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# The Contribution of the System Concept to the English School: Clarifying the System Concept by Means of Methodological Pluralism

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**The Contribution of the System Concept to the English School:  
Clarifying the System Concept by Means  
of Methodological Pluralism**

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The 'international system' concept of the traditional triad and the English School's (hereafter ES) methodological pluralism are both aspects of the School that are taken for granted. However, neither the international system concept nor the ES's methodological pluralism are well understood. In both cases, over the years the debate has been patchy and unsustainable. With regards to the international system concept, the debate has largely revolved around whether the concept remains relevant. For Alan James<sup>1</sup>, for example, the question is *which* concept, system or society, is more useful for describing the collectivity of states. Other scholars simply never refer to the international system, choosing instead to focus on international society alone. This is not surprising; the ES has often been characterised by others as the 'international society school'.<sup>2</sup> There is also a general consensus among those within the ES that the concept of international society is the ES's most significant contribution to the discipline. Recent work confirms this; more than one edited anthology has appeared on the importance of international society to IR theory.<sup>3</sup> Whilst recognising the importance of the international society concept, it should not become the focus at the expense of an understanding of the other two concepts. This neglect shows a misunderstanding of what Richard Little has called an 'unstated methodological assumption' that it is not possible to understand IR from one perspective alone.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that this misunderstanding of the ES as the 'international society' school would occur less often if the ES were defined on the basis of more than just the tripartite distinction. This would mean defining methodological pluralism separately from the triad, so that we would both understand the triad as one approach among many, and we would also understand its basis more clearly.

In this paper I focus primarily on the system concept within ES theory, on the basis that, if one of the key concepts of the School is not well understood, the ES cannot meet the potential of its methodological pluralism. This paper therefore begins the process of laying the groundwork to clarify the system concept in English School theory. I aim to clarify the system concept in two ways: first, I discuss the major points of the debate on the international system concept within the ES; I then re-frame the current understanding of the ES's methodological pluralism. I use the proposed ES research agenda in order to develop what I call the 'English School commitment to methodological pluralism'; in brief, I argue that the ES has a commitment to the explanation and description of multiple, co-existing tendencies in IR. According to this framing, the triad is a powerful tool that captures these tendencies, but it is not the only tool. In the last section I suggest some approaches to understanding systematic tendencies in IR by discussing a number of the contributions in a recent anthology on the relevance, or lack thereof, of Niklas Luhmann's theory for world

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<sup>1</sup> Alan James, "System or Society?" *Review of International Studies* 19, no. 3 (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Dale Copeland, 'A Realist Critique of the English School', *Review of International Studies*, 29 (2003), p. 439; see also Richard Little, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 6 (2000), p. 396. Copeland and Little disagree on what being called the 'international society' school means for the ES however; Copeland would have the ES focus on international society as a 'causal variable' whereas Little argues that reducing the ES to the study of international society alone takes away its methodological pluralism, which is its unique contribution to the discipline.

<sup>3</sup> See Alex Bellamy, ed. *International Society and its Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); also B.A. Roberson, ed. *International Society and the Development of International Relations Theory* (London: Pinter, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Little, "International System, International Society and World Society: A Re-Evaluation of the English School," in *International Society and the Development of International Relations Theory*, ed. ed. B.A. Roberson (London: Pinter, 1998).

politics. Although Chris Brown argued in his contributing essay that there are few links to be made between Modern Systems Theory (MST) and the ES, I think there are links to be made, although caution is necessary. I will focus on how Luhmann's theory can help the ES take on a systemic perspective when necessary, as well as offer potential explanations for the structural level.

### **The 'international system' debate in the ES**

An understanding of what the international system concept does for the English School is necessary in order to make full use of the triad, which for many is the foundation of the ES's methodological pluralism.<sup>5</sup> However, defining the international system concept's contribution to the English School is a difficult task, since it appears at first glance that there is not an explicit debate about the international system concept *per se* within the ES. Many scholars refer to the international system and often depend on their assumptions about it in order to make arguments about other aspects of international politics, most often international society. However, very few studies in the English School deal primarily, or even secondarily, with the international system concept. Because there are so few studies in the ES that focus primarily on the international system concept, the discussion in this section will be limited to the work of three scholars, Alan James, Barry Buzan and Richard Little.

The international system concept has never been uncontroversial. The criticism within the ES usually begins with questioning the clarity of Bull's distinction between an international system and an international society. According to Bull, an international system requires regular interaction but lacks any shared rules, whereas in a society there are common interests.<sup>6</sup> James points out that for a system to exist, the units need to have some kind of shared interest or else the system could not maintain itself. He further questions Bull's argument that a system can 'agree' to rules but not 'accept' them. James argues that such questions create shortcomings in Bull's conceptual distinction; these shortcomings prompt him to ask which concept is more useful, system or society, and ultimately to argue that society is the "better" concept.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Buzan takes a different approach to the system-society problem from James. He accepts the basic assumptions inherent in Bull's distinction, but attempts to clarify it further. Buzan argues that the key distinguishing factor between a system and a society is the shared identity that is the consequence of states' recognition of each others' equal legal status within an international society. This equal legal status arises because of the likeness of the units.<sup>8</sup>

Although Buzan and James arrive at different conclusions about the fate of the international system concept, there are a couple of related, noteworthy similarities. First, both Buzan and James use the international system concept as a means of elucidating international society. Second, their definitions of international system are negative definitions, in the sense that they are defined on the basis of what they are not, namely, international society. For James, the important question is which is the better way of describing the collectivity of states, system or society? On the basis that the distinction

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<sup>5</sup> In the next section I will be questioning whether or not this is the only way to understand methodological pluralism and suggesting a different approach. However, for the purpose of this section, it is necessary to stay within the tripartite approach.

