

A Realist critique of the English School

DALE C. COPELAND

Over the past decade, the English School of International Relations (IR) has made a remarkable resurgence. Countless articles and papers have been written on the School.¹ Some of these works have been critical, but most have applauded the School's efforts to provide a fruitful 'middle way' for IR theory, one that avoids the extremes of either an unnecessarily pessimistic realism or a naively optimistic idealism. At the heart of this *via media* is the idea that, in many periods of history, states exist within an international society of shared rules and norms that conditions their behaviour in ways that could not be predicted by looking at material power structures alone. If the English School (ES) is correct that states often follow these rules and norms even when their power positions and security interests dictate alternative policies, then American realist theory – a theory that focuses on power and security drives as primary causal forces in global politics – has been dealt a potentially serious blow.

This article will argue that American realism remains a more useful starting point than the English School for building strong explanatory and predictive IR theory. From the realist perspective, there are two major problems with the English School as it is currently constituted. The first has to do with its lack of clarity as a putative theory of international politics. For American social scientists, it is difficult to figure out what exactly the School is trying to explain, what its causal logic is, or how one would go about measuring its core independent (causal) variable, 'international society'. As it stands, the English School is less a theory that provides falsifiable hypotheses to be tested (or that have been tested) than a vague approach to thinking about and conceptualising world politics. It offers descriptions of international societies through history and some weakly defined hypotheses associating these societies with greater cooperation in the system, but not much else. This does not mean that the School could not build on its suggestive descriptions and initial hypotheses to develop a rigorous and testable theory of international relations. Yet up to the present time, little work has been done to further this objective.

The second problem from the realist standpoint concerns the idea that international societies of shared rules and norms play a significant role in pushing states towards greater cooperation than one would expect from examining realist theories alone. As I will show, the English School ignores key implications of anarchy that any theory of international relations must grapple with – in particular, the impact of

¹ For an extensive bibliography on the English School organised by Barry Buzan, see the English School website at <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/polis/englishschool/>>. Given length restrictions on a forum essay, this article references only a sample of English School works.

leaders' uncertainty about the present and future intentions of other states. Leaders must worry that the other state is not as benign as its diplomatic claims to moderation might suggest. That is, they worry that the other will try to cheat on current rules or ignore them when the material conditions change in its favour – and at the extreme, launch a premeditated attack. Yet even when leaders are fairly sure that the other is currently a cooperative actor, they know that the other may change its spots later on. States must therefore worry that the other will use any growth in power that it acquires through cooperation to harm their security and interests in the future. Because the English School has not tackled these issues (in contrast to American institutionalist approaches), it provides few insights into how uncertainty about the other state's behaviour can be moderated in an anarchical environment. The School thus cannot say when and under what conditions international societal norms will or will not have an effect on state behaviour.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I will offer a short overview of the English School, concentrating on elements of the approach that have the most relevance to the debate with American realism. Second, the article will lay out in more detail the two critiques summarised above. Finally, in the concluding section, I will discuss the practical agenda for transforming the English School approach into a theory that can compete with American realist and institutional arguments.

Before proceeding, I should pre-empt one concern that may arise immediately. Some ES supporters might object that this essay amounts to an artificial forcing of the American positivist standards adopted by US realists onto a school of thought that operates in an inherently more descriptive and interpretive way.² Such an objection would be misplaced. I am not seeking to impose some narrow definition of correct methodology. Rather, the article simply starts from an assertion that almost all scholars in the 'big three' American paradigms – realism, liberalism, and constructivism – would agree upon: namely, that there *are* causal forces out there (power, domestic factors, shared ideas, and so on) that drive state behaviour, and that our collective goal is to understand when and how these forces operate, and with what relative explanatory salience. Orienting the article, therefore, is one basic question: What causal arguments does the English School contribute to the mix, what has it ignored, and how can its weaknesses be overcome? Until this question is confronted head-on by ES scholars, I would argue, the school will remain unnecessarily on the fringes of theoretical debates in the field.

The English School approach

At the most general level, the English School takes a very broad and eclectic approach to world politics, one which examines the interaction between three core elements: international system, international society, and world society.³ (Other

² See Roger Epp, 'The English School on the Frontiers of International Society: A Heurmenautic Recollection', *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 47–63; Timothy Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), pp. 7–9.

