donald Trump and his discourse of "taking back control" seems to justify the idea that the world is done with globalisation, and that it is returning to an age of Realpolitik.

Given the above conjuncture, this paper asks if the English School (ES) of IR can provide a good understanding of the contemporary global scenario. With so many meta-theoretical questions casting doubt on the competence of the discipline to provide a good picture of international affairs, how well does the ES fare, especially in comparison to other paradigms? What are its strengths? How has it been used? Is it a good analytical tool?

This analysis argues that the ES provides a great analytical tool for understanding contemporary international relations. Its strength stems from how the concept of *international society*[2] – the theory's central concept – provides students with a flexible instrument, that emphasises the relevance of the social character of international relations. Its features allow IR students to have not just a descriptive, but also a historical and normative view of the subject. This concept keeps the state at the centre stage, while not completely excluding neither a systemic nor a more "human" oriented view.

For this endeavour, this work will be divided into the following three parts: First, the idea of *international society* will be defined and conceptualized. Also, the first section will examine how the concept of *international society* contrasts with the ideas of "international

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[2] Key concepts will be *italicized* to separate its meaning from general ideas.

system" and "world society", each stemming from different traditions of political thought. The second part will outline how the concept has been used within the ES. It will draw examples from a variety of scholars linked to the School to highlight its historical, normative and social analytical strengths. Finally, the contrasts and parallels with other theoretical paradigms will be examined. In special, it will look on how three other mainstream theories – Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism – resemble and differ from the ES.

Conceptualizing *international society*

The idea of *international society* is not exclusive to the ES. As it will be argued bellow, this concept finds parallels in other theories. Nonetheless, it plays a dominant role in ES. The origins of the ES date back to the establishment of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics in 1959 and the work of its founding members. The Committee was engaged in developing "a new analysis of international relations" (DUNNE, 2013: p.134). There was a feeling of dissatisfaction towards what at the time was the dominant paradigm of IR, Realism. The realist approach neglected important aspects of international relations, such as its moral and ethical dimensions. Dunne observes that "the Committee wished to orient the group around a normative theoretical agenda" (1998: p.96). In this context, the concept of *international society* would be fundamental to the commitment of rethinking IR in more "social" terms.

But, how exactly the ES defines *international society*? Bull and Watson give a concise definition, that goes beyond the simple meaning relating to a crude interaction amongst states:

> "[…] a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements." (1984: p.1)

The *international society* concept puts "the social" back in the international: states behave under the influence of rules and institutions, that guide their conducts; at the same time, these states exert influence over how these rules and institutions are shaped, just like individuals in a society (BUZAN, 2014: p.13). Thus, the international is socialised, in the sense that states should not be seen simply as black-boxes, rationally seeking survival; rather, the socialisation – which refers to the relationship between states – is what guides behaviour.

The ES distinguishes *international society* from *international system. International system* exists "when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some measure – as parts of a whole" (BULL, 2012: p.9). Therefore, the *international system*, is an "under socialised" version of interstate relationships. The difference between *system* and *society* can be traced back to Martin Wight's study of the three traditions of international theory.

In the 1950s, Wight acknowledged that the study of IR had been dominated by *Realism*, *Rationalism* and *Revolutionism*. Wight describes as *Realists* "those who emphasize, in international relations, the element of anarchy, of power politics, and of warfare." (1991: p.15). Realists draw their ideas from Hobbes and Machiavelli. Wight indicates that for Realists "there is no natural society or community of states; society is created by a social contract." (*ibid*: p.31). The problem is that the "social contract" is only present inside the national states, and according to *Realists*, unless there is a world government enforcing this social contract, there is no possibility of a true international society.