<sup>6</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society, 3rd Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> James, 'System or Society?', pp. 274-275.

<sup>8</sup> Barry Buzan, "From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School," *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (1993). p. 345.

between the two concepts is unclear, and his contention that even Bull's understanding of international system would require some societal elements, he argues that society is the better classifying concept. However, conceding with Wight that a society will not arise unless backed by a common culture, he suggests that, when a common culture is lacking, the collectivity of states would be more like a system than a society. However, he does not develop this point further.<sup>9</sup>

This is where Buzan picks up. Instead of arguing that when a common culture is lacking, international system may be the more appropriate term, he argues instead that international society can arise out of anarchy in the international system. He distinguishes between two forms of international society, *gemeinschaft*, an international society that forms on a civilisational, or a common cultural basis, and *gesellschaft*, an international society that forms on a functional basis through conscious acts of will. It is the latter that he argues may arise out of anarchy; in Buzan's words, 'System is logically the more basic, and prior, idea: an international system can exist without a society, but the converse is not true'.<sup>10</sup> For Buzan, then, it is not a question of system or society as it is for James, but rather how system precedes society. One might even say that Buzan is implying that system *causes* society. If this is the case, then how does the international system continue and co-exist alongside society after it forms? However, neither Buzan nor James answer these questions; one reason, of course, is because it is neither of their objectives to answer these questions because their interests lie in developing the international society concept.

On the other hand, I would add that there is another reason why they cannot answer these questions, which is that both Buzan and James define international system in such a way that we only know what it is with reference to international society. In the latter case, this is because James does not attempt to build on or clarify Bull's distinction between international system and international society; he simply illuminates its shortcomings by working with it as it is. Buzan also recognises the limitations of Bull's definitions, but moves on from the basic idea in order to demonstrate the definitions' potential for development. Yet, even as Buzan further develops Bull's concepts, his definition of international system still leaves many questions open. Buzan explains the international system as follows, 'For a system to exist requires the existence of units, among which significant interaction takes place and that are arranged or structured according to some ordering principle'.<sup>11</sup> This is a problematic explanation because, following soon after it, Buzan points out that Bull associated the concept of international society with order.<sup>12</sup> The line between an international system and an international society is therefore blurred; all we know is that an international society is the 'thicker' concept of shared values and institutions. An international system does not have these, but what it does have remains unclear.

Admittedly, the concepts of international system and international society are not going to be black-and-white concepts, and perhaps the problem is that too many people have been expecting them to be. Yet if the ES intends to use the triad as an analytical approach, it should be able to identify the value of each concept in its own right. Buzan has offered one understanding; by using the 'mechanistic' logic of Bull's and Watson's understanding of the international system, he is able to show that there is a linked relationship between international system and international society, and therefore between

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<sup>9</sup> James, 'System or Society?', p. 276.

<sup>10</sup> Buzan, 'From International System', pp. 331, 333.

<sup>11</sup> Buzan, 'From International System', p. 331.

<sup>12</sup> Buzan, 'From International System', p. 332.

structural realism and the English School.<sup>13</sup> But this linear relationship between the international system and international society may not be the only link to be made between a system and a society concept. Systematic tendencies may still be at work in international politics, even after societies have surpassed the minimum interaction necessary for the formation of a system. This takes us back to Little's 'unstated methodological assumption.' He argues, 'when viewing international relations in terms of a system rather than a society ... different features of reality are brought into focus'.<sup>14</sup> But which features are brought into focus by using a system rather than society concept? In order to answer this question, we need to identify what systematic tendencies are.

Buzan and Little's *International Systems in World History* is as of yet the only study in the ES to develop the international system concept in its own right. Although the other concepts of international and world society play a role in the study, the international system is the focus. They conceptualise the international system as both historical and multidimensional; this requires acknowledging that mechanistic and social constructivist understandings of the concept can make important contributions. According to their theoretical toolkit, international systems can be understood by considering levels and sectors (military-political, economic, socio-cultural, environmental) of analysis along with three 'sources of explanation', process, interaction capacity and structure.<sup>15</sup> Their theoretical toolkit certainly does suggest how to analyse international systems, yet nowhere do Buzan and Little present an alternate, perhaps clearer than Bull's of Waltz's, definition of international system. They tell us that international systems need not be defined by like units and they need to be understood within their own historical contexts in order to avoid a teleological understanding of the modern international system.<sup>16</sup> But again, these are methods that clarify our analysis of international systems, but do not identify them.

One difficulty is the term 'international' used to describe the system element. This both locates the concept within time and space and conceptually blurs into the normative territory of international society. Still, it is questionable whether there is a better term to capture the phenomena that Buzan and Little are trying to capture with their toolkit. What it does suggest though is, as I mentioned previously, international system and international society are not black-and-white concepts, which means they will be difficult to distinguish empirically. However, from a theoretical point of view, they express different perspectives. Buzan and Little write, 'A systemic perspective presupposes that from the myriad events constituting international relations it is possible to abstract patterns and regularities that reveal the existence of international systems'.<sup>17</sup>

Their discussion of process formations sheds light on this view. They define process formations as 'durable or recurrent patterns in interactions among units' which include, for example, war, the balance of power, diplomacy and international organisations, among others.<sup>18</sup> What is notable about this definition is that what they are here defining as process

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<sup>13</sup> Buzan, 'From International System.'