³ See Barry Buzan, 'The English School: An Underexploited Resource in IR', *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (2001), pp. 471–488; Richard Little, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:3 (2000), pp. 395–422.

labels for the three-fold division are Hobbesian, Grotian, and Kantian,⁴ or alternatively, realist, rationalist, and revolutionist.⁵) The international-system component focuses on the power politics that results from the mere interactions of states with one another; the system is formed simply by regular contact, and need not involve any sharing of rules or norms.⁶ International society, on the other hand, involves both a system of interacting states *and* the institutionalisation of shared rules and norms of state conduct. In Bull's often-cited phrase, an 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.'⁷ The concept of world society goes quite a bit further. Whereas the idea of an international society is based on states, the world-society component highlights individuals and non-state organisations as the key actors, and looks to the transcendence of the states system through the role of shared identities between these actors.⁸

Despite the inclusion of these three elements in most discussions of the English School, the innovative dimension of the School – and the one that almost always occupies the central focus of scholarly works – is undoubtedly the second one, namely, international society.⁹ Realist thinking aligns with the first element, the power politics of the international system. To challenge and go beyond realist thinking, the English School stresses that states do not exist merely in an anarchic system driven by material power structures; such a system is an 'anarchical *society*' of states, guided by shared norms on the proper ways of behaviour.¹⁰ Some ES scholars, particularly solidarists (discussed below), may highlight the importance of individuals and non-state actors, but they also typically found their arguments on a sense of a global international society whose cosmopolitan values (such as support of universal human rights) are widespread and increasingly internalised.

The notion that most international systems contain an international society which inclines the system towards order and cooperation is thus the fundamental idea setting the English School apart from its North American realist and Marxist competitors.¹¹ When it comes to conceptualising the nature of international society,

⁴ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977); A. Claire Cutler, 'The "Grotian Tradition" in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 17 (1991), pp. 41–65.

⁵ Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1991).

⁶ Barry Buzan, 'Rethinking the Solidarist-Pluralist Debate In English School Theory', paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, New Orleans, March 2002, pp. 2–3; Buzan, 'English School', pp. 474–7; Bull, *Anarchical Society*, p. 10.

⁷ Bull, *Anarchical Society*, p. 13. On the distinction between a system and a society of states, see Roy Jones, 'The English School of International Relations: A Case for Closure', *Review of International Studies*, 7 (1981), pp. 1–13; Alan James, 'System or Society?', *Review of International Studies*, 19 (1993), pp. 269–88.

⁸ Buzan, 'English School', p. 475.

⁹ Peter Wilson, 'The English School of International Relations: A Reply to Sheila Grader', *Review of International Studies*, 15 (1989), p. 54.

¹⁰ Bull, *Anarchical Society*; R. J. Barry Jones, 'The English School and the Political Construction of International Society', in B.A. Robertson (ed.), *International Society and the Development of International Relations Theory* (London: Pinter, 1998), pp. 231–45.

¹¹ Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd edn. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), pp. 173–81.

however, ES scholars separate into two groups: pluralists and solidarists.¹² Pluralists adopt a more minimalist state-centric notion of international society, arguing that sovereignty norms incline states to cultivate differences between themselves. As in American regime theory (neoliberal institutionalism), states in the pluralist argument are largely self-centred actors using the rules and norms to further their own interests. Pluralist states shun intervention in the name of human rights, and place geopolitical order over the promotion of global justice. International society, in this view, encourages states to co-exist through the mutual recognition of sovereignty, but it does not do much more.¹³

Solidarist scholars, on the other hand, lean towards the more revolutionary or Kantian end of the spectrum. Elites in many if not all states in international society do more than simply acknowledge sovereign co-existence; they also share a sense of common global values and human rights. Although solidarists emphasise the role of individuals and transnational groups (thus shading over into arguments about world society), the important role of the state is still recognised. Yet the state is expected to actively pursue goals of justice as well as order, and thus to intervene in other states' affairs when human rights are being abused. States in solidarism thus will often put aside pluralist norms of sovereignty and non-intervention to further the development of a shared global morality, even at some cost to interstate order.¹⁴

In sum, both pluralist and solidarist factions within the English School stress the fundamental role of international society in fostering interstate cooperation. Pluralists, however, put continued world peace and order above the attainment of justice within states, rejecting interventionist efforts that undermine the former in pursuit of the latter. Solidarists adopt a more revolutionary agenda, and thus they accept that some reduction in order may be necessary to foster the humanitarian goals of a cosmopolitan and moral society of states.

What exactly is the 'theory' of the English School?

In American political science, significant disagreements exist regarding the correct procedure for the building, testing, and refining of theories of international relations. The majority of US-based political scientists would agree, however, that any proper theory must at the very least do one thing: it must specify what it is that the theory is trying to explain (the dependent variable), what causal or independent variable(s) the theory will employ to explain the dependent variable, and what causal mechanism or causal logic links the two (that is, *why* do changes in the independent

¹² For summaries and references on the pluralist-solidarist distinction, see Buzan, 'English School;' Buzan, 'Rethinking the Solidarist-Pluralist Debate;' Timothy Dunne, 'New Thinking on International Society', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3:2 (2001), pp. 223–44.

¹³ Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); John Mayall, *World Politics: Progress and its Limits* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 14.

