

# **Talcott Parsons' Sociology and the English School – Investigations into a mutual non-perception**

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## **1. Introduction**

Given the prominence and centrality of concepts such as *international system* or *international society* in the writings of classical 'English School'-thinkers like for example Hedley Bull and Martin Wight, their strong interest in the history and evolution of international systems/ societies or their occupation with patterns of order in an anarchical international realm, the total lack of perception of Talcott Parsons' quite prominent contemporary sociological theory which oscillates around topics like order, system and society together with the English Schools ongoing complete neglect of Parsons writings about the evolution of societies, seems to be at least surprising. None of the (classical) English School studies gives any reference to Parsonian ideas.

But this is also true the other way round, as Parsons never mentioned or cited any writings of the English School when concerned with the international realm.<sup>1</sup>

While acknowledging this non-perception as being *mutual*, the present paper mainly focusses on the question why the English School has originally (and until now) not dealt with the Parsonian terms and concepts at all, even though there are obvious similarities to be found and fruitful stimulations to be expected. By sketching some of those similarities (but also differences!), possible gains of such an outstanding perception of Parsons' thoughts for the English School shall be outlined in the proceedings of this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> In an article on „Order and Community in the International Social System“ Parsons apologized for his only fragmentary knowledge of international relations literature in general, confessing that he was not able to familiarize with it “to even a minimum degree of desirability” (Parsons 1969b: 292). Given this statement and regarding his other (few) writings which deal with the international realm, it can surely be stressed that Parsons has not been aware of any of the works of the English School.

Additionally some general considerations about the ambivalent role and status of sociological thinking and reasoning even in the more recent English School-literature will build the second part of the paper. It will be argued here, that Parsons non-reception might be founded in the English School's anti-scientist stance.

## **2. Similarities and Differences between Parsons' Sociology and the classical English School approach**

First of all some of the most basic presumptions of (classical) English School-thinking shall be sketched here before introducing those Parsonian ideas and concepts which may be fruitfully placed in a position of dialogue with the English School ideas. The following paragraphs thus do not claim to be full-fledged introductions neither into English School-thinking, nor into the sociology of Parsons but are focussed on three core concepts both traditions deal with and attached their path-breaking readings to it, namely *order*, *system* and *society*.

### *The English School on international order, system and society*

One rather basic – meanwhile not at all exclusive – starting-point where classical English School-thinking and reasoning is beginning from,<sup>2</sup> is the observation of the international political sphere as being ‘anarchical’, which means the absence of common government, respectively that it lacks a hierarchical structure with a central or superior authority being capable to give orders to the other units (Bull 1966b: 35; Wight 1978: 105). Thomas Hobbes' well-known notion of the state of nature as war of all against all is thus an important intellectual cornerstone for the English School even though it is used critically when transferred to the international sphere as the anarchical constitution of the international sphere is not conceived as one which solely lacks any form of order. Quite to the contrary, Bull and Wight pay attention especially to such patterns of order which tend to appear in an anarchical realm (Bull 2002: 3-21; Wight 1966b: 102). Such patterns are seen as the result or outcome of the interactions of the central units/actors of the

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<sup>2</sup> Represented in this paper mainly through the writings of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull.

international sphere, namely the *states*. The English School is thus decidedly state-centric and insofar close to neorealist IR approaches.

This proximity to neorealism is even more obvious when it comes to the definition of an ‘international system’, which is according to Bull formed when two or more states have sufficient or regular contact with one another, thereby having “sufficient impact on one another’s decisions, to cause them to behave [...] as parts of a whole” (Bull 2002: 9). An international system is thus the result of an ordering principle as the behaviour of principally independent and sovereign units (= states) is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others thereby binding them together to a certain degree.<sup>3</sup>

But unlike neorealist approaches the English School does not stop at this point but looks at more than mere power relations which are only balanced within systemic and apersonal procedures.

Instead it focusses on common rules and institutions which are established within a group of states by dialogue and consent for the conduct of their relations, together with the recognition of their common interest in maintaining this arrangement (Bull/Watson 1984: 1). As Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami have argued, the uniqueness of the English School

can be found in its focus on how sovereign states learn to control violent tendencies by agreeing on some universal moral and legal principles which bind them loosely together in an international society (Linklater/Suganami 2006: 121).

The English School puts the creation and maintenance of shared norms and rules – the second defined as “general imperative principles which require or authorise prescribed classes of persons or groups to behave in prescribed ways” (Bull 2002: 52) – at the centre of its theoretical interest and tries to explain how they regulate, structure and order the international anarchy (Buzan 2004: 7). A rule, to be effective in society “must be obeyed to some degree, and must be reckoned as a factor in the calculations of those to whom it applies, even those who elect to violate it” (Bull 2002: 53).