<sup>14</sup> Little, 'International System, International Society', p. 74.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Little Barry Buzan, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Buzan and Little, *World History*, p.113.

<sup>17</sup> Buzan and Little, *World History*, p. 33

<sup>18</sup> Buzan and Little, *World History*, p. 79.

formations are elsewhere defined as institutions<sup>19</sup>, an element which unquestionably belongs in the realm of international society. But this does not create a conflict because Buzan and Little do not argue that process formations are a replacement for institutions; rather, reading their argument with reference to more recent work on institutions suggests that phenomena like war, the balance of power, diplomacy and international organisations may be simultaneously process formations and institutions. Thus, in discussing ‘process formations’, Buzan and Little are viewing phenomena, which also may be classified as institutions, from a systemic perspective.

Given this observation, it is surprising that Buzan advocates the removal of the international system concept in his more recent work, *From International to World Society?*. He re-works the triad into three new key concepts that are based on type of actor: inter-human (of individuals), inter-state and trans-national (of non-state, non-individual actors). This re-worked triad is based on the following four propositions: 1) that state and non-state dimensions should be separated, 2) physical/social distinctions should be set aside in ES theory, 3) distinct forms of social relations are linked but there is no direct causality and 4) individuals and trans-national actors are not grouped together because they are ontologically different.<sup>20</sup> These three new domains capture the international society and world society concepts of the traditional ES triad in greater depth and detail.

In explaining his new triad, Buzan justifies the removal of the international system element in the following way:

‘Dropping “system” as representing a distinctive, asocial form of interstate relations, means eliminating (or rather relocating in a redefined form) one of the three main pillars in the classic English School triad of concepts. In return for this, the problem of the missing “system” side complementing world society also disappears. This revision ...solves the boundary problem created there by changing the nature of the boundary between international and world society’.<sup>21</sup>

Two problems arise with this justification. First, Buzan argues for removing the international system element when it is associated with the realist asocial/power political definition. Second, he states that his new triad is relocating the system pillar of the triad in a redefined form. Defining the international system element in terms of asocial interstate relations is an entirely different take from the approach in *International Systems in World History*. There, international systems could be historical and multidimensional, but here international systems are asocial. Of course, Buzan does argue for a structural and historical approach to understanding the relationship between international and world society, and perhaps this approach is the redefined/relocated systemic perspective he refers to. Nonetheless, the argument does seem to leave the question of where and how the perspective the international system element offers fits in. Is changing the boundary between international society and world society enough?

This discussion has revealed the difficulty of conceptually differentiating international system and international society. Bull’s own definitions of the two concepts indicated a direction for understanding the relationship between the two concepts which has largely been accepted within the ES literature. However, the boundary between the two

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of institutions, see for example, Kalevi Holsti, *Taming the Sovereigns: Institutional Change in International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Buzan, *World Society?*, pp. 128-132.

<sup>21</sup> Buzan, *World Society?*, p. 107.

concepts is blurred. Rather than attempting to define the international system as a concept that is entirely distinct from international society, in this section I have tried to emphasise the *perspective* that the concept offers. Arguments such as Little's, that different perspectives are necessary in order to understand more of international politics, and Buzan's, that the international system concept can be redefined and relocated, indicate the value of such an approach. Yet questions remain about how the international system concept should be redefined and relocated as well as what a system concept should actually contribute. In the next section I adopt one approach to addressing these questions; I step outside the boundaries of the classical triad and define the ES on the basis of a further developed understanding of the School's methodological pluralism. I adopt this approach on the grounds that I believe that adopting a different perspective on the meaning of methodological pluralism will open the door to further clarifying the system concept's contribution. Therefore the next section does not discuss the system concept explicitly, but rather focuses on the questions this new perspective raises. These questions will inform the final section, in which I will return again to the ES's system concept.

### **The meaning of methodological pluralism**

My objective here is to temporarily step outside the triad in order to ask if there is something more fundamental to the definition of methodological pluralism in ES theory. In 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', Little argued that discussion about methodological pluralism was needed because 'members of the ES have tended to be methodologically unselfconscious'.<sup>22</sup> I do this by differentiating between what I call the English School commitment to the explanation and understanding of multiple and co-existing tendencies and the triad of concepts. I argue that this commitment requires a methodologically pluralist approach. Because of this unique approach, the ES has the capacity to be both structural and historical, and thus able to address both structural and normative questions either simultaneously or separately. The strength of the combination has three important elements: 1) a long view of history; 2) telling a story of historical contingency as opposed to teleology; 3) the role of norms and institutions in the constitution of agents and structures. These points have been well established in recent ES works, which have opened the door for more structural and historical work, but they still rely heavily on the triad. My objective in this section is to re-define methodological pluralism in light of the three elements I introduced above. I then re-consider the ES research agenda through the lens of this commitment, considering the types of research questions that are raised as a result. My argument is that there are research questions that are relevant for the ES agenda that do not fit the conventional triad mould.