¹⁴ For an extended solidarist analysis, see Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

variable lead to changes in the dependent variable?).¹⁵ In short, a theory must answer in a coherent fashion the question ‘what explains what, and why?’¹⁶

There is indeed a general causal argument that floats through the literature of the English School: that international societies lead to greater cooperation and order among states. On the surface, this seems to be the kind of testable statement of causal connection that appeals to American political scientists. Nevertheless, there are a number of obstacles that stand in the way of saying that the English School approach actually has a theory embedded in it. First, for the majority of articles and books listed on Buzan’s comprehensive bibliography of the English School (fn. 1), it is frustratingly difficult to identify any dependent variable at all. Many of these pieces seem more interested in establishing the history of the School (how it developed, who is ‘in’ or ‘out’), in discussing different ways of conceiving the core concepts (for example, international society vs. international system), or in providing exegetical points on the founding fathers (what did Wight or Bull really say?).¹⁷ Such efforts may be important ground-clearing exercises for the development of theory, but they are not theories themselves. Without knowing clearly what it is that is being explained, there is simply no way of gathering evidence to support or disconfirm a particular author’s position.

Second, even when it is fairly clear that an author is seeking to account for cooperation or non-cooperation in a system, the measures used to evaluate changes in the independent variable, ‘international society’, are very often problematic. When ES scholars are self-aware on this issue, they invariably agree with Bull that the degree to which a system exhibits elements of a ‘society’ must ultimately be measured by *elite perceptions* of this society of rules and norms.¹⁸ This would fit with the point that the English School is, by its nature, driven by a largely interpretative methodology; as with constructivism, because rules and norms are intersubjectively shared ideas, one must examine as well as possible the way leaders thought, rather than their external behaviour. It is a striking fact, therefore, that there are very few studies within the English School that carefully examine the diplomatic documents needed

¹⁵ Constructivist theorists would include constitutive arguments in addition to purely causal ones. See Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 77–88.

¹⁶ Again, one should not feel that the paper is imposing American social science standards by using the language of ‘variables’ and ‘causal logic’. Any argument that seeks to explain (as opposed to merely describe) something of interest — whether it is why nations cooperate or why Bill went to the store yesterday — implicitly or explicitly must establish what it is that is being explained, what factors explain it, and why these factors lead to the outcome observed.

¹⁷ Representative examples include Timothy Dunne, *Inventing International Society*; Dunne, ‘New Thinking on International Society’; James, ‘System or Society?’; Adam Watson, ‘Hedley Bull, States Systems, and International Societies’, *Review of International Studies*, 13 (1987), pp. 147–53; Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell, *Hedley Bull on International Society* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999); and essays by Tonny Brems Knudsen, Samuel M. Makinda, Hidemi Suganami, and Tim Dunne in the symposia on Dunne’s *Inventing International Society*, in *Conflict and Cooperation*, 35:2 (2000) and 36:3 (2001).

¹⁸ Bull, *Anarchical Society*, pp. 40–41; Peter Wilson, ‘The English School’, p. 53; Tony Evans and Peter Wilson, ‘Regime Theory and the English School of International Relations: A Comparison’, *Millennium* 21:3 (1992), p. 333. On the English School’s difficulties in measuring the extent and intensity of an international society, or even knowing that one exists, see Roy Jones, ‘The English School: A Case for Closure’, pp. 4–5; Martha Finnemore, ‘Exporting the English School?’, *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (2001), pp. 509–510.

to expose the beliefs and values that elites held prior to actions. Well-known book-length studies written or edited by Adam Watson and Hedley Bull, for example, rely largely or almost exclusively on descriptions of the international society in terms of the type of institutions that states joined and their diplomatic interactions, rather than on leader perceptions.¹⁹ For a school that prides itself on offering a 'historical' approach to international relations, there are surprisingly few diplomatic-historical analyses that extensively utilise archival sources or documentary collections.²⁰ This leads to a severe testing problem: we have a hard time knowing whether leaders truly thought the way the English School expects that they should have thought, that is, whether leaders were aware of international societal norms and took them into account when they acted. No true test of the School's approach can be achieved without this information.²¹

Yet the problem here is potentially more fundamental. Because ES scholars are not measuring the degree of 'international society-ness' *via* elite perceptions, they typically fall back on measures that reflect the *behaviour* of states – for example, the number of agreements actors sign, the extent to which states form institutions, diplomatic pronouncements of states' willingness to work with each other, and so forth.²² Such a technique poses a significant risk of measuring the independent variable by what happens on the dependent variable, that is, of finding high levels of international society-ness because one observes high levels of behavioural cooperation. This leaves us unable to test the theory at all (it becomes 'unfalsifiable'), since for every move from cooperation to non-cooperation the analyst can argue that the intensity of the international society has dropped correspondingly. It has, but only because the level of interstate cooperation is simultaneously used to measure the independent variable! The dependent and independent variables collapse into one thing – the degree of cooperative behaviour in the system – and we are left simply with a description of changes in the level of international order over time, rather than a causal explanation as to *why* this level varies.

