THE ENGLISH SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS A "MIDDLE WAY" BETWEEN REALISM AND IDEALISM

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Abstract: The article examines the core principles of the English School of international relations, which tries to harmonize the theoretical positions of the rationalist and liberal schools of thought, and thus bridge the distinctions between their respective key concepts of 'international system' and 'international society.

Key-words: international relations, English School, realism, rationalism, idealism, liberalism, international system, international society, the Hobbesian or realist tradition, the Grotian tradition, global social order, *via media*

From the plethora of theoretical perspectives which characterize the intricate realm of International Relations, Rationalism – commonly known as 'the English School' or 'the International Society' tradition – has been regarded as one of the chief approaches to international politics 'although its influence is probably greater in Britain than in most other societies where International Relations is taught' [1].

'The English School' is best described as a group of mainly British or British-inspired theorists, whose major focus is, first and foremost, on the concept of 'international society'[2]. The term 'international society' conveys a society of sovereign states, conceived as independent political communities in that they do not have to yield to any higher juridical political authority [3]. Judging from this definition, one can draw the conclusion that 'independence is the core value in a cluster of important international values, including self-determination (the right of a political community or state to become a sovereign state), non-intervention, and the right of self-defence (a state's right to wage war in its own defence)' [4]. Therefore, scholars of the English School view international politics as a distinctive domain in the sphere of politics, which has at its heart the absence of a hierarchical authority, envisaged as a 'world government'. Nonetheless, International Society theorists argue that the relations between states are continuously influenced by specific common interests, values, rules, and institutions which are designed to maintain a global social order within 'the anarchical society', as Hedley Bull appropriately describes it.

Hedley Bull, one of the leading exponents of the 'International Society' approach, draws a sharp distinction between an 'international system' (a realist concept) and an 'international society' (a liberal concept). According to Bull, 'a system of states (or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions…to make the behaviour of each a necessary element in the calculations of the other', whereas 'a society of states (or 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' [5].

It follows that International Society theorists view sovereign states as the hub of world politics and as the key actors in international relations, insofar as they form a society, albeit an anarchic one, operating in the absence of any central government. This view implies 'a surprisingly high level of order and a surprisingly low level of violence between states given that their condition is one of anarchy' [6]. However, this does not mean that the English School overlooks the phenomenon of hostility in relations between states. On the contrary, its representatives are well

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aware of this prevalent facet of the 'anarchical society' (the title of the School's masterwork, Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society*, 1977).

In addition, they lay emphasis on the controlled coexistence of states, safeguarded by a wide range of international institutions regulating the modern international society, such as international law ('a set of norms, rules and practices created by states and other actors to facilitate diverse social goals, from order and coexistence to justice and human development'[7]), the balance of power ('the power of one state or group of states is checked by the countervailing power of other states'[8]) and diplomacy ('a communications process between international actors that seeks through negotiation to resolve conflict short of war'[9]). As Hedley Bull puts it, 'most states at most times pay some respect to the basic rules of coexistence in international society, such as mutual respect for sovereignty, the rule that agreements should be kept, and rules limiting resort to violence […] and take part in the working of common institutions: the forms and procedures of international law, the system of diplomatic representation…' [10]. Therefore, it should be obvious that the smooth running of the society of states requires 'a highly developed form of international social consciousness'[11], through which international cooperation can be achieved.

Consequently, members of the English School argue that the international political system is more civilized and organized than realists and neo-realists imply; nevertheless, 'the fact that violence is ineradicable in their view puts them at odds with utopians who believe in the possibility of perpetual peace'[12]. To put it in a nutshell, the English School is viewed as a 'middle way' in classical IR scholarship, as 'it sees itself providing a *via media* that runs between two more polarized positions' [13]. To a certain degree, the International Society approach rejects both the over-optimistic idealist forecasts of international cooperation and eternal peace in world politics and the realist tradition, which 'describes international relations as a state of war of all against all, an arena of struggle in which each state is pitted against every other' [14]. Hence, for International Society scholars, the study of international relations requires a twofold analysis of both war and peace, inasmuch as they have alternated throughout the history of international practice.

Adherents of the *via media* approach have been labelled in various ways – as rationalists, Grotians or proponents of an international society, who 'seek to avoid the stark choice between (1) state egotism and conflict and (2) human goodwill and cooperation presented by the debate between realism and liberalism'[15]. Therefore, the Grotian tradition is considered to occupy the middle ground between the realist tradition and the idealist tradition, its supporters contending that the truth lies between these two extremes. The theorists of the English School oppose the viewpoint of the Hobbesian or realist tradition, which holds that states are engaged in an escalating struggle for power, 'like gladiators in an arena' [16]. Instead, they argue that the existence of common rules and institutions keeps a tight rein on the conflicting interests and discords within the sphere of international relations.

On the other hand, International Society scholars view sovereign states as the principal actors of international politics, thus strongly disagreeing with the Kantian or universalist tradition, which asserts the superiority of individual human beings. In brief, the core principle of the English School is the pursuit of dialogue between these two separate theoretical perspectives, which, according to its proponents, do not fully grasp the endless convolutions of the reality in international politics – to quote Scott Burchill, 'there is, they argue, more to international politics than realists suggest but there will always be much less than the cosmopolitan desires' [17].

In the rationalist view of Grotius, states are conceived as 'human organizations', as indicated by the key concept – 'society of states' – which entails 'international activities in which humans engage', and whose normative aspects arouse considerable interest for International Society scholars [18]. Basically, the Grotians' understanding of international relations is that of a human activity involving various fundamental values which shape the interactions between states. For the English School, the focal centre of interest is indubitably the tension between order and justice, which 'is a reminder that progress has not advanced very far' [19], thus affirming the impediments which states need to confront throughout their progressive intercourse. Consequently, rationalists

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charge that idealists have failed to understand these difficulties as a result of their naivety and incessant wishful thinking.

Bull's statement that 'order is part of the historical record of international relations' has aroused the opposition of those to whom 'the idea of international order suggests not anything that has occurred in the past, but simply a possible or desirable future state of international relations'[20]. However, Bull acknowledges 'the precarious and imperfect nature of the order' [21] within the modern international society, implying that the prospect of providing order more efficiently remains beyond its reach [22]. Yet, regardless of the flawed nature of order, an idea he advances in his *Anarchical Society*, Bull carries great conviction that order does exist. He argues that it has its roots 'in the actual practice of states and not just in ideas about their relations' and that 'the evidence for its existence lies in the common interest of all states in the achievement of the elementary goals of social life, in the rules that they established to that end, and in their participation in common institutions' [23].

On the whole, it can be concluded that the English School does not accept as true the realists' pessimistic belief that the state of nature is a state of war, since states can form an international society governed by certain common rules and institutions leading to a more peaceful coexistence within the realm of international politics. Conversely, members of the English School are highly sceptical of the global political reform advocated by cosmopolitan thinkers, who envisage a new world order and a universal community of humankind. As a consequence, the English School is attracted by elements of both realism and idealism, since it lays stress on the 'diplomatic dialogue between states, while recognizing that states are often tempted to use force to realize their objectives or to resolve major differences' [24].

All things considered, it has become commonplace to regard the English School as the *via media* between two opposite extremes, inasmuch as, in trying to reconcile realism with idealism, it gravitates towards the middle ground – to cite Scott Burchill, 'the English School can claim to have passed the test of a good international theory', by having managed to avoid 'the sterility of realism and the naivety of idealism' [25].

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