The aboved mentioned ‘international society’, a society without government (Bull 1966: 48), marks the main distinguishing concept of the English School, Barry Buzan calls it the

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Waltz is thus talking about sets of “constraining conditions” (Waltz 1979: 73).

English School's "flagship idea" (Buzan 2004: 1). Bull's central and often cited definition claims that 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 interests (Bull 2002: 13).

This definition of a society remarkably departs from common sociological concepts and definitions of society, as the members of international society are not individual human beings but *sovereign states* mutually recognizing their respective sovereignty (Bull 2002: 25; Wight 1977: 23, 1978: 106).<sup>4</sup>

The crucial point in Bull's definition of an international system is the remark that states form a society, when they 'conceive' themselves as being bound by certain rules.<sup>5</sup> The rules or norms become effective because states *make* them effective by acting according to them.

And it is human agency which is thereby emphasized in determining outcomes in the international society not somehow abstract or anonymous systemic structures, like neorealists often claim. International society according to Timothy Dunne exists "in the activities of state leaders and is reproduced in the treaties they sign, friendships they form, customs they observe, and laws they comply with" (Dunne 1998: 99). It is the result of the "handiwork of real people' and is reproduced by their 'ongoing activity'" (Dunne 1998: 10).

Bull and Wight are especially interested in the common institutions which make elementary social rules effective, which regulate and order the customs of international society in the absence of a common or central authority, like the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, alliances, war, arbitration and great power concerts. All these institutions create, represent and uphold order in the international society and are at the same time the result of the interaction of the states which are on the other hand shaped by them (Bull 2002: Part 2, Wight 1977: 29ff, 1978: 105ff; Dunne 1998: 59).

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<sup>4</sup> Buzan coined the term 'second order society' (Buzan 2004: 110) for such an international society comprised of states.

<sup>5</sup> This at the same time marks the English School's overlap to constructivist IR theories. See for this Dunne (1995b; 1998: 185-189), Makinda (2000).

According to Bull, the states that create and shape the form of the international society commonly share some elementar or fundamental goals. Bull's definition of 'international order' actually refers to this, as he describes it as a "pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of state, or international society" (Bull 2002: 8). Bull regards 1.) the preservation of the international system or society, 2.) the maintenance of the independence or external sovereignty of the individual states, 3.) peace, "in the sense of absence of war among member states of international society as the normal condition of their relationship" (Bull 2002: 17) as the three basic or elementar goals, that are commonly shared by the states forming the society of states.

As Claire Cutler has argued Bull regards the value of maintaining the existing international system or state as a nearly universal commitment (Cutler 1991: 56).

Bull regards the contemporary states-system – which he dates back roughly to the late nineteenth century – as forming a global political system, actually the first of its kind in history. Even more than this, he conceives the states-system as representing only a part of a world political system. The world political system itself is defined as "the world-wide network of interaction that embraces not only states but also other political actors, both 'above' and 'below' it" (Bull 2002: 266). Whereas Bull remains rather restrained at this point, Wight claims that nowadays "certain institutions other than states have attained rudimentary international personality" (Wight 1977: 101), like – for example – the United Nations.

Regarding this evolutionary process towards a world political system both Wight and Bull emphasize the importance of *global communication*, thus generally stating that without "communication there could be no international society, nor any international system at all (Bull 2002: 164). World-wide communication gets also a key-role for a possible emanation of an international social consciousness, a world-wide community-sentiment or 'we-feeling', which could be the fertile soil for a 'great society of mankind' (Wight 1966b: 97; Bull 2002: 19).

However, the English School conceives its own account to IR as a *via media*-approach, whose matter of concern Wight describes as follows: "Between the belief that the society of states is non-existent or at best polite fiction, and the belief that it is the chrysalis for the community of mankind, lies a more complex conception of international society" (Wight

1966b: 95). So English School-thinking is placed right between those two extremis of ‘realism’ (associated with Hobbes and Machiavelli) and ‘revolutionism’ (associated with Kant) looking at the patterns of order, like rules, laws and norms, which structure the international society (Wight 1992).

*Parsons on order, system and society*

In his earlier writings Parsons developed his sociological theory of social action against the background of classical European thinkers of the social like Thomas Hobbes, Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (Parsons [1937] 1969a, b). He shares with those thinkers the general interest how order between individual human beings – respectively how society – is possible at all.

In this context, Parsons critically refers to Hobbes’ explanation to the solution of the problem of order via a social contract, which according to Hobbes and other contractual theorists domesticates and restrains the war all against all (Parsons 1968a: 89-107). But Parsons’ main-criticism is directed towards Hobbes’ almost complete devoid of normative thinking, as Hobbes only regards ‘passions’ as the basis of human actions. In contrast to this, Parsons claims that there can only be a *normative* solution to the utilitarian problem of order between individuals (Parsons [1937] 1968a: 89). Following Parsons, the explanation and emanation of social order has to be based on the consensus of norms and values. Social order “cannot have stability without the effective functioning of certain normative elements” (Parsons [1937] 1968a: 92): “Social order is possible if social actors share a culture of common values, which unites them together to share and perform co-operative activities” (Turner 1991: xxix)

Only if norms are collectively shared, an individual can trust even when he or she is the victim of the breaking of a norm, as he can expect to get help from the others.