¹⁹ Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992); Bull, *Anarchical Society*.

²⁰ Two books that stand out in terms of providing more in-depth historical narratives — Wheeler's *Saving Strangers* and Yonglin Zhang's *China in International Society Since 1949* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998) — nevertheless offer few statements on the internal elite perceptions of international societal norms. Thus whether elites strongly believed in these norms can only be inferred, not demonstrated. (A stronger ES work in this regard is David Armstrong's *Revolution and World Order* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1993]). American constructivists, to whom ES scholars are quite sympathetic, have done a much better job at thorough and often original documentary work. See, for example, Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Emanuel Alder and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and the special issue of *Security Studies* on the origins of national interests, 8:2-3 (1998-99). Recent realist work also draws extensively from the documents. See William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

²¹ One may argue that for many of the historical cases prior to 1600, the documents are too few and far between to allow proper testing. This is correct, and in such situations, historical inferences may have to substitute for archival work. Yet this does not excuse the lack of diplomatic-historical work for periods when documents abound.

²² See esp. Watson, *Evolution of International Society*; Bull and Watson, *The Expansion of International Society*.

Finally, the English School does an inadequate job of specifying a deductive causal logic that would explain why higher levels of shared rules and norms should lead to higher degrees of cooperation. American neoliberal regime theory (discussed below) has one possible answer. Starting from a clear functionalist base, it contends that forward-looking actors will form international institutions to provide the information needed to reduce transaction costs and overcome fears of cheating under uncertainty. The English School sets out no corresponding functionalist logic. And while ES scholars are beginning to draw on American constructivism,²³ they have not yet followed the lead of Alexander Wendt, who has used social-psychological theories of socialisation to explain the mutual codetermination of structure and agency.²⁴ Hence, it is difficult to know exactly how international societal norms are supposed to foster cooperation: is it through the furnishing of information, through the change in the deep interests and identities of states, or through the altering of beliefs about self and other? And when would any one of these explanations be expected to dominate the others?

In sum, until the English School can go beyond simply asserting that international society furthers cooperation, until it can offer a coherent causal logic, and until it can properly test that logic without falling into the traps described above, the School's 'contribution' to IR theory will remain limited.²⁵ It will have provided typologies of different types of systems in history, and given us some descriptive evidence for them. But it will be unable to answer some of the defining questions of the field: Why do states in historical systems go from relative peace to all-out war? When will states trade at high levels or move to sever economic relations? Why do they cooperate on environmental or monetary issues? To achieve this end, the English School needs a theory; right now, it has none.

The English School and the problem of anarchy

The English School, following the lead of one of its seminal figures, Hedley Bull, has stressed that the international system is an 'anarchical society': that it is both anarchic and an international society at the same time. Unfortunately, ES scholars, in their rush to uphold the importance of the societal dimensions of the system, have consistently ignored the profound implications of anarchy for this society's

²³ Dunne, 'The Social Construction of International Society', *European Journal of International Relations*, 1:3 (1995), 367–89; Richard Shapcott, 'Practical Reasoning: Constructivism, Critical Theory, and the English School', paper presented at the 4th Pan-European International Relations Conference, University of Kent, 8–10 September, 2001; Ole Waever, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', paper presented at the annual conference of the British International Studies Association, Manchester, 20–22 December 1999; Janine Kisssolewski, 'Norms in International Society: English School meets Constructivists', paper presented at annual meeting of British International Studies Association, Bradford, 18–20 December 2000.

²⁴ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*. As Martha Finnemore notes, it is not clear that the English School even has a constitutively causal argument of the kind constructivists like: Finnemore, 'Exporting the English School?', *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (2001), p. 510.

²⁵ Richard Little, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:3 (2000), pp. 395–422; Waever, 'The English School's Contribution'.

ability to affect state behaviour.²⁶ For realists, anarchy – as the lack of a central authority hanging above states to protect them and to enforce rules and norms – means above all else that great powers must constantly worry about the chance that other great powers will attack them, if not tomorrow then perhaps in the foreseeable future.²⁷ It is this uncertainty that states have about the present and especially the future intentions of others that makes the levels and trends of relative power such critical causal variables for realists. In the face of the potentially hostile intentions of others, states become concerned with power as the means to safeguard security.

