Chapter 4

The English School

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'The English School' is a term coined in the 1970s to describe a group of predominantly British or British-inspired writers for whom international society is the primary object of analysis (Jones 1981; Linklater and Suganami 2006). Its most influential members include Hedley Bull, Martin Wight, John Vincent and Adam Watson whose main publications appeared in the period between the mid-1960s and late 1980s (see Bull 1977; Bull and Watson 1984; Wight 1977, 1991; Vincent 1986; Watson 1982). Robert Jackson, Tim Dunne and Nicholas Wheeler have been among the most influential members of the English School in more recent years (Jackson 2000; Dunne 1998; Wheeler 2000). Since the late 1990s, the English School has enjoyed a renaissance in large part because of the efforts of Barry Buzan, Richard Little and a number of other scholars (Buzan 2001, 2003; Little 2000). The English School remains one of the most important approaches to international politics although its influence is probably greater in Britain than in most other societies where International Relations is taught.

The foundational claim of the English School is that sovereign states form a society, albeit an anarchic one in that they do not have to submit to the will of a higher power. The fact that states have succeeded in creating a society of sovereign equals is for the English School one of the most fascinating dimensions of international relations. There is, they argue, a surprisingly high level of order and a surprisingly low level of violence between states given that their condition is one of anarchy (in the sense of the absence of a higher political authority). They invite their readers to reflect on the probable level of violence, fear, insecurity and distrust in even the most stable of domestic societies if sovereign authority collapsed. A condition of chaos would be the most likely result, and yet this is not the central characteristic of world politics.

This is not to suggest that the English School ignores the phenomenon of violence in relations between states. Its members regard violence as an endemic feature of the 'anarchical society' (the title of Hedley Bull's most famous work, 1977) but they also stress that it is controlled to an important extent by international law and morality. Even so, confusion

about the central purpose of the School can result from the fact that its members seem distinctively realist at times. This is most obvious in Wight's influential essay, 'Why is there no International Theory?' (1966), where he maintained that domestic politics is the sphere of the good life whereas international politics is the realm of security and survival (Wight 1966a: 33). Realism is also evident in his argument that international relations is 'incompatible with progressivist theory'. In a statement that seems to place him squarely in the realist camp, Wight (1996: 26) maintained that Sir Thomas More would recognize the basic features of international politics in the 1960s since nothing fundamental had changed during the last few centuries. Some have argued that the English School is essentially a British variant on realism which exaggerates the importance of the veneer of society and pays too little attention to its role in safeguarding the privileges of the leading powers and other dominant interests (for a critique of this interpretation, see Wheeler and Dunne 1996).

Members of the English School are attracted by elements of realism and idealism, yet gravitate towards the middle ground, never wholly reconciling themselves to either point of view. This is precisely how Wight (1991) described 'rationalism' or the 'Grotian tradition', from which the English School is descended, in a famous series of lectures delivered at the London School of Economics in the 1950s. He argued in those lectures that 'rationalism' was the 'via media' between realism and what he called revolutionism – a group of perspectives which believed in the possibility of replacing international order with peace and justice (see also Wight 1966: 91). In this context, he refers to Grotius' comment in his great work, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* which was published in 1625, that those who believe that anything goes in war are as wrong as those who believe the use of force can never be justified. Grotius envisaged an international society in which violence between Catholic and Protestant states would be replaced by a condition of relative peaceful coexistence. In his lectures, Wight lamented the fact that the debates between realism and utopianism in the inter-war years had led to the neglect of the *via media* with its concentration on international society.

In short, members of the English School maintain that the international political system is more civil and orderly than realists and neo-realists suggest. However, the fact that violence is ineradicable in their view puts them at odds with utopians who believe in the possibility of perpetual peace. There is no expectation among its members that the international political system will come to enjoy levels of close cooperation and the relatively high level of security found in the world's more stable national societies. There is, they argue, more to international politics than realists suggest but there will always be much less than the cosmopolitan

desires. This is why it makes sense to argue that members of the English School belief there has been a limited degree of progress in international politics.

