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The English School and Historical International Relations

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From the first, the English School (ES) defended historical approaches to international studies and provided the first historical theories relevant to a discipline of International Relations (IR).\(^1\) In 1966, in the context of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (BC), Hedley Bull laid out the ‘classical approach’ in which history appeared alongside philosophy and law as the triad that should guide the study of IR, and the same year Martin Wight provided two such theories in his ‘Why is There No International Theory?’ (Wight, 1966). The major historical theory appeared in 1984 in *The Expansion of International Society*, also in the context of the BC, which has been called ‘one of the few extended and sustained metanarratives that can be found within IR’ (Dunne and Little, 2014: 98). But what kind of history was intended by the British Committee is seldom inquired after. For all their rejection of ‘scientism’, the BC, or at least central members of it, were striving after a theory, and their returns to history were the off-shoots of their grappling with what kind of theory.

**Theory and history: three English School responses**

Wight’s ‘Why is There No International Theory?’ was no casual musing by a historian. It was a direct response to the agenda laid down for the British Committee\(^2\) by its sponsors, the Rockefeller Foundation – to consider a *theory* of IR. Wight’s lecture course on the Theory of International Relations, developed during the 1950s, provided the background.\(^3\) In the essay, Wight outlined two sorts of theory relevant to IR: a ‘theory of survival’ and a ‘theory of diplomatics’. The ‘theory of survival’ dealt with the ‘extremities’ (as he termed them) of the international experience – ‘the right of devastation and pillage in war’, the right of intervention, and the prospect of nuclear war. Its subject matter was questions of ‘national existence and national extinction’; it displayed ‘repetition and necessity’, and the appropriate method for dealing with this subject matter was the conventional body of political science ‘middle-range’ theory. For the generality of statecraft and the daily progress of diplomacy – in other words, everyday IR, the appropriate form of theorizing was ‘historical writing’, understood as ‘a coherent structure of hypotheses that will provide a common explanation of phenomena’. ‘Historical writing’ shared the same aim as positive theories in political science, only with ‘more judiciousness and modesty’ (Wight, 1966, 32–33).\(^4\) What is more relevant in the present context is the kind of history Wight had in mind. His attack on progressivism in the essay was also an
attack on the progressive history that had dominated the nineteenth century and that continued to structure much of the understanding of political relations among states (see Hall, 2019). What he is recommending is a form of technical history.

The ES's second historiographical moment came in the effort to devise a comparative history of 'states systems'. Some four years after the onset of the BC, following the seminal moment when Hedley Bull first proposed that international life was not anarchic but composed into a 'society of states', the BC decided to make a prolonged study of state-systems in various parts of the globe. Wight took the directing role (Vigezzi, 2005: 199–203), focusing on the 'norms and values that animate [each] system, and the institutions in which they are expressed' (Bull, 1976: 113). The result was four essays on Hellas, Persia, and the modern state-system, demonstrating a variety of beliefs, social forms, and 'animating' tendencies, with no direction or unifying theme. Aside from a fairly substantial piece by Geoffrey Hudson on China (Hudson, 1965), other studies were nugatory, and no second volume to follow Diplomatic Investigations appeared. Bull published Wight's studies in a stand-alone volume (Wight, 1977) to illustrate his theory of the importance of a common culture underlying any state-system.

The historian who established a comparative standard was Herbert Butterfield, to be carried forward in the well-known work by Adam Watson. In a paper for the Committee in 1965 to initiate their discussions on historic systems, Butterfield, always doubtful about Wight's culture-alone thesis, put forward the idea that 'a states-system can only be achieved by a tremendous conscious effort of reassembly after a political hegemony has broken down' (Vigezzi, 2005: 187). In other words, a state-system, or international society, arises from the collapse of a previous hegemony, the end of which 'ensures the conditions' for its subsequent development. Watson developed Butterfield's thesis into a typology of state-systems that moved from a collection of independent entities, to hegemony, suzerainty, dominion, and empire (Watson, 1992), clarifying much of the Committee's previous discussions and creating a template based on the form of rule. Developing Butterfield's main thesis, he presented the Italian city-states as emerging out of the waning of the medieval theocracy, Westphalia out of the failed Habsburg bid to re-establish hegemony, and the Concert of Europe out of the near-successful French efforts to do the same.