State uncertainty about both present and future intentions underpins the realist concept of the security dilemma. Two states, A and B, may both be only seeking security. Yet given the difficulty of seeing the other's motives (the 'problem of other minds'), state A worries that state B harbours non-security motives for war. Hence, if B takes steps only for its security, these steps may be misinterpreted by A as preparations for aggression. State A's counter-efforts, in turn, will very likely be misinterpreted by B as moves to aggression, sparking a spiral of mistrust and hostility.²⁸ The problem of future intentions is even more intractable. Even when states A and B are both fairly certain that the other is at present a security seeker, they have reason to worry that the other may become aggressive some years later as a result of a change of leadership, a revolution, or simply a change of heart resulting from an increase in power. Thus both states will be aware of the importance of protecting their power position as insurance against a future threat.²⁹ A state that faces exogenous decline in relative power will be particularly unsettled, since it will fear being attacked later when it has less power and therefore less ability to defend itself.³⁰

American realists divide into two main camps – offensive realism and defensive realism – with regard to the implications of anarchy and uncertainty for state behaviour. Both sides agree that anarchy forces states to be concerned primarily with

²⁶ The exception to this rule is the work of Barry Buzan and Richard Little. Buzan and Little have written extensively about anarchy and its effects and have also been active supporters of the English School. In addition to the citations above, see Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Buzan, *People, States and Fear*; Buzan and Eric Herring, *The Arms Dynamic in World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Little, 'Neorealism and the English School: A Methodological, Ontological, and Theoretical Reassessment', *European Journal of International Relations*, 1:1 (1995), pp. 9–34. Note, however, that even these two accomplished scholars have not yet shown how the concerns of structural realism which are discussed below might limit or undermine the significance of global norms and the value of the School's international society approach, nor how realist concerns might be mitigated through ES counterarguments. Buzan does discuss the security dilemma in *People, States, and Fear*, ch. 8, but he does not relate it to the English School and the problem of sustaining cooperation via an international society.

²⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979). The realist focus on great powers is straightforward: small states within any system often do have bodyguards and enforcers of rules — the great powers! Because small states typically do not exist in pure anarchy, they can often shirk actions that shape the world order and instead rest on appeals to shared norms. This is a luxury that great powers usually cannot afford (unless those norms serve their interests).

²⁸ See inter alia Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, 30: 2 (1978), pp. 167–214; Charles L. Glaser, 'The Security Dilemma Revisited', *World Politics*, 50:1 (1997), pp. 171–201.

²⁹ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 62; John Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, 19:3 (1994–95), p. 10.

³⁰ Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, ch. 1.

maximising their security, and that power is a primary means to achieving this security. Offensive realists, however, emphasise state uncertainty regarding future intentions, contending that states must always be ready to grab opportunities to increase their power as a hedge against future threats. This leads to a prediction of a highly competitive international system, one where norms and rules within an international society play little role in guiding behaviour.³¹ Defensive realists are not quite as pessimistic. They focus on the problem of uncertain present intentions and the risk that, within the security dilemma, hard-line policies will be countered by others' balancing actions and may even lead to an escalation into war. More cooperative policies are thus generally the most rational means to security maximisation (although if the system favours offensive strikes, defensive realists predict behaviour more in line with offensive realist hypotheses).³²

For both types of realists, however, ES scholars remain naïve about the true forces that produce either cooperation or conflict between states. Realists see two problems with the ES argument that international societal norms and rules promote greater cooperation. First, states will worry that others will cheat on or manipulate the shared rules and norms to achieve benefits at their expense. Hitler's use of the principle of self-determination for ethnic groups to justify his takeovers of Austria and the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia in 1938 is but one example. The most extreme worry, of course, is that the other will 'cheat' by launching an unprovoked attack. For realists, international societal norms provide little restraining power against an adversary bent on war – witness the numerous great power wars that have broken out since 1648 and the widespread acceptance of norms of sovereignty. Second, leaders will be concerned that cooperation will help further the relative power of potential adversaries. This 'relative gains' concern has been prevalent throughout the history of great power politics, and for realists it generally leads states to reduce their level of economic and military cooperation. Even today many officials in the United States worry that China will use its participation in world economic institutions to develop its long-term relative strength *vis-à-vis* America.³³

The English School has not addressed either of these concerns. Advocates of the English School have noticed the similarity between American neoliberal regime analysis and the School's emphasis on international institutions as an expression of shared norms.³⁴ Yet the former has the theoretical sophistication that the latter

³¹ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Mearsheimer, 'False Promise of International Institutions'; Eric Labs, 'Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims', *Security Studies*, 6:4 (1997), pp. 1–49.

³² See Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma'; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Root of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help', *International Security*, 19:3 (1994–95), pp. 50–90. For an argument that integrates offensive and defensive realist insights, see Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, ch. 2; Copeland, 'Theory and History in the Study of Major War', *Security Studies*, 10:4 (2001), pp. 212–16. For additional references on the two camps, see Jeffrey Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited', *International Security*, 25: 3 (2000–2001), pp. 128–61.