In his introduction to *International Theory: the Three Traditions*, Bull quotes Wight writing, 'One of the main purposes of a university education is to escape from the Zeitgeist, from the mean, narrow, provincial spirit which is constantly assuring us that we are at the summit of human achievement, that we stand on the edge of unprecedented prosperity or unparalleled catastrophe ... It is a liberation of spirit to acquire perspective'.<sup>23</sup> Bull drew particular attention to this statement in his introduction to *The Three Traditions* in order to

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<sup>22</sup> Little, 'ES Contribution', p. 405.

<sup>23</sup> Hedley Bull, 'Introduction' in Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991).



explain how Wight's high moral and academic standards were informed by his commitment to the association of normative, historical and theoretical enquiry.<sup>24</sup> It was this commitment to a particular approach to intellectual enquiry – not just international relations or international theory – that informed his exegesis of the three traditions. This commitment can be likened to the three elements I have suggested as a framework for describing the ES's contribution. We can read the three traditions, and by implication the triad, as one possible expression of a commitment to a long view of history that is both normative and historically contingent.

Traditionally the use of the tripartite distinction has been central to defining the methodological pluralism of the school, leading many studies to focus on the question of how strong or weak each element of the triad is in relation to the others.<sup>25</sup> But we must ask ourselves what it is we really want to know. What is interesting about the triad is not the triad itself, but what it represents: the co-existence of the potentially conflicting tendencies of power and morality, and what forms society takes in order to compensate for and/or achieve the goals that each of these tendencies implies. Little argued, discussing Boucher [1998], that the ES does not need to create a new classificatory scheme other than the triad, but rather the ES should consider the bases that generate each concept of the triad.<sup>26</sup>

This argument suggests that the commitment to explaining multiple tendencies in IR is more fundamental to the ES's methodological pluralism than the triad is. Such an understanding is compatible with the English School's research agenda, which both Buzan and Alderson and Hurrell offer views upon. Buzan proposes that the ES research agenda be divided into the following areas: 1) ES theory, 2) sovereignty and intervention, 3) history of international society, 4) the European Union and the distinction between international and world society, 5) ES theory and international law.<sup>27</sup> Alderson and Hurrell, in considering the continued relevance of Bull's work, more or less concur with these areas, but also add systemic and normative transformation, culture and draw particular attention to Bull's interest in first-order questions of power, value and legitimacy.<sup>28</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that the ES should do away with the triad. I am suggesting a change in perspective because the standpoint, or direction of a theory, matters just as much as the substance it is trying to explain. Thus, I am suggesting that defining the ES's methodological pluralism as a commitment to structural and historical theorising should be a valid starting point, instead of necessarily defining methodological pluralism as *derived* from the triad. It was on the basis of defining methodological pluralism as derived from the triad that Buzan argued for a 'taxonomical overhaul' consisting of re-imagining the triad;<sup>29</sup> instead I advocate a taxonomical overhaul outside of the triad. If we proceed to let the triad be the only definition of the School, we may get trapped in it. Ultimately the triad of concepts may still be the most useful set of concepts for naming the tendencies which we wish to explain in international politics. Nonetheless, we should not rule out the possibility that there may be times historically and in the future when using the triad will limit our understanding. For example, in the previous section I referred to how using the term 'international system' does locate our enquiry within a particular historical time and space. Viewing the ES's

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<sup>24</sup> Hedley Bull in Martin Wight, *International Theory*, p. xxiii.

<sup>25</sup> Barry Buzan, "The English School: An Underexploited Resource in Ir," *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>26</sup> Little, 'ES Contribution', p.401.

<sup>27</sup> Buzan, 'Underexploited Resource', pp. 481-487.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Hurrell Kai Alderson, ed., *Hedley Bull on International Society* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Buzan, *World Society?*, p. 16.

methodological pluralism through the lens of structuralism and historicism, rather than a specific tripartite distinction, will facilitate finding circumstances when the triad may not be appropriate, as well as encouraging more deliberate usages and/or applications of the triad.

In one way, the ES's commitment to structuralism and historicism cannot be separated from the triad, just as the discussion in the last section showed that an international system and an international society cannot ever be neatly divorced from each other. To separate the ES's structural and historical capabilities entirely from the triad would mean tossing out the central status of states in ES theory; the resulting theory would not be the English School anymore. Rather, what is necessary to define methodological pluralism in terms of structuralism and historicism, while keeping the triad of concepts always in mind. It is my contention that ES methodological pluralism has always been understood from the opposite direction to this approach, i.e. defining it on the basis of its three concepts, which its practitioners aim to understanding structurally, historically and normatively. In defining methodological pluralism the former way, it is then possible to view empirical studies from several different perspectives of international, world, systemic and/or societal.

Thus I consider how the commitment to the explanation of multiple and co-existing tendencies underlies the tripartite distinction. This, and not the triad itself, is what is fundamental to ES theory. This commitment captures the *via media* approach more than the triad alone does; in the words of Alderson and Hurrell, Bull was 'striving to combine the liberals' concern for norms with the realists' concern for power politics, reminding us of the necessity of reaching out towards an ethic of community among states while at the same time pointing to the limits any such enterprises would necessarily face ... Bull constructed his *via media* out of materials kept constantly in dynamic and ultimately creative tension'.<sup>30</sup> The acknowledgement of this tension and the commitment to explaining it is what makes ES theory unique in the discipline.