Another tradition is *Revolutionism,* which is a theory that "demands homogeneity among the members of international society, i.e. states, it requires doctrinal and structural conformity, and ideological homogeneity between states" (*ibid*: p.42). *Revolutionism* is mainly associated with the writings of Kant, who, in his *Perpetual Peace* essay, offers a hypothetical treaty, where perpetual peace is achieved only when all states of the *international society* become constitutional republics. Revolutionists proclaim a "world society of individuals, which overrides nations or states" (*ibid*: p.45). In the ES lexicon, *world society* is described as a cosmopolitan idea that takes "the global population as a

whole as the focus of global societal identities and arrangements and puts transcendence of the state system at the centre of IR theory" (BUZAN, 2014: p.13).

Finally, *Rationalists* are defined as "those who concentrate on, and believe in the value of, the element of international intercourse in a condition predominantly of international anarchy" (WIGHT, 1991: p.13). This tradition draws from the work of Grotius, a 17th century international law jurist, whose works stood as a middle way, or *via media*, between customary and positive law. The *Grotian* tradition is called *Rationalism* because individuals choose to observe law, not by coercion, but as the result of a reasoned decision. In the same way, states in their international relations obey laws because it is rationally mutually advantageous.

It is in the *Rationalist* tradition where the ES concept of *international society* is located. Wight declares that "[t]he Rationalist tradition is the broad middle road of European thinking." (1991: p.14). It is in the middle of the spectrum between *Realism* and *Revolutionism*. Buzan argues that the ES thought is "built around a triad of three key concepts" (2014: p.12), which are the *international system*, *international society* and *world society*. This triad brings a "methodological pluralism" to the ES, in a way that these three concepts rather than clashing with each other, actually, "operate simultaneously" (BUZAN, 2001: p.476). Bull maintains that the essence of Wight's teachings was "that the truth about international politics had to be sought not in any one of these patterns of thought but in the debate among them" (1976: p.110)

Usage in the English School

Given that the importance of *international society* lies on the fact that it stresses the social character of interstate relations, and works as a *via media* of IR traditions, how exactly does the ES employ this concept?

By analysing Hedley Bull's classic, *The Anarchical Society* (2012), originally published in 1977, some light can be shed on the usefulness of the *international society* concept. The book is an "inquiry into the nature of order in world politics and in particular in the society

of sovereign states" (BULL, 2012: p.xxxiv). Bull investigates the nature of the *international society*, by inspecting the institutions of balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war and great power management. Bull contextualizes the evolution of these institutions in a historical perspective, comparing them with the contemporary political world.

One of the facts that distinguishes the ES, is its interest in history. The norms and institutions that constitute the *international society* are not static, they evolve over time. *Realism,* on the other hand, seems to give a historical account that is mechanical and based on the recurrence of power politics, while the *Revolutionists* see in history a way to look for possibilities of future progress. Buzan and Little (2014) argue that the historical focused branch of the ES mainly pursued two projects: first, to study the comparative formation of different international societies and to grasp the relevance of past achievements in today's society (WATSON, 1992); and secondly, to concentrate more specifically on how the contemporary global *international society* expanded from a formerly exclusively European *international society* (BULL and WATSON, 1986).

Returning to Bull's *Anarchical Society*, another aspect of his work recurrent in ES is how the concept of *international society* can be used normatively. Bull (2012: p.74-94) comments on the contending topic of order versus justice in international politics. He investigates the argument that the modern *international society* was divided between the conflicting interests of the developed countries, that conferred to *order* primacy over *justice*, and third world countries that defended *justice* over *order*. The *order-justice* dilemma is central to the *pluralist-solidarist* debate. Buzan defines *pluralism* as the representation of a "disposition towards a state-centric mode of association in which sovereignty and non-intervention serve to contain and sustain cultural and political diversity", in contrast, *solidarism* refers to "the disposition either to transcend the states system with some other mode of association or to develop it beyond a logic of coexistence" (2014: p.16).

During the 2000s there was an extensive *pluralist-solidarist* debate on humanitarian intervention. Jackson (2000), defended that a *pluralist international society* was the best

option to achieve freedom and respect for human diversity. He argues that the broad consent of member states, through established institutions, such as the UN security council, should be the only way that foreign interventions could be legitimated. Conversely, the *solidarist* Wheeler (2000) defends the argument that the *international society* has changed, and there are new rules legitimizing intervention through the support of national public opinion.