³³ Joseph M. Grieco, 'Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism', *International Organization*, 42 (1988), pp. 485–507; Mearsheimer, 'False Promise of International Institutions'; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, ch. 6.

³⁴ Barry Buzan, 'From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory meet the English School', *International Organization*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 327–52; Evans and Wilson, 'Regime Theory and the English School'.

lacks, at least in terms of addressing the first concern. American regime theory from its inception sought to address the problem of cheating that arises in any anarchic system. Utilising rigorous game-theoretical arguments, neoliberals reveal the role that institutions can play in reducing uncertainty about the other's present and future intentions. The information that institutions provide can thus help foster trust while also minimising states' incentive to cheat to gain a short-term advantage.³⁵ The power of regime theory rests in its ability to start with realist assumptions about anarchy and the problem of uncertainty, and yet show that cooperation can still obtain under many sets of conditions. The English School offers no equivalent causal arguments. It may proclaim the similarities to American regime analysis, but until it adds new elements to the functional logic of this analysis, it will have made no original theoretical contribution to the understanding of how and when institutions matter. Indeed, at this stage, the English School still has not integrated the game-theoretical core of regime theory into its analysis. It has thus not yet grappled with the problem of uncertainty that game theory so nicely models, namely, state A and B's mutual fears that the other will not follow the agreed norms of behaviour.

The profound issue of relative gains as an inhibitor of cooperation is likewise ignored by the English School. American neoliberal theorists have offered a number of plausible counterarguments that establish the boundaries of the realist argument: when offense is more dominant, for example, or when there are only a few great powers, relative gains concerns are likely to be more relevant; when defence is dominant and many great powers exist, states should worry less and cooperate more.³⁶ Defensive realists have largely agreed with this conditional approach, and both sides can claim victory in pushing theory forward through the clear specification of the conditions under which relative gains concerns inhibit cooperation. Yet once again, the English School has added nothing to this debate, primarily because it has not confronted the relative-gains problem in the first place.

As a consequence of its side-stepping of realist concerns, the English School has difficulty explaining fluctuations in the level of cooperation over time. Consider the conflicts of the twentieth century. Hedley Bull and Adam Watson argue that the European-based international society reached its highest level of universality in the European colonial period prior to 1945.³⁷ Yet this is also a period which saw two

³⁵ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Stephen D. Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes* (Cornell University Press, 1982). For further references, see Lisa Martin and Beth Simmons, 'Theories and Empirical Studies of International Institutions', *International Organization* 52: 4 (1998), pp. 729–57 and Andreas Hasenclever, Peter Mayer, and Volker Rittberger, *Theories of International Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁶ See essays by Duncan Snidal, Robert Powell, and Robert O. Keohane in David A. Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

³⁷ Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilisations would reinforce this point: the withdrawal of European colonial powers from the southern hemisphere left independent states with cultural values and aspirations that were very different from the established Western powers, particularly in the Middle East and the Far East. Indeed, Huntington's thesis, even if only partially correct, would call into question any ES claims that states currently exist within a universal international society. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

world wars and numerous bilateral struggles. The School also offers little help in explaining the ups and downs of the US-Soviet relationship during the Cold War, for the simple reason that the Soviet Union is typically said to have been outside the international society altogether. Realists however can point to power trends and both sides' uncertainty about the other's intentions as major causes of the ongoing conflict.³⁸ Moves towards cooperation in the 1970s can also be explained: the superpowers did not suddenly discover international norms, but simply recognised the need for restraint in an era of mutually assured destruction.³⁹

The English School also has difficulty explaining the nature of recent US foreign policy. The Bush administration has executed a string of unilateralist moves that can hardly be said to align with international norms (as the negative reaction of both allies and adversaries indicates). It has abandoned the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty with Russia, rejected membership of the International Court of Justice, and, most dramatically, adopted the so-called Bush Doctrine of 'preemptive action' that recommends initiating military attacks against groups and states considered to pose a future threat to the United States and its interests. At the time of writing (September 2002), Washington is preparing for a war against Iraq, despite warnings from all its key allies except Britain. The English School cannot tell us why the United States, the most democratic great power in the system and the key founder after 1944 of many of its institutions, would pay so little attention to commonly accepted norms. Realism has a straightforward explanation of the matter: the United States is now the predominant state in the system, and has reason to want to stay in that position. The policy of missile defence and the preventive destruction of emerging threats is part of that long-term security-maximisation strategy. Dominant great powers in history regularly either attack rising states before it is too late, or switch to hard-line policies to contain their growth.⁴⁰ For realists, the fact that the United States would fall into this age-old pattern despite its liberal democratic underpinnings only reinforces the profound explanatory strength of a power-driven approach to world politics.⁴¹

Once we incorporate realism's concern regarding the uncertainty of state intentions, we see the limitations of both pluralist and solidarist arguments. The solidarist call for intervention in the name of universal human rights is fraught with difficulties. Even when the intervening state is truly seeking to safeguard human rights, there is always the issue of convincing *other* actors of this state's humanitarian objectives. The security dilemma and the problem of other minds creep back in: when state A intervenes against state C, how is state B to know A's true motives? What may be

³⁸ For a discussion of realist accounts of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, and an attempt to provide a better, more dynamic realist argument, see Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chs. 3–7.