Thus, the ES cannot hope to explain and understand multiple and co-existing tendencies unless it is prepared to be both historical and structural. How, then, does this affect our reading of the ES research agenda? Using the triad as our lens, each of the items on the research agenda may be read as either aiming to clarify the triad of concepts or use the concepts as analytical tools in order to consider other research questions. However, there are other themes besides those directly related to the triad running through the items on the research agenda. These include the following: transformation/change, institutions and units/forms of social organisation. I will consider how each of these areas are informed by the ES commitment I defined above.

### *Transformation and change*

The study of change and transformation remains on the margins of English School work. It is often discussed in relation to other considerations, but almost never in its own right. As I mentioned earlier however, Hurrell draws attention to the questions Bull raises about transformation and change in *The Anarchical Society*. First, Bull argued that there is much to be gained from comparisons between the present and previous historical transitions. He introduced, though never fully developed, the ideas of a 'neo-Grotian moment' and 'neo-mediaevalism'.<sup>31</sup> In discussing the possibility of a 'neo-mediaeval' order,

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<sup>30</sup> Alderson and Hurrell, *Hedley Bull*, p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Hurrell, 'Introduction to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition', in Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. xvi.

Bull contested that the proliferation of non-state actors alone was not enough evidence to indicate that we are moving away from the modern, anarchical states-system. To prove such a claim we would need evidence that the supremacy of the sovereign, territorial state is being undermined. He points to several trends in contemporary world politics that suggest there may be evidence to support the neo-mediaeval claim: 1) the increasing regional integration of states, 2) the disintegration of states, 3) the rise of private international violence, 4) the rise of transnational organisations, 5) the globalisation of technology.<sup>32</sup> Second, Bull also raises the issue of change and transformation through his focus on normative questions. He does not make it his explicit objective to explain the creation and diffusion of norms and institutions as a means of understanding change; nonetheless his interest in explaining the nature of order in the society of states has led others to argue that his theory has a 'normative purpose'.<sup>33</sup>

Questions about the character of the structure adopted in world politics (mediaeval, modern international system, neo-mediaeval world order) and the nature of norms raise interesting questions that go beyond the triad and are relevant for the ES research agenda. A good example is the spectrum of pluralism to solidarism, and the limits and possibilities it represents. Buzan asks 'at what point does solidarism become so progressive that it calls into question the existence of a state system?'<sup>34</sup> At that point, if there is such a point, we will need alternate terms to international system and international society because such a point would no longer be a solidarist international society. It would be something else altogether. Alderson and Hurrell propose another approach to the pluralism-solidarism question, focusing on norm creation and implementation. They ask how far norm creation/implementation is based on consent, consensus or community interest. One way to go about considering this question would be to distinguish between different types of international societies.<sup>35</sup> But to distinguish between international societies, we must know what other types of societies there are, in order to give our claim that international societies are unique and important more weight. This suggests that the ES could benefit from completing a typology of societies (not to mention systems), asking of each society what relevance it held for the ES.

Typologies of systems and societies beyond international systems and societies would be one starting point for the ES to start seriously considering transformation and change. It would be consistent with both the historical and normative strands of the School, as well as the commitment to explaining multiple, co-existing tendencies in IR. However, another approach would be to complete typologies of institutions in order to understand their role in change. This is the subject of the next section.

### *Institutions*

A considerable number of scholars have advocated more in-depth study of institutions in world politics; here I will only discuss two (Holsti and Buzan) whose works have particular relevance for understanding ES methodological pluralism as I have defined it, in terms of the commitment I outlined previously.

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<sup>32</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, pp. 254-263.

<sup>33</sup> Hurrell, 'Introduction', p. xvii; Richard Shapcott, "Ir as Practical Philosophy: Defining a "Classical" Approach," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6 (2004).

<sup>34</sup> Buzan, 'Underexploited Resource', p. 482.

<sup>35</sup> Alderson and Hurrell, *Hedley Bull*, p. 67.

Holsti's discusses institutional change as significant change in international politics; he focuses on institutional rather than structural change because structural change occurs infrequently in history, thus leaving out many other types of change. Although he does not specify that he is only interested in institutional change in international society, he does use Bull's definition of a society of states as a means of clarifying which definition of institutions he is using.<sup>36</sup> Bull writes, '... states collaborate with one another ... in what may be called the institutions of international society ... By institution we do not necessarily imply an organisation of administrative machinery, but rather a set of habits and practices shaped towards common goals'.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that institutions are fundamental to the definition of international society. But does this necessarily mean that international society is fundamental to the definition of institutions? It seems unlikely that institutions are unique to international societies; we should therefore be asking questions such as, what kinds of norms, rules and institutions define international societies as opposed to other types of societies? What kinds of institutions define international societies *and* other types of societies?

Buzan makes a start on answering questions such as these by developing a typology of primary and secondary institutions of international society. According to Buzan's definitions, primary institutions follow constitutive rules, whereas secondary institutions follow regulative rules. However, Buzan makes it clear that the constitutive/regulative distinction is not a basis for hierarchically ranking the institutions of international society. Similar to the triad of concepts, there are boundary issues between what counts as a constitutive rule and what counts as a regulative rule. It would therefore be difficult to presume that one type of rule is more important than the other. However, there may be some other basis for hierarchically ranking institutions if needed. For example, one method might be to functionally differentiate the institutions of international society, and then hierarchically rank the functions they represent.<sup>38</sup> Holsti offers a different typology; he argues that institutions may be divided into 'foundational' and 'process' institutions. 'Foundational institutions ... define the fundamental principles, rules, and norms upon which their mutual relations are based' while 'process institutions refer not to ... questions of "how do we claim status and legitimacy?"', but to more instrumental issues of how we behave towards one another'.<sup>39</sup> Similar to Buzan's typology, process institutions are secondary.

