

The English School as a theory and a scholarly community

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It is becoming customary to define the English School (ES) as a group of scholars participating in a common inquiry related to a few central concepts, notably that of international society (Dunne 1998; Buzan 2001, 2004). Although the roots of the ES are often attributed to the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (Dunne 1998; Vigezzi 2005; Navari 2009), it is now said to be more of an open society of impersonal ties rather than an exclusive community based on personal relations (Buzan 2004: 110-111). But how true is that assertion? If the School is theoretically open to anyone, why are its members predominantly male, white and Western?¹ In this piece, we discuss three obstacles that prevent the ES from becoming a more inclusive venture.

The founding fathers: Despite the theoretical pluralism of the ES, locating oneself in its masculine intellectual tradition is seen as a standard for theoretical sophistication. In her project on women and the history of international thought, Owens (2018) points out that Dunne's ES text *Inventing International Society* (1998) features 24 men and only one woman, while Luard's *Basic Texts in International Relations* (1992) features no women. Navari's forthcoming volume on the ES in Palgrave's series *Trends in European IR Theory* has only one contribution from a female scholar apart from the editor. This forum also reflects the limited visibility of women.

Historical surveys of IR at both the LSE and Aberystwyth do include a number of early women (Porter 1972; Bauer and Brighi 2003) – so what happened to these voices? There was certainly active exclusion. Owens' (2018: 478) study details how Charles Manning worked to exclude Lucy Mair – an early scholar of imperial administration – from the discipline of IR at the LSE. Mostly, however, the exclusion was diffuse and social, relying on tight-knit informal networks. Perhaps more than other scholarly communities, the ES was deeply rooted in select UK universities and subject to hierarchical, patriarchal and exclusionary practices of those institutions. The omission of earlier women's work reinforces the tendency to view the ES as a "boys' club" where merit is accorded based on exegeses of "founding fathers'" texts—and this potentially dissuades female scholars, impoverishing the School even now.

The expansion story: A trademark of the ES is its story of how European international society spread across the globe (Bull and Watson 1984). Although many studies on this topic take peripheral actors into account, they usually appear as passive or at best reactive, and as seeking to "accede" to international society rather than actively shaping it. The ES account has thus minimized non-European agency, as well as the dynamic and constitutive nature of interactions between European and non-European agents in international history (Seth 2011: 169–174; Yates 2020: 3–6).

By recognizing the expansion of European international society as a contingent historical process, the ES has the tools to critically examine its expansion story, and thereby uncover the imperial legacy of international society particularly through concepts such as the Standard of Civilization (Gong 1984; Towns 2009; Yao 2019). However, this potential is rarely exploited (Yates 2020). While there is room for agency from the periphery in ES theorizing (see Dunne & Reus-Smit 2017), the need to frame

¹ According to data provided by the ISA in January 2020, roughly two thirds of the members of the International Studies Association's (ISA) English School Section – which might serve as a snapshot of the ES community – are male, and 80 percent of them are affiliated with institutions in North America or Europe. Gender identities were inferred using first names as indicators. Due to data protection considerations, the authors did not directly access the original data, and were therefore not able to cross-check the classification by the ISA representative. We are aware of the methodological limitations of this approach, as well as the problematic implications of ascribing binary gender identities based on names, but maintain that it can serve as a reasonable approximation for the purpose of this contribution.

their research within the dominant scholarly narratives largely keeps scholars from occupying these spaces and offering balanced accounts of the historical development of international society. It is a plausible conjecture that, upon observing these intellectual blinkers, scholars in the periphery who seek to challenge postcolonial conditions and narratives in IR turn to other theories.

The level of theorising: ES theorising is mainly ontological in nature, concerned with “what is” order, international society or world society (Guzzini 2013). Proponents of theory as generalisation based on empirical observation have criticized the ES for being abstract, fluffy and far removed from the concerns of the real world (Jones 1981). It has even been accused of studying its own image (Kaczmarek 2019). Empirical analyses in ES works usually seem like afterthoughts, designed as “illustrative case studies” whose sole purpose is to validate the grand theoretical argument that forms the actual contribution of the study. This privileging of abstract, totalizing theory maps onto feminist critiques of globalization theory for coding global theorizing as masculine and local empirical investigations as feminine (Freeman 2001; Roberts 2004). Perhaps this is due to the ES’ academic roots in philosophy, history and law, and its explicit aim to draw on the tools from those disciplines for its inquiries. In any case, it reinforces the self-selective mechanisms of the ES, as those with a classic “gentleman’s” education (Weaver 1998: 709) are the most acquainted with those tools for analysing international affairs. As Lake (2011: 465, 469–471) observed, obsession with theorizing for theory’s sake and supporting one’s theoretical preconceptions with selective evidence results in “academic ‘sects’ that engage in self-affirming research”. The mere impression, fair or not, that this is what the ES does can constitute a barrier to entry, and the onus is on the ES to demonstrate its fruitfulness to further our understanding of concrete contemporary issues.

Conclusion

The ES’s masculinist intellectual history, its Eurocentric narratives and its premium on abstract theorizing are not isolated features, but interact in a way that generates a perfect storm of intersectional exclusion for scholars from outside of its male, white, Western core. Its institutional origins in the patriarchal structures of British elite universities provided a breeding ground for theory-heavy scholarship, which in turn reproduces a male-centric account of its own history. Abstract and universal theorizing also makes it easier to discount stories of the International as seen from the periphery as deviations from the normalized European model of international order (cf. Seth 2011).

Perhaps due to an inferiority complex in relation to American IR, the ES seems unwilling or unable to see its own position of privilege. British IR, even with its own set of problems, is well-funded, well-respected and influential. It is also at home-ground language-wise, and it has been able to put up a fight against American dominance in the discipline. In light of all this, the ES must start to question its self-image as underdog. Rather, it plays an active part in shaping the discipline, and consequently needs more reflexivity in its approach to gate-keeping and the image it reproduces of itself and of its central concepts.

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