³⁹ Note that Henry Kissinger, a realist academic, was the individual instrumental in achieving this *détente*.

⁴⁰ Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, chs. 3–8.

⁴¹ That smaller states in the system might caution against attacking Iraq does not support ES arguments if it is clear that they are doing so not because they have internalised international societal norms, but because they can foresee negative consequences for themselves and their neighbours. The almost unanimous rejection by Arab states in September 2002 of a US preventive attack on Iraq, for example, reflected less their commitment to global norms than their fear of domestic and interstate chaos in the region.

perceived by A as a noble act may very likely be seen by B as a move to improve A's geopolitical position and further an expansionistic programme. Consider three of the cases presented by solidarist Nicholas Wheeler: the Indian intervention in Bangladesh in 1971, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979, and the US action against Kosovo in 1999.⁴² Indian support for Bangladeshi secessionists led directly to war with Pakistan. The Vietnamese action to eliminate the Kymer Rouge regime undermined the confidence of regional states and sparked a punitive military attack by China. The American-led NATO intervention on the side of ethnic Albanian Kosovars against the government in Serbia did not lead to war expansion, but it did heighten the suspicions of Russian and Chinese governments while giving both states greater justification for their own future interventions in neighbouring states.

Pluralists are well aware that the solidarist position can lead to an undermining of peace and order (they are, after all, close to the realist end of the spectrum on many issues). Yet the pluralists have not developed a causal theory to explain why actions by state A that are viewed by A as non-threatening moves in support of international societal norms might not be seen as so moderate by others. And because they have not, they cannot establish the conditions under which states *can* communicate their benign intentions and avoid conflict spirals. Defensive realists, by contrast, have recently drawn upon game theory and games of incomplete information to show not only the difficulty in communicating good intentions in anarchy, but also how it occasionally can be done. States that send 'costly signals' – taking actions that states with aggressive intentions would not have done – can help moderate the security dilemma and secure more cooperative relations.⁴³

Pluralists, by emphasising the differences between sovereign states and their right to maintain those differences, also seem unaware that such a pluralism can increase the level of uncertainty in the system. States with different ideologies are, according to pluralism, guaranteed the right to exist by the shared norms of interstate sovereignty. Yet as we saw during the Cold War, the ideological divide between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the United States and China, exacerbated the already profound security dilemmas between these powers. Any military buildups by the Soviet Union or China were viewed with great suspicion in Washington, as American buildups were in Moscow and Beijing. The fear on both sides was the classic one outlined by realism: should the other grow in relative power, it might become more aggressive and less deterrable. Destabilising arms races were the result. Even after the US-Russian and US-Chinese *détentes* in the 1970s when Russia and China were integrated more fully into international society, deep suspicions remained. Today, Washington elites are still wary of China, precisely because it is a growing and non-democratic power with the long-term potential to challenge US predominance, at least in the east Asian theatre.

Systems founded on pluralist norms, in short, may be less inclined to destabilising interventions to promote ideological homogeneity, but they suffer from the uncer-

⁴² Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.

⁴³ James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organization*, 49: 3 (1995), pp. 379–414; Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists'; Andrew Kydd, 'Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security-Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other', *Security Studies*, 7:1 (1997), pp. 139–47.

tainty resulting from the continuation of political differences between actors.⁴⁴ Either way, pluralist and solidarist systems contain high levels of uncertainty. Until the two camps within the English School grapple with how this uncertainty impedes cooperation and the conditions under which such uncertainty might be mitigated, the School will be left with an empty optimism founded on little more than a hunch that international society matters.

Conclusion: the necessary future agenda of the English School

The arguments put forward in this essay do not mean to imply that the English School is an inherently flawed approach to explaining international relations. Rather, the article has sought to show that after more than four decades of discussion, the School's theoretical development is still in its infancy. Some of the School's strongest supporters concede that the approach is underdeveloped, and that much work has to be done.⁴⁵ Yet ES scholars have not yet grasped, I believe, what needs to be accomplished to turn the ES approach into an actual theory. Some see the School's incorporation of the three elements of international system, international society, and world society as a foundation for building a better 'grand theory' of international politics.⁴⁶ This is not the direction the School should adopt. It amounts to trying to forge grand theories simply by arguing that everything matters. With 'international system' capturing material structural constraints and 'world society' capturing domestic, individual, and transnational variables, once 'international society' is added to the mix it is hard to know what would *not* be included in such an eclectic approach to theory building. Such an exercise will not lead to a grand theory with high explanatory power. At best, it will create only an even more complex typology than is currently offered, one which lists the many factors that should be considered in any case-study analysis and which perhaps suggests how these factors are internally linked, but which provides no falsifiable theory to be tested.