Buzan's and Holsti's works both point to the possibilities for institutional change in world politics. Buzan acknowledges that the work is far from finished, and sets out several follow-up areas, including these: the need to define a wider range of institutions than the classic five described by Bull; the need to understand processes of creation and decay of institutions; the possibility that some primary institutions may be more important than others.<sup>40</sup> But again, what if we were to expand these areas beyond international society? Could we have a corresponding typology of institutions of world society? When and how do institutions cross historical international societies? And, if institutions embody the norms, values and practices that constitute international society, then what drives the formation of institutions? Are there particular values that cross history that lead to the development of institutions, which in turn constitute different types of societies? These are just speculative questions; I raise them to draw attention to the need to look outside international society.

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<sup>36</sup> Holsti, *Taming the Sovereigns*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>37</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 71.

<sup>38</sup> Buzan, *World Society?*, pp. 176-177.

<sup>39</sup> Holsti, *Taming the Sovereigns*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> Buzan, *World Society?*, p. 172.

The related issues of units and modes of social organisation cross through several items on the ES research agenda, most especially the first two items, ES theory and sovereignty and intervention.<sup>41</sup> It is here where we may ask more specific questions about the basis of the state and international society, in particular *why* these particular forms of organisation occurred, as well as what other forms of social organisation they might lead us to. This approach takes our analysis beyond the society of states because it assumes that different forms of social organisation will be required at different times historically. In other words, Bull focused on the society of states because it has become the means of maintaining order in world politics; there is no evidence to suggest that the society of states is the only form of social organisation that could maintain order in world politics. I therefore focus on three areas whose development could encourage thinking about forms of social organisation beyond the triad, 1) the state, 2) the role of units in structural change, 3) society vs. community.

Bull argued that the state is the central institution of international society, but a number of scholars argue that he did not fully develop this concept as he did for his other institutions of international society (balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war and great powers). There seems to be informal consensus among some ES scholars that the state should *not* be understood as an institution, or at least not a primary one. Instead, a number of scholars have referred to the state as a “referent object,” asking how, if the state is constituted by institutions, it can be an institution as well.<sup>42</sup> This question of the state as an institution or not seems to suggest that there is room for considering whether there can be a constitutive relationship between institutions. This becomes even more relevant if/when we start discussing a hierarchical ranking of institutions. Which institutions have the capacity to change other institutions? Thus, if sovereignty constitutes the state, but the state is transformed, what happens to sovereignty? Is it transformed with the state? Or is it gone altogether?

Buzan also emphasises the need to chart the evolution of the postmodern state.<sup>43</sup> This idea brings us back to the consideration of the transition from a mediaeval to a modern world order, in order to consider whether we might be moving towards a neo-mediaeval world order, which I addressed in an earlier section. Buzan’s and Little’s method of starting to answer this question is to take an inside-out approach; in other words, their focus is on how units (states) construct the international system. In Buzan and Little’s story then, it is from the units that change must arise.<sup>44</sup> At some point, if units change or transform enough, we would have to call the system and society tendencies of world politics something other than an international system and an international society. However, it is also possible that change might go in the other direction, from the structure to the unit level. The difficult question is, how much change is “enough” to create a different kind of system or society? And must change always arise from the unit to the structural level? When might it be vice versa?

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<sup>41</sup> Buzan, ‘Underexploited Resource’, pp. 481-483.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Chris Brown in *Observing International Relations*; arguments of this nature have also been made in a number of unpublished work and/or informal discussions.

<sup>43</sup> Buzan, ‘Underexploited Resource’, p. 485.

<sup>44</sup> Buzan and Little, *World History*, pp. 107-108.

This raises the question, why society? Why not community? Why not both? Buzan addresses this question by discussing the World Society Research Group (WSRG), a working group outside of the ES. For the WSRG, community implies more/greater 'we' feelings of belonging in opposition to an 'other'; society, on the other hand, encompasses more calculation of interests.<sup>45</sup> These definitions lead Buzan to parallel the WSRG's definitions of community and society with the ES's definitions of society and system, respectively. However, although enough similarities exist to make these parallels, it seems that Buzan's exclusion of community leaves a gap in our explanations of world politics. Is there not a difference between a 'we' feeling in a society as opposed to a community? Community definitions of nationalism certainly suggest that there is something unique about a community form of organisation. At the very least, Anderson's 'imagined communities' thesis raises questions about community as form of political organisation;<sup>46</sup> for example, if we can have community-defined nations that are different from nation-states, does this imply that the community form of organisation does not require territoriality as one of its primary institutions, as international society does?

As stated previously, this section's objective was not to focus on the international system concept first, but to suggest a different approach to the ES's methodological pluralism, which could encourage the ES research agenda to grow. It by no means suggests that the research questions already on the agenda should be replaced; rather, the significance of existing questions should only increase by adding an explicit means of understanding methodological pluralism. I chose change and transformation, institutions and units/social organisation as areas to focus on; these particular research areas seem to merit independent attention because they keep arising in the context of other discussions. The discussion about boundary issues between international and world society, for instance, often brings up questions of change. I believe that these discussions make a case for the completion of thorough typologies of systems, societies and communities beyond the triad of concepts. An understanding of methodological pluralism that focuses on what the three concepts express, and how they are generated, is a necessary first step in order to complete such typologies. Thus, in the last section, I use the understanding of methodological pluralism developed here to inform my discussion of the system concept. I will address how Luhmann's theory offers a systemic perspective that the ES could benefit from, although not without also acknowledging the work that is unique to the ES.