Another feature of Bull's classic (2012: p.224-308), recurrent in the ES, is the investigation of the claim that the *international system* is in decline, due to the ineptitude of the *international society* in dealing with new transnational concerns such as environmental problems or gender inequality, and the increased global importance of non-state actors, such as transnational advocacy groups. Central to this thematic, is the investigation of how the more human-centred *world society* can – and if it normatively "should" – transcend the limits imposed by the state.

Buzan warned that the *world society* concept was "the least well-developed" of ES concepts (2001: p.476). He later attempted to address this problem by improving the ES theoretical taxonomy (BUZAN, 2004). He differentiated concepts such as *primary* and *secondary institutions*, where the former are the social institutions classically defined by the ES, such as diplomacy and sovereignty, and the latter, institutions designed by states, such as IOs. Furthermore, Buzan distinguishes *first* from *second-order societies*, where *first-order* describes societies which members are individuals, and *second-order* those which members are collectivities, such as states. Clark (2007) works on the differences between *world* and *international society*, defining both concepts as distinct ontologies. He finds evidence that transnational *world society* actors, such as advocacy groups, are increasingly able to influence the constitution of *international society*. Hurrel (2007) depicts a world society in which governance is increasingly falling beyond the state, into the hands of markets and civil society networks.

International society and other IR theories

To properly grasp the usefulness of an item, it is important to compare it with available alternatives. This section aims to sketch some of the meta-theoretical parallels and contrasts between the ES and other mainstream IR paradigms. This comparison provides additional insight into the ontological, methodological and epistemological aspects that constitute the concept of *international society*. For this endeavour, this part of the article examines whether the idea of an international society composed of norms, rules and institutions is present in other IR conceptualizations, especially those that have dominated the discipline since the mid-20th century.

As previously mentioned, *Realism* is better associated with the concept of *system*, rather than *society*. There is an impression that *Realists* blatantly ignore social and moral considerations, denying the existence of a true *international society*, but, it is not a totally accurate affirmation. The major difference is that if there is anything that resembles the ES idea of an *international society* in *Realism*, it is subordinate to power and therefore to the will of those who possess the greatest power. Some classical IR realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, acknowledge the existence of international law, and therefore the existence of *international society* institutions. However, it should be noted that acknowledging the existence of international law is not "tantamount to asserting that it is as effective as a legal system as the national legal systems are and that, more particularly, it is effective in regulating and restraining the struggle for power on the international scene" (MORGENTHAU, 2006: p.285). In this way, for realists, an international society would be simply the product of the will of the most powerful.

For *Neorealists*, states are functionally-like units, rationally interested in survival, under an anarchical and decentralized structure, that is defined by differentiated capabilities (WALTZ, 1979). Waltz negates the existence of an *international society*, but does so in a way to achieve the theoretical *elegance* of simplicity and explanatory power. For Waltz, theorizing requires abstraction, and by abstracting there is a need to leave "some things aside in order to concentrate on others" (*ibid*: p.10). In this way Waltz ends up excluding from his theory "questions about the cultural, economic, political, and military interactions

of states" (*ibid*: p.80), factors that are indispensable for understanding the ES concept of *international society*.

How *Liberalism* defines international society has been already elucidated by the description of Kantian *Revolutionism*. It is important to bear in mind, that although, teleologically, *Liberalism* longs for a progressive *world society* of individuals, Kant actually meant a society of states in his *Perpetual Peace*. Doyle (1986) develops a Kantian theory where democratic states lead a peaceful relationship with each other, but display aggressive attitudes toward non-democratic ones. *Liberal* theories, like the *democratic peace theory*, just provide a description of the international society – such a society is peaceful because its states adopt a democratic constitution. *Liberal Peace Theory* describes it as "democratic", but its idea of international society is ontologically restricted, very different from the more comprehensive ES concept. Therefore, it cannot answer properly many questions, for example: how it becomes democratic, how its institutions and norms develop, or why some states may behave properly in the liberal sense – perhaps like China does – but, without completely adopting a democratic constitution.