A much more fruitful agenda for the English School would be to concentrate on three tasks: first, refining the concept of the international society as a causal variable; second, explaining exactly how this variable should affect the probability of international cooperation over time; and third, testing its causal salience relative to competing variables through careful documentary research. Introducing us to the idea of an international society is the English School's unique contribution, and thus must be the focus if the School wishes to enter the ongoing American political

⁴⁴ Solidarists might claim that *if* the system became completely homogeneous — at least on the Western democratic model — it would be very peaceful. Along the lines of democratic peace theory and the arguments of Francis Fukuyama, a system with only democracies would have greater certainty about the good intentions of others — see Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992); Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). Yet in the *transition* to this homogeneous world, the very effort to promote democracy through intervention would increase the suspicions of non-democratic states, exacerbating the security dilemma.

⁴⁵ Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 105.

⁴⁶ Buzan, 'English School', p. 481.

science debates. Yet the concept itself is still more of a description of historical tendencies than a well-specified variable that can be measured in more than an *ad-hoc* or *post-hoc* manner. In a recent paper, Barry Buzan has made a foray towards the development of international society as a testable variable. Staying within a state-centric model, he conceptualises this society as running from extremely pluralistic (states which stress their sovereign independence to the point of almost asociality) to extremely solidaristic (states which are thickly immersed in a web of shared norms and values).⁴⁷ Much more work of this calibre needs to be undertaken. Yet the fact that Buzan's 2002 paper is one of the first to offer this level of sophisticated analysis reinforces just how far the English School has to go even in conceptualising its core causal variable.

The second necessary step for the English School is the building of a clear causal mechanism to explain why and under what conditions international societies can lead to positive (or negative) outcomes for interstate cooperation. To do this, however, it must offer the kind of polished and testable arguments that American regime theory has developed over the last two decades. Rational choice assumptions will very likely be useful as a starting point for understanding why shared international norms will deflect welfare- and security-maximising states away from what a power-driven realist account might suggest. (These assumptions can then be relaxed by ES scholars more inclined to constructivist insights.) It is perhaps unlikely at this stage that the English School can add very much to the theoretical insights already offered by regime analysis. Yet because regime analysis has tended to concentrate on more circumscribed regional and issue-specific institutions, the English School has the opportunity to show the impact of more general international-societal norms and rules on state behaviour and outcomes.⁴⁸ This also reiterates the challenge the English School faces, however. Regime analysis has been able to address some of realism's concerns regarding cheating and relative gains through both theoretical counterarguments and the examination of the workings of specific institutions. The English School has not yet confronted realist concerns, and by couching its arguments at the most general level of international society, it risks falling back into the kind of ill-defined and unfalsifiable generalisations that have characterised the School for four decades.

Finally, if it can build these 'new and improved' arguments, the School must still test their relative causal salience. It is not enough just to show that international society 'matters'. International society must be shown to affect behaviour and outcomes *even though* realist power factors are pushing states in the opposite directions.⁴⁹ Moreover, ES scholars must demonstrate that effect through the diplomatic documents; that is, they must show that elites truly understood the international societal norms, and that they followed them despite the implications for the state's power and security position. I am doubtful that ES scholars will find many cases

⁴⁷ Buzan, 'Rethinking the Solidarist-Pluralist Debate'.

⁴⁸ On international society as a regime above regimes, see Buzan, 'From International System to International Society', p. 350.

⁴⁹ This is necessary to avoid the over-determination problem. China's willingness to join the international community after 1970 and especially after 1980, for example, may be due to its increasing internalisation of shared norms, but it likely also reflects its self-interested efforts to build relative power and security through trade and the acquiring of foreign technology.

where great powers sacrificed their power and security for the pursuit of international norms. But when they can find such cases and show through the documents that societal norms made the difference, they will have helped bound the causal importance of realist arguments.

Overall, the English School still has a long way to go before it can claim to offer a theory that competes with American realism (or with American neoliberalism and constructivism) in terms of deductive logic and empirical support. Yet the effort at theory-building is necessary if the School ever hopes to push its scholarly agenda beyond the geographical confines of Great Britain. Staying at the level of descriptive typologies and vague generalisations about the impact of international society will not do the trick. Sound theoretical arguments that link causal variables to important outcomes must be developed. These arguments must then be shown not only to explain what realism cannot, but also to do a better job than the already existing non-realist arguments offered by neoliberalism and constructivism. This may be a tall order. But I believe that the English School is up to the task.