### **Luhmann's theory and the English School's system concept**

In the recently published anthology, *Observing International Relations*, contributors address the potential links between Niklas Luhmann's Modern Systems Theory (MST) and international relations. Chris Brown's contribution on the ES was largely sceptical about the links that might be made between MST and the ES. Brown's scepticism is a consequence of two central features of Luhmann's theory, 1) that it questions the basic assumption of the ES that states are ontologically prior to other societal forms by placing world society first and 2) that for Luhmann society is cognitively, rather than normatively, integrated, meaning that he does not have space for human agency. According to Brown, MST would dissolve the

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<sup>45</sup> Buzan, *World Society?*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>46</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

system-society distinction that is central to the ES.<sup>47</sup> Brown is correct that these two points create serious differences between MST and the ES, but whether these differences make the theories ‘genuinely unbridgeable’,<sup>48</sup> as Brown believes, remains to be seen. It is clear that Luhmann’s theory cannot explain much at the level of human agency, but it may have a great deal to offer the ES at the structural level.

MST is a theory of world society, a world society that is ontologically primary to any other societal form. Society, for Luhmann, is based on differentiation, and most importantly, autopoietic differentiation. In other words, the first and most important distinction is that between a system and its (physical) environment. This difference is generated by communication, which also ensures that world society continues to reproduce itself.<sup>49</sup> Other distinctions follow from world society in the form of ‘functional subsystems.’ These functional subsystems are each closed systems, operating according to their own logics, what Luhmann calls ‘media of communication’ that in turn generate ‘codes.’<sup>50</sup> Although functional subsystems are autonomous, there can be what Luhmann refers to as ‘structural coupling’ between subsystems.<sup>51</sup> Luhmann’s functional subsystems include, for example, politics, law, the economy and science.<sup>52</sup> These basic premises of Luhmann’s theory outlined here do illustrate the stark contrast between MST and the ES; yet if we consider Luhmann’s basic premises of functional differentiation and its resulting subsystems in more detail there are useful parallels to be made between the two schools of thought. First, and most generally, as questions about Bull’s undeveloped concept of ‘neo-mediaevalism’ become more important, so do theories of functional differentiation. Second, there are parallels to be drawn between Luhmann’s functional subsystems, institutions and Buzan’s and Little’s sectors of international systems.

Thomas Diez argues that MST is useful for IR because it offers a global framework in which territorial demarcations are less important.<sup>53</sup> This is an argument that even Chris Brown might be sympathetic with, since at the end of his chapter he acknowledges that the state-centricity of the ES and the focus on international society are less stable than they were before.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, when Bull discussed neo-mediaevalism, he argued that if neo-mediaevalism were to be a legitimate claim, then evidence proving that the territorial state is being undermined would be necessary. However, I will not ask the question Bull would have us ask, that is, is the territorial state being undermined? Rather, I will ask the question that Luhmann would ask of the English School,<sup>55</sup> is functional

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<sup>47</sup> Chris Brown, "The "English School" and World Society," in *Observing International Relations: Niklas Luhmann and World Politics*, ed. Lena Hilke Meier Mathias Albert (London: Routledge, 2004). pp. 68-69, 71.

<sup>48</sup> Brown, "The "English School"", p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> Anders Esmark, "Systems and Sovereignty: A Systems Theoretical Look at the Transformation of Sovereignty," in *Observing International Relations: Niklas Luhmann and World Politics*, ed. Lena Hilke Meier Mathias Albert (London: Routledge, 2004). p.123; Albert, 'On the Modern Systems Theory of society and IR: contacts and disjunctures between different kinds of theorizing', in *Observing IR*, pp. 14, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Dieter Kerwer, 'Governance in world society: the perspective of systems theory', in *Observing IR*, pp. 197-198.

<sup>51</sup> Guzzini, 'Constructivism and International Relations: an analysis of Luhmann's conceptualization of power', in *Observing IR*, p.215

<sup>52</sup> Kerwer, 'Governance in world society', p. 197.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Diez, 'Politics, Modern Systems Theory and the critical purpose of International Relations Theory', in *Observing IR*, p. 30.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, "The "English School"", p. 71.

<sup>55</sup> It should be clear that this is not Luhmann's question, but rather the question that Luhmann would ask of the English School were he standing outside of it. I believe this is consistent with Luhmann's approach because he argued that it was important to 'observe' theory. See Thomas Diez, 'Politics, MST and the critical purpose', pp. 41-43.

differentiation becoming more important? The distinction between the two questions is crucial; Bull puts into question the mode of social organisation that has been central to the modern era, the time period that the ES literature has covered the most. Luhmann's question, on the other hand, asks about the increasing importance and presence of a different mode of social organisation. The possibility that the two modes might co-exist is therefore not out of the question.