Watson's efforts were carried forward by Buzan and Little in their International Systems in World History (2000). Generalizing Bull and Watson's (1984: 1) definition of an international system as 'a group of independent communities ...[in which] the behavior of each is a necessary factor in the calculation of others', they plotted the historical development of both regional and global international systems from pre-modern times to the modern era, specifically defending a historical methodology, one based in their case on comparative social forms. The argument is summarized in their 1994 article, published in the International Political Science Review, on 'The Idea of “International System”: Theory Meets History'.

The more enduring historiographical moment, and the one that was to sweep the discipline, was The Expansion of International Society (1984), initiated by Hedley Bull when he took up the BC chairmanship in 1978. It was a difficult time for the Committee – Rockefeller had decided, after 20 years, not to renew the grant. The previous five years, under Watson’s chairmanship, it had focused on questions of justice and ethics, where discussions, though lively enough, concealed an overall standstill and, in Vigezzi’s account, a ‘dispersal of effort’. Returning from Australia to take up his Oxford chair, Vigezzi points to the importance of Bull’s Australian and outremer experience, his continued focus on Order, and the growing question in Bull’s mind as to whether the emerging global order could in any sense be called an ‘international society’. In the event, he wrote to Watson that there had been enough ‘Ethics and Morality’ for the time being and proposed that the next stage of the Committee’s work be devoted to Convergence and Divergence. It was
the theoretical beginnings of a historical narrative that would identify central elements of the European social order and its spread to the rest of the globe.

**The theory of the Expansion Narrative**

The ‘Expansion Narrative’ is a historical narration of how functional norms and practices of international behaviour developed in Europe, to provide a form of order there, roughly in the period from 1300 to 1800 – a European international system that then spreads to the rest of the world. The expansion took place most rapidly (and forcefully) in the nineteenth century, thanks to imperialist colonization and strong social pressures. Critical, according to Gerrit Gong, was the ‘Standard of Civilization’ that developed especially in the last 30 years of that century (Gong, 1984). Subtly implicit in the narrative is a stage theory, in that a relatively disconnected ‘international system’ – with different regional subsystems – was superseded by a next phase, marked by a more intense interaction and the development of shared understandings of appropriate behaviour, which became an ‘international society’.7

Adam Watson summarized the narrative in his 1992 *Evolution of International Society*. It portrays a developing European international society’s expansion to the world as a gradual process, done by European exploration and colonization, beginning around 1500. (He proposed the Palazzo Venezia in Rome as the first embassy, established in 1437.) Crucial norms and practices were gradually developed between the major European powers: Watson highlighted the evolution of a diplomatic system (professional diplomats, embassies, and diplomatic immunity), great conferences, and treaty-making at the end of wars, balancing power, and external recognition of sovereignty. The process was gradual: one turning point, for example, is in the eighteenth century when Russia and the United States became ‘members of European society’ (1992: 224).

Many key developments came in the nineteenth century. Hedley Bull (1984a, 117) finds the process of creating the ‘universal international society’ as completed around the mid-nineteenth century, through the penetration of the last insular regional systems and the linking up of the world into one political space. Watson (1992: 227) highlights a transition in which European states at first operated separately, in conflict and competition: ‘They did not yet dominate the other systems of states in the world, and had not yet created a single global system. That was to be the achievement of the nineteenth century’, essentially through a process of domination. Buzan (2014: 62) presents Expansion in three phases: emergence (in Europe), transfer (to everywhere else), and then decolonization. For Dunne and Little (2014: 101), the nineteenth century was when the ‘nascent global international society’ forming over regional systems was overtaken by key developments, including a portentous ‘transformation’ in the way Europeans conceived of international society and themselves: ‘European great powers in the nineteenth century began to see themselves as members of an exclusive club to which most political entities around the world were not eligible to join’ (2014: 101).

The Standard of Civilization was devised around the 1880s (Gong, 1984) and used to gate-keep admission to an international society that was globalizing. Gong’s overall account is of an implicit standard and an explicit one (1984: 5–7); the implicit one (a European sense of cultural superiority) appeared early in the century and was the more omnipresent (e.g. Bowden, 2009; Zarakol, 2011), while the explicit one was codified much later, in the 1890s and early 1900s in legal textbooks and international legal expectations. In accordance with this standard, polities and kingdoms previously treated as sovereign entities were denied that status. Literature on the Standard is especially focused on countries not actually formally colonized, tracking their incorporation into international society through sociocultural conformities and adaptations and
through invitations to meetings, conferences, and treaties. Favourite cases include the Ottoman Empire, China, Japan, and Siam (Gong, 1984). Indeed, this first rendering of the Expansion Narrative in the 1970s and 1980s adopted the metaphor of ‘entry’ or ‘incorporation’ into a pre-existing European international society, tracking admission using specific dates and treaties. This thereby sidestepped the issue of outright forceful colonization.