The nature of the '*via media*' can be explored further by noting the contrasts with realism and 'revolutionism' (as noted, a term Wight used to describe various perspectives including cosmopolitanism which aim to replace international order with a universal community of humankind) and by further clarifying the claim that members of the English School offer a limited progressivist account of world politics. As discussed in Chapter 3, realism emphasizes the unending competition for power and security in the world of states. Sovereignty, anarchy and the security dilemma are crucial terms in its lexicon; in the main, the idea of global progress is absent from its vocabulary. Moral principles and social progress are seen as relevant to domestic politics where trust prevails because security is provided by the state, but cosmopolitan projects are said to have little importance for international relations where states must provide for their own security and trust few of their neighbours. In the latter domain, moral principles serve to legitimate national interests and to stigmatize principal competitors: they are not the basis for a new form of world political organization which will supersede the nation-state.

The existence of a more or less unbridgeable gulf between domestic and international politics is a central theme in realist and especially in neo-realist thought. By contrast, cosmopolitan thinkers envisage a world order – but not necessarily a world government – in which universal moral principles are taken seriously and the gulf between domestic and international politics is reduced or eliminated. Global political reform is not only possible but of vital importance to end the struggle for power and security. The tension between these two approaches has been crucial to the history of international thought and was clearly evident in the early twentieth-century debate between realists and idealists.

The characteristics of that debate need not detain us. Suffice it to note that it was largely about whether the development of a strong sense of moral obligation to human beings everywhere was the key to building peaceful International Relations. Liberal internationalists believed that realism was unjustifiably pessimistic about the feasibility of radical change and revealed a lack of political imagination. Realists thought that liberal internationalists were naively optimistic about the prospects for a new world order based on the rule of law, open diplomacy and collective security, and they thought their ideas were dangerous because they distracted attention from the main task of foreign policy which is to ensure the security and survival of the state. The violence of 'the inter-war

years' and the tensions peculiar to the bipolar era secured the victory of realism.

Bull argued that realists focus on the struggle for power and security in an international system while their liberal or utopian opponents focus on the possibility of a world community. The English School recognizes that each approach contains insights about the condition of international politics. The realist's claim that states, unlike individuals in civil society, are forced to provide for their own security in the condition of anarchy is valuable, as is its emphasis on how adversaries seek to outmanoeuvre, control and overpower one another. However, this perspective captures only part of the substance of world politics. The international system is not a state of war despite the fact that each state has a monopoly of control of the instruments of violence within its territory. Because of a common interest in placing restraints on the use of force, states have developed the art of accommodation and compromise which makes an international society possible.

Watson (1987) later argued that a 'strong case can be made out, on the evidence of past systems as well as the present one, that the regulatory rules and institutions of a system usually, and perhaps inexorably, develop to the point where the members become conscious of common values and the system becomes an international society'. This might seem to give the utopian thinker hope that further progress is achievable, but this is not a position that the English School generally endorses. They argue that the utopian vision of a universal human community draws on the fact that concerns about human rights, peace and justice have long influenced the development of world politics. Like realists, members of the English School begin with the condition of anarchy but they are more inclined to take arguments for global reform seriously rather than to regard them as either peripheral issues in world politics or as simply one of the ways in which states compete for influence and power. But they stress that the visionaries are wrong in thinking that the current international order is merely a stepping stone to a universal community. The crucial point is not that states are obsessed simply with the struggle for power but that many have different conceptions of human rights and global justice and conflicting views about how such ideals can be implemented. The contemporary debate about whether the time has come to introduce a principle of humanitarian intervention where a state is guilty of the gross violation of human rights is a classic example of the kind of moral disagreement which the English School regards as typical of the society of states (Jackson 2000; Wheeler 2000). Indeed, members of the English School stress that efforts to improve international politics can produce major moral disagreements which sour relations between states and damage international order. Most have

been sceptical of proposals for large-scale global reform and most have doubted that any of them will ever appeal to the majority of nation-states or to their most powerful members.