For Luhmann, because world society is ontologically primary, he is most concerned with how it is differentiated internally rather than how it is held together. Or, another way of putting this is, world society is held together despite the fact that it cannot hope to be an integrated whole; it is only whole in the sense that it is differentiated functionally.<sup>56</sup> A number of functional subsystems are therefore generated within the closed system of world society. Because of the functional definition of both world society and its functional subsystems, they necessarily operate transnationally. This means that if territoriality is a form of organisation (for Luhmann it is not), then it is a form of internal differentiation within world society and its subsystems.<sup>57</sup> This may not have much immediate appeal for those within the ES; it sounds hierarchical, as if territoriality has been relegated in importance as a mere subset of broader societal subsystems. However, I believe there are two points to be made in Luhmann's favour, 1) that it may be possible to see world society as ontologically prior in certain cases, if the ES takes a long view of history; using this approach, there would be times historically when world society might be ontologically prior, but other times when the international system would be; 2) that functional and normative logic may operate at the same time, thus allowing for functional subsystems as well as international society to co-exist.

I mentioned previously that Luhmann's functional subsystems are allegedly autonomous of one another because they each operate according to their own logic. If interaction occurs, it occurs only at the system (for Luhmann, societal) level by means of 'media of communication.' Whether one understands media of communication as attached to particular subsystems, or as 'universals' that may operate within all of world society,<sup>58</sup> they nonetheless carry normative undertones. Power, for instance, is the medium of communication most associated with the political subsystem. Within the political subsystem, it becomes the 'binary code' of power superiority and power inferiority.<sup>59</sup> Luhmann, of course, is not interested in how these media of communication come about and/or whether they are constitutive of the subsystems they are associated with, but those are interesting questions for the ES. It is possible to see media of communication as a link to the normative realm that international society exists within.

More specifically, media of communication may link partially to the ES's institutions and Buzan and Little's sectors of the international system. Although it would be incorrect to draw the comparison between Luhmann's functional subsystems and institutions and/or sectors too closely, there are certain similarities. All three concepts draw our attention to particular kinds of societal practices, though each concept demands seeing these practices in a different light. Luhmann's functional subsystems highlight how links between different societal practices reproduce themselves at the systemic level; they take individuals out of the picture entirely, replacing agency with communication *only* between systems. This view is

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<sup>56</sup> Albert, 'MST of society and IR', pp. 17-18.

<sup>57</sup> Diez, 'Politics, MST and the critical purpose', p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Guzzini, 'Constructivism and IR', pp. 214-215.

<sup>59</sup> Guzzini, 'Constructivism and IR', p. 215.



only possible by seeing subsystems as autonomous, and a differentiated world society as the whole. The concept of institutions, on the other hand, stands at the other extreme; in considering institutions, we consider those practices that have been normatively established, a process which cannot be separated from human agency.

This puts sectors of international systems somewhere in between functional subsystems and institutions. Eric Grahn, in a work in progress, suggests that each of Buzan and Little's sectors 'appear[s] to have a core logic that is equivalent to a deep structure in their own right.'<sup>60</sup> Grahn is arguing that defining the sectors separately leads to disaggregating the whole in order to explain complexity. He writes, quoting Buzan, Jones and Little,

‘ “When we refer to more specific sectors in the international system these will also be identified as the international political, military, societal, economic, or whatever system... The partial systems identified by sectors are not subsystems... Instead, they are views of the whole system through some selective lens that highlights one particular aspect of the relationship and interaction among all of its constituent units” [Buzan and Little ?: 31]. In which case, why even use the word ‘system’ except to denote the complex whole? If these systems are not genuinely systems or subsystems in their own right, then why use the word at all? It breeds confusion.’<sup>61</sup>

Grahn seems to first see a problem with disaggregating the whole into sectors, but then seems prepared to accept this disaggregation by applying Luhmannian logic to the sector. However, applying the theory of functional subsystems onto sectors will not work because functional subsystems have to be autonomous and operatively closed. Why use the term system at all? Because using sectors, rather than referring to institutions, is taking a systemic view. So Grahn is right to point out that considering the interactions between sectors is important;<sup>62</sup> MST, by focusing on differentiation, is a useful tool for bringing to light the interactions at the system level. MST cannot by itself offer explanations of everything on the ES agenda, but it can help us identify what is going on at the systemic level with a bit more clarity.

This last section has been largely speculative. It has brought up questions that may or may not lead to useful links between Luhmann's theory and the ES. Luhmann offers one approach to addressing certain unresolved questions on the ES research agenda; there may be other theories that could also help in illuminating the systemic level, and its relationship to the other concepts of international and world society. However, Luhmann's focus on the differentiation of world society makes his theory particularly relevant in light of recent discussions of change and history. What Luhmann cannot do is explain how differentiation stops reproducing itself. However, in considering Luhmann and the ES together, it may be possible to discuss the relationship between functional differentiation at the system level and human agency within international and world society.

At the very least, Luhmann's theory, along with a more explicit conceptualisation of methodological pluralism, may make room for a systematic perspective alongside the rest of ES theory. I focused on both methodological pluralism and the system concept because they are both 'under-exploited resources' within English School theory. Because ES concepts

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<sup>60</sup> Eric Grahn, 'Recovering the English School: A Critique of Buzan and Little Inc.', unpublished paper, 2005, 61pp, p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> Grahn, 'ES: A Critique', p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Grahn, 'ES: A Critique', pp. 19-21.

cannot be understood as autonomous of each other, if one or more of the triad's concepts lag behind the others, this can affect the theory as a whole. Thus my approach has been to further develop the meaning of methodological pluralism in order to draw clearer links between the differing perspectives offered by each element of the triad. In doing so, this paper has raised more questions than it has answered, but I hope that these questions have indicated a direction to take in furthering the ES research agenda.

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