But social order is not reducible to overarching norms and values, according to Parsons, one has also to acknowledge social arrangements that are effective in the ‘real world’, meaning different constellations of power and interests or cultural traditions (Münch 1982). Parsons tries to build a bridge between the positivist and normative-hermeneutic theories of the social. His early voluntaristic theory of social action might thus be regarded as a *via media*-approach.

Parsons later structure-functionalist and systems theory does not mark a complete break with his earlier writings as it is often stated. Parsons remains deeply concerned with the problem of social order and how norms and values help to create and uphold this order.

Order is then treated as a problem which occurs between and within the four subsystems of the 'general action system', namely the social system, the cultural system, the personality system of individual actors and the behavioral organism (Parsons 1991: 6; 1969a: 5).

Parsons defines a 'system' as a concept,

that refers both to a complex of interdependencies between parts, components, and processes that involve discernible regularities of relationship, and to a similar type of interdependency between such a complex and its surrounding environment (Parsons 1977: 177).

Differentiation refers to the "development of subsystems specialized about more specific functions in the operation of the system as a whole, and of integrative mechanisms which interrelate the functionally differentiated subsystems" (Parsons 1969a: 27).

The social system is according to Parsons generated by the process of interaction among individual units or actors, whereby the actor "may be either an individual or some kind of collective unit" (Parsons 1977: 179). The social system integrates the general system of action – this is its function – and is itself differentiated into the political system ('goal attainment function'), the economic system ('adaptive function'), the societal community ('integrative function') and the cultural system ('latent pattern maintenance'). But only a social system, which is sufficiently differentiated into these four different functional systems may – according to Parsons – be called a 'society': "A society is a type of social system, in any universe of social systems, which attains the highest level of self-sufficiency as a system in relation to its environments" (Parsons 1969a: 10).

The societal community – the core of a society, which integrates the whole system – is the normative system of order and statuses, rights and obligations (Parsons 1977: 183). The cultural system – as a subsystem of the social system – centers around the institutionalization of cultural value patterns and is concerned with 'moral' (Parsons 1977: 185).

There are also cases, where a social system is not fully differentiated internally, Parsons calls them 'partial' social systems (Parsons 1991: 20). Meanwhile these 'partial' social systems are only of minor importance in Parsons theoretical framework for a society, they gain importance when dealing with the international sphere.

Parsons conceives interactions occurring on the international level as a system not a society, as this international system is not fully differentiated internally, which means it lacks for an example a fully self-sufficient integrative subsystem, a societal community. He would only call an international system a society if such a system would be functionally differentiated in all four dimensions (goal attainment, adaption, integration, latent pattern maintenance). As it lacks this condition, Parsons sees the international system as only a 'partial' social system. But he conceives this social system as one, which is ordered and contains

normative control over a range of the action of acting units, whether these be individuals or collectivities so that, on the one hand, their action is kept within limits which are compatible with at least the minimum stability of the system as a whole and, on the other hand, there is a basis for at least certain types of concerted action when the occasion so requires (Parsons 1969b: 293)

[...] NEEDS TO BE OUTLINED FURTHER

*Fruitful encounters*

*NOT WRITTEN YET*

### **3. The intellectual trias of the 'classical approach' of the English School – Sociology missing?**

What might be the causes for the English School's non-reception of Parsons sociological theory, despite the above stated similarities and possible fruitful encounters? One reason for this non-reception might be the rather fuzzy status of sociological thinking in the English School in general.

In his widely perceived outline for a 'classical approach' for the study of international relations, Bull marks *philosophy*, *history* and *law* as the three basic intellectual modes of thinking and reasoning about the international realm, which a classical approach should at least refer to (Bull 1969: 20). This intellectual trias has often been repeated, and especially been picked up in the context of the writings of the English School which can (however roughly) be gathered around this three pillars or modes of thinking (Dunne 1998: 117-120):

Most obvious is the *historical pillar*, given the English Schools long standing interest in historically situated systems of states or international society/societies (Wight 1977; Bull/Watson 1984a; Watson 1992, Buzan/Little 2000).

But history is also seen as an intellectual mode of thinking and reasoning about the (international) political sphere. As Timothy Dunne has argued, the English School thinkers organised in the British Committee “believed that the contemporary world can best be understood by applying the lessons of history” (Dunne 1998: 119). Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami have suggested that – according to the English School – “atemporal approaches to the study of international relations are inadequate” (Linklater/Suganami 2006: 114). Adam Watson puts the relevance