Finally, the ES has always been concerned with the post-1945 phase, sometimes described to include the ‘Revolt Against the West’ (e.g. Bull, 1984b) which achieved decolonization. By this account, ‘European or Western dominance of the universal international society’ peaked around 1900 (Bull, 1984b: 219). Rules before decolonization were made by the West/Europe and in their own interests (Bull, 1984b: 217), but by 1900, the non-West was beginning to shape and reform international society, with five goals in mind (Bull, 1984b: 220–222): a campaign for equal sovereignty, the anti-colonial revolution, and struggles for racial equality, international economic justice, and liberation from Western cultural domination (on non-Western Historical IR, see Fonseca Santos, 2021; Svensson, 2021; both in this volume). These early ES works drew some attention to the co-constitutive and multidirectional nature of the evolution of international society, and there is some acknowledgement that once former colonies got their independence and were admitted to international society, they would have an impact. The main concern, however, was that this impact would be negative – ‘quasi-states’ (Jackson, 1990) would be given independence before they were ready and would not be good, responsible actors in global politics.

More recent studies have elaborated upon the expansion process, sometimes taking it in different directions (see also Bayly, 2021 in this volume). Christian Reus-Smit (2013) seeks a causal theory of why an international society of states exists, and identifies the desire for human rights and political freedom as the key driver. Expansion is then the creation of new sovereign states and the collapse of empires, a process in which decolonization events are particularly central. He identifies five historical moments in which a state-system emerged and then ‘expanded through a series of imperial implosions’ (2013: 15), each producing newly independent states: the Westphalian episode around 1648, the Latin American ‘second wave’ between 1810 and 1825 in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the post-1945 breakdown of all empires; 1919 and 1989 are other such moments.

From the historical point of view, the Expansion Narrative established a fully developed and global ‘international society’ as the end point of the diplomatic activity of the previous four centuries and codified its periodization. The emphasis on treaty-making at the end of wars established the basic periodization: Westphalia, Utrecht, Vienna, Versailles, with corrections and adjustments at Berlin and Bretton Woods. This periodization has been challenged – Buzan and Lawson (2015) have put forward the 1850s as a turning point, at which the world is finally one unified political-strategic system – but it has not been overturned.8

The Expansion Narrative today

While large-scale historical narratives – e.g. liberal-democratic expansion and ‘whiggish’ progress narratives that incorporate directionality, telos and ignore historical contingency – have been the subject of persistent attack, the Expansion Narrative avoids teleology for the most part and has survived attacks on grand narratives relatively unscathed. Its critics do not question that a form of expansion occurred but rather focus on the processes involved, and the ideological implications of the theory and the process itself. Many of these criticisms have been incorporated into the narrative, correcting its detail and amplifying it in significant ways. It should also be noted that
large-scale narratives are essential conceptual tools, conveying summary information to the general public and to students in the classroom, and are in fact omnipresent (Suganami, 2008; White, 1973). Narratives bring order to the infinite volume of facts available, highlighting some things and ignoring others. The relevant question is the accounting – do the analytic benefits of a narrative outweigh the costs? More importantly, do the criticisms directed at elements in the Expansion Narrative undercut the essential elements in the story, or do they rather amplify it and correct it?

There have, of course, been important criticisms of the Expansion Narrative. A common charge is that the Expansion story as originally represented is Eurocentric and overly impressed with Western power (Buzan, 2004: 214–216; Buzan and Little, 2000; Dunne and Little, 2014; Kayaoglu, 2010; Keal, 2003). It is also said to have sanitized a process that was often violent, and with little genuine regard for the subjects that were being incorporated (Callahan, 2004; see also Yao and Delatolla, 2021 in this volume), describing as gradual and benign a ‘process of social incorporation’ that was in fact repressive and exclusionary (Keal, 2003). Finally, the expansion story has been found to be ‘primarily descriptive not explanatory’ (Reus-Smit, 2013: 31); the original narrative was not primarily concerned with why things happened.