Buzan links the *neo*-variant of *Liberalism* with the notion of a *solidarist international society* because *neoliberals* show "a normative aspiration to identify structures that promote cooperation and to improve the peacefulness and justice of the human condition" (2014: p.30). *Neoliberal* theories rely on the concept of *regimes* to explain the possibility of cooperation, which Krasner defines as: "sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge" (1982: p.186). However, *neoliberals* also deviate ontologically from the ES. Their work focus on how international institutions facilitate cooperation (STERLING-FOLKER: p.114), but mostly, they refer to what the ES calls *secondary* institutions, that is, formal international organizations and institutions. They are not much interested in how *primary* or informal institutions, *such as diplomacy or international law*, act as constitutive elements of the *international society*.

Methodologically the ES strikingly differs from *Neorealism and Neoliberalism*. The *neo*-variants are heavily influenced by positivism, the epistemological belief that "facts are out

there to be discovered and that there is only one way to do this, only one form of reliable knowledge, that generated by methods based on the natural sciences" (BROWN and AINLEY: p.33). In contrast, the ES has been associated with the *classical approach*, which derives from "philosophy, history and law" and relies "upon the exercise of judgement" (BULL, 1966: p.361). The ontological considerations of the ES, with its focus on the norms and rules of the *international society,* coupled with the *classical* methodology, enable the ES to delve into normative considerations. Such considerations are ontologically and epistemologically constrained in the *neo*-variants of *Liberalism* and *Realism.*

Constructivism connection with the concept of *international society* is embedded in the same "anti-positivist" approach of the ES. Furthermore, there is a shared consciousness that the *international society* is a social construct. Wendt even affirms that Bull have advanced an "important constructivist approach to international politics" (1999: p.3). But, despite having similarities, *Constructivis*m and the ES contrast in some aspects. As Buzan affirms, there is a stark difference in "the historicism of the English School versus Wendt's ahistoricism" and also in their different epistemological roots, the English school is founded on "the study of history, political theory and international law, whereas constructivism grew out of debates about epistemology and method" (2014: p.33). Nonetheless, there is a sense that the *ES* and *Constructivism* could profit from cross-fertilization (HENDERSON, 2001). Although, Buzan warns: "strengths would be lost by trying to conflate them" (2014: p.36).

In summary, the notion of international society is not completely absent from other theoretical backgrounds. What separates the ES concept of *international society* from others, are its ontological emphasis on the societal aspects of international relations, and its methodological and epistemological focus on history, political philosophy and the "exercise of judgement". These elements offer the constitutive base that justify the usefulness of the *international society* concept, as argued in this work. Even when it finds a broader common ground with other theories, such as *Constructivism*, the ES still offers a distinctive meta-theoretical style that can be unique and enticing to IR students.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to analyse how useful the ES and its concept of *international society* are to the study of international relations. It looked at how the concept has been defined, applied, and how it compares to other schools of thought. It has shown that the ES provides a theoretical approach that is descriptively, historically, and normatively important to understanding contemporary international relations and its complexities. Furthermore, the ES have in its DNA a penchant for engaging and with other approaches, as demonstrated in the three traditions study of Martin Wight.

It should be noted however, that although out of the scope of this paper, it would be an advantage to engage the ES with more critical IR approaches, such as Poststructuralism, Feminism and Post-colonialism. In this way, a more thorough critique could investigate what would be perceived as limitations to the ES approach. For example, the ES can be accused of leaning towards "euro-centrism" from the fact that in its historical analysis it has centred on an originally European international society; also, there is an apparent lack of focus on research topics related to gender. Nonetheless, instead of exclusionary, the ES has always displayed an openness to new debates. Therefore, this kind of criticism will actually enrich, rather than diminish, the ES's intellectual strengths.

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