The crucial point is that neither realism nor revolutionism recognizes the extent to which states have succeeded in creating an international society. The English School insists, however, that the survival of international order can never be taken for granted because it can be undermined by revolutionary or aggressive powers. There is no guarantee that any international society will survive indefinitely or succeed in keeping crude self-interest at bay, but for as long as international society exists it is important to ask whether it can be improved. Noting that demands for morality and justice have always formed an important part of the history of international relations, Wight (1977: 192) argued that 'the fundamental political task at all times [is] to provide order, or security, from which law, justice and prosperity may afterwards develop'. Members of the English School were understandably inclined to stress the importance of order rather than justice or prosperity during the Cold War years, but since the mid-1980s many have taken a more explicitly normative stance on questions of poverty and human rights. In the more optimistic world of the 1990s, members of the 'critical international society' approach became particularly interested in the possibility that states could be 'good international citizens' promoting a more cosmopolitan world order (Dunne 1998; Wheeler and Dunne 1998).

Members of the English School have long argued that the great powers can be 'great responsibles' which do not place their own interests before the task of strengthening international order. However, it is usually the great powers that pose the greatest threat to the survival of international society (Wight 1991: 130). In the age of American hegemony, members of the English School have returned to one of its central concerns – whether international society can survive in the absence of a balance of power. Dunne (2003) highlights this question in his account of the contemporary phase of US hegemony with the stress on preventive war to deal with regimes which are believed to be prepared to share weapons of mass destruction with terrorist organizations. The threat to international society is stressed in this account. Other members of the English School continue to examine the ways in which international society can be improved. This is especially evident in Wheeler's writings on the need to introduce a limited principle of humanitarian intervention and in Keal's argument for changes which will improve the position of indigenous peoples (Wheeler 2000; Keal 2003). Indeed, one would expect proponents of a perspective which is located between the poles of realism and utopianism to explore the prospects for improving international society and the constraints that stand in the way. No member of the

English School is naïve about the possibilities for radical change; but increasing divisions between more 'radical' and more 'conservative' proponents have appeared in recent years, not least over the question of whether the society of states should introduce a principle of humanitarian intervention.

We will return to these themes later in this chapter which is organized under four main headings. The first focuses on the idea of order and society in core English School texts. The second considers the English School's analysis of the relative importance of order and justice in the traditional European society of states. This is followed by an assessment of the 'revolt against the West' and the emergence of the universal society of states in which various demands for justice are frequently heard. The fourth section returns to the question of whether the English School remains committed to the notion that only limited progress is possible in international relations and whether its claim to be the *via media* between realism and revolutionism is convincing in the light of current debates and developments in the field.

From power to order: international society

We have seen that the English School is principally concerned with explaining the surprisingly high level of order which exists between independent political communities in the condition of anarchy. Some such as Wight (1977: 43) were fascinated by the small number of international societies which have existed in human history and by their relatively short life-spans, all previous examples having been destroyed by empire after a few centuries. Wight (1977: 35–9) also noted the propensity for internal schism in the form of international revolutions which bring transnational political forces and ideologies rather than separate states into conflict. He posed the interesting question of whether commerce first brought different societies into contact and provided the context within which a society of states would later develop (1977: 33). In his remarks about the three international societies about which a great deal is known (the Ancient Chinese, the Graeco-Roman and the modern society of states) Wight (1977: 33–5) maintained each had emerged in a region with a high level of linguistic and cultural unity. Crucially, independent political communities felt they belonged to the civilized world and were superior to their neighbours. Their sense of their 'cultural differentiation' from allegedly semi-civilized and barbaric peoples facilitated communication between them and made it easier to agree on the rights and duties which bound them together as members of an exclusive society of states.