However, Reus-Smit’s recent work highlights an important causal factor, which has served to considerably amplify the historical narrative. These are the ‘political struggles for freedom and recognition’ (2013: 1). These drove the expansion process in part by adapting the discourses of the imperializer for processes of resistance. Nor is this just his theory. Local historians from the Middle East, Africa, Japan, and Latin America have constructed their political histories of independence or (re Japan) modernizations in terms of the Expansion Narrative, albeit an adjusted narrative in which local forces did not merely absorb but also selected elements in the Standard of Civilization discourse to serve local purposes of adaptation and change. Amitav Acharya (2001) is perhaps most relevant in this respect, but see also Carsten-Andreas Schulz (2014).

Noting that Zhang (1991) and Stivachtis (1998) had already offered their critiques, Edward Keene (2014) ambitiously criticizes the analogy frequently assumed between ‘entry’ and ‘expansion’. Instead, he argues for a shift ‘from expansion to stratification’. By this argument, we need to rethink how the nineteenth-century system itself actually functioned and ordered things, not just the idea of incorporation itself (2014: 655) – in fact, non-Western states were hardly admitted into international society on equal terms. Carsten-Andreas Schulz (2014) makes a similar point about Latin American states in the nineteenth century and the awkward case of countries nominally Western in civilizational terms. He argues that international society was ‘heterarchical’, with different measures of status and belonging and varying ways of including and excluding. Latin American states might have been incorporated in formal-legal terms, but were excluded on civilizational expectations. A second purpose in these studies is to take account of the new interest in hierarchy that has become prominent in IR (e.g. Bially Mattern and Zarakol, 2016). B.A. Roberson’s study of the modernization of Egyptian legal codes demonstrates how Egyptian legal and political elites deliberately adopted European legal practice to counter European rights to special legal treatment (Roberson, 2009). These are innovative process breakthroughs, though still within the classical account.
Similarly, it is now realized that changes were not so easily imposed by imperial conquest (Buzan and Little, 1994, citing Laura Benton); there was always local pushback and resistance. The regional systems that were overrun and absorbed by the European system, once ignored, are now getting attention (Buzan and Little, 1994: 62; Stivachtis, 2014; Suzuki et al., 2014). But these developments imply a correction of the narrative, not its overthrow.

Tim Dunne and Reus-Smit’s (2017) edited volume, The Globalization of International Society, is the new major revisiting of the Expansion Narrative, with some significant advances. The authors take a truly global perspective to the story and take on the 1984 Expansion collection at every point, providing compelling critiques of the classical narrative. Major theoretical and conceptual innovations are offered (Reus-Smit and Dunne, 2017a: 28–39). Perhaps most significantly, the volume rejects the incorporation/expansion model in favour of globalization processes writ large, proposing the ‘globalization’ of international society, not the expansion of it. This de-privileges Europe in favour of a globally interactive process. Second, they fully embrace the idea that international systems are social and therefore not distinct in any way from ‘international society’, in effect bucking away from the ES’s somewhat stadial understanding of international history. In short, there is no notion that an international system stage preceded a societal one (Reus-Smit and Dunne, 2017a: 33). Third, they choose to foreground Hedley Bull’s (1977: 278) notion of the ‘world political system’—all the actors and forces in the world, not just state actors—enact a constant influence on the development of international society (2017a: 33–34). International society exists within and develops from ‘a broader world of political actors and relations’ which they call ‘the world political system’, and which features ‘a shifting panoply of individual and institutional actors’ (2017a: 34). In effect, they counsel us to take a variety of global influences into account, always. In their terms, international society is a ‘governance assemblage…in which the principal units are sovereign states’ (2017a: 34).

New studies consider in some detail how the world political system has shaped the evolution of international society, as ‘contestation’ in the globalization of international society characterizes the modern co-constitution of the culture of international society since 1945 (and the new tone is much less Eurocentric or Euro-friendly; see Bowden, 2021 in this volume). Ian Hall (2017) discusses the contours and content of the new revolt today, noting that some of those Bull identified in 1984, such as the anti-colonial revolution, have been largely resolved or displaced, but that new disagreements have taken their place. The issue of racial inequality lingers as a problem in international society, but in different forms (Klotz, 2017). Gender and gender expectations are incorporated as part of standards of civilization (Towns, 2017), something completely missing from the ES in the past, and even today.

These topics are evidence of the cultural issues at stake in the new international society. They also offer fertile possibilities for future exploration, building on the traditional ES concern about culture (as webs of norms and values). With the new lens, all the world’s civilizations can be seen in relation to their contributions to an international culture. What other approaches to IR give this question so much concerted attention? In this new form, the ES is incorporating and joining many of the arguments made by postcolonial IR and its empirical points about the intercultural cogeneration of the international.

