

Is the ES still an underexploited resource? And whither the ES? An introduction

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Is the ES still an underexploited resource? And whither the ES? An introduction¹

This forum includes some of the reflections on the English School (ES) offered in a two-day symposium at the University of St Andrews in October 2017, with the participation of almost thirty scholars. The symposium was structured around the theme 'Is the English School still an underexploited resource in International Relations?' intentionally echoing Barry Buzan's and Richard Little's article, published in 2001, titled 'Is the English School an underexploited resource in International Relations?' The symposium's goal was to reflect on the position of the ES in the wider IR discipline, asking whether its 'degree of exploitation' has improved over the years or not.

Building on that symposium, the authors in this forum are now faced with a daunting, twofold task. On the one hand, they have been asked to reflect on what they think the current status of the ES as a theory and as a community is, in the light of its recent developments. On the other hand, they have been invited to think of 'the way ahead', of how the ES can develop, and of new research trajectories that the ES can explore in the near future. These two tasks are not an exercise in solipsism, but should be seen as part of a wider, all-encompassing period of reflection for the whole IR discipline, now at a century, and in the context of profound changes in to-day world politics.

With respect to the first task, there seems to be a general agreement, in this forum as well as in the wider ES community, that the ES is not underexploited as it used to. First, working groups and research themes have increased. The ES is now more engaged with international security, as well as with issues that are of contemporary relevance, such as populism, Brexit, the rise of environmentalism, the digitalisation of international politics, health governance, and the refugee crisis among other topics (Diez 2019; Nantermoz 2020; Wilson and Oliver 2019; Youde 2018; Barrinha and Renard 2017). Second, already consolidated themes continue to be exploited and researched, such as historical international societies, regionalism, the contours of world society, as well as primary and secondary institutions (Falkner and Buzan 2019; Goh 2020; Spandler 2018; Pardesi 2019; Giumelli and Costa Buranelli 2020; Ba 2019). Third, within the ES there seems to be more geographical diversity, in terms of both research and researchers. The ES is, if slowly, becoming more aware of its Eurocentrism, and more scholars outside the old continent are making use of it.

Yet, it is with respect to the second task that the contributors in this forum best show their ability to see how the ES can be improved and taken forward. This is done with ingenuity, with theoretical and analytical rigour, and with a frank awareness that despite the recent improvement and refinement of the theory, much is still to be done. All scholars in this forum aptly point at other bodies of theory, disciplines, and literatures, thus perpetuating and at the same time renovating the distinctive *ecumenic*, *humanistic* character of the ES. Yet, at the same time, all the authors make use of the 'constitutive binaries' at the heart of the ES to indicate avenues for further, promising research and to point at those areas where the ES can be improved: ontology and epistemology, theory and method, history and present, structure and agency, international and world society among many others.

Thus, after Bellamy (2005) and Young (2005), we are here again to ask – whither the ES? Carefully avoiding to be the spoiler of what follows in the next pages, I anticipate to the reader that despite

¹ I would like to dedicate this Forum Section to the late Professor Nicholas Rengger – active supporter and fair critic of the English School. Also, I am grateful to the audience and the participants at the original St Andrews symposium in October 2017 co-hosted by the Centre for Global Constitutionalism, and to Aliya Tskhay, Sarah Bertrand, Kerry Goettlich, Chris Murray and Lucas de Oliveira Paes for their enthusiastic support of this project.

being very diverse the following ten contributions are ultimately in sync and harmony in identifying four main trajectories to develop, upgrade, and refine the ES:

- To internationalise ES research through collaborative activities, including more graduate students, focusing on *theory development*, the *practicality*, the *empirical application*, and the *added contribution* of the ES;
- To foster more dialogue with scholars from the *postcolonial world*, paying attention to institutional and normative dynamics in the *Global South*;
- To actually *embrace* interdisciplinarity, collaborating more with anthropologist, ethnographers, historians, international political economists, area studies scholars, and other representatives from humanities and social sciences;
- To continue work on *methodology* and explicate it, so to enhance and entrench its position in US academic circles and, more in general, outsiders.

These trajectories, paired with the considerations made above on where the theory currently stands, may well poised the ES to fully tackle some of the criticism it has been subject to, and to analyse and make sense of the most fundamental trends in contemporary international politics and of the complexity of a changing world order, by virtue of its distinctive holism that embraces IR in (almost) its totality: cooperation *and* conflict, power *and* norms, states *and* people, institutions *and* organisations, anarchy *and* hierarchy, history *and* the present.

A caveat is that the contributions in this forum, by virtue of a limited wordcount, should not be considered as full-fledged pieces of research. Rather, they should be read as broader conversational reflections with and open-ended invitations to all those scholars who have an interest in the ES – either through engagement or through criticism. Furthermore, these contributions are not ad hoc pieces produced for this outlet but are, like bubbles on a surface, manifestations of a deep-seated, consistent, and transversal dialogue between theorists who focus on different aspects of the ES and, more broadly, of IR.

The contributors cannot and more importantly do not want to predict where the ES will be in another twenty years. Certainly, though, we all share an awareness that the answer to this question depends, crucially, on the ability of scholars who identify themselves within this tradition to be reflexive about their work and the assumptions guiding it, to be receptive of changes in world politics and in the scholarly community, and to be clear about what is to be achieved.

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