Relatedly, the ES continues to undertake a creative introspection of the central concepts of ‘international society’ and ‘international system’, which may shake up the conceptual underpinnings of the narrative itself. One argument is that a somewhat violent, disconnected ‘international system’ phase or stage is actually hard to substantiate empirically, such that we should shift our thinking to consider most of world history as displaying aspects and dimensions of international society alone.
Finally, the new literature is more cautious about seeing expansion/globalization as a finished process. Instead, it presents both as ongoing, with recognition that the current age of challenges to the West, the rise of the BRICS/East, and a general ‘multicultural multipolarity’ are, or may be, creating a different form of international society.

Conclusion

The ES’s strong historical research agenda, and its singular content, are a key source of the ES’s uniqueness. The ES has always been an alternative to positivist modes of theorizing, to quantitative approaches, and to a scientific-structural realism; it has always been ‘interpretive, normative, and attentive to questions of identity and culture’ (Epp, 2014: 33). This is the sensibility it brings to international history. No other approach or ‘research program’ in IR has embarked upon a concerted effort to develop a unified narrative of IR history, in which key terms and descriptors for phases and aspects of history are debated so intensely.

Taken together, the Expansion Narrative is a grand account of the history of IR, one that builds on the 1648-Westphalia state-system narrative but adds to it considerably. Crucially, it addresses colonialism better than most approaches and the social story of how practices were developed in a ‘European cultural hearth’ — in intense interaction with the rest of the world — and then spread elsewhere. As ES authors have noted, it therefore anticipates, by decades even, today’s more fashionable renderings, both constructivist, driven by social mechanisms and norms, and the interest in norm diffusion. Its origins lie clearly in diplomatic history, and in the experience of the British Empire. It puts to the side the more common realist-oriented themes of systemic power distributions, polarities, power transitions, predicting the incidence of war, etc. Instead, it is primarily about order and the problem of securing and managing legitimacy for a presently existing order.

The overall import of the ES’s theoretical contribution to historical IR should not be underrated. The Expansion Narrative and the comparative study of state-systems that the ES has pursued alongside it (Wight, 1977; Watson, 1992) have established the temporality of our present state-system and provided the historian of international relations with a common focus — the historical development of the contours of a system of sovereign states. In the course of doing so, they also provided it with a Big Question. The Expansion Narrative supported the contention that state-systems based on mutual recognition and equality are historically rare (see Phillips and Sharman, 2015), that hierarchical systems are more the norm, and that the European historical system of equal sovereigns, or at least of equal great powers who recognized each other’s right to exist, is positively freakish. It is quite possible that a China-centred international society of 2050 and beyond will be hierarchical in the more usual manner. Watson identified a continuous tendency in state-systems towards hegemony, a reminder that the conditions of our present state-system are contingent historical conditions, and that other narratives are possible. Scholars should focus our attention on the historical conditions, and historical contingencies, that maintain our ‘freakish order’, as well as the ones that are most likely to overcome it. This is a task for historical IR, with the ES in the vanguard, for years to come.

Suggestions for further reading


### Notes

1. As opposed to historical theories with implications for international relations (e.g. Fischer, 1967).

2. The British Committee on the Theory of International Politics was initiated by Kenneth Thompson of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1957 to support the work of a faltering American committee on the same subject.

3. For those unfamiliar with the lectures, Bull's characterisation has the virtue of brevity: 'Each pattern or tradition of thought embodied a description of the nature of international politics and also a set of prescriptions as to how men should conduct themselves in it' (Bull, 1976: 103).

4. Wight (1966: 32–33) is anticipating the argument that conventional historians and conventional political scientists do not in fact differ much in method or philosophy; each is doing much the same thing — empirically based case studies. The main difference is that one uses primarily sociographical material and the other historiographical material.


6. The unpublished paper Butterfield delivered to the Committee in January was entitled 'The Historic State-System'; Vigezzi (2005: 186–188) provides an account of the contents.

7. A third, Kantian phase, of considerable liberal norm-convergence and the erosion of states under deep human solidarity is the 'world society' phase, not something we discuss here (see Wight, 1991; Buzan, 2004).

8. From the theoretical point of view, the Expansion Narrative also narrowed the ES focus on what has come to be termed 'fundamental institutions' (see Holsti, 2004; Buzan, 2004, Knudsen and Navari, 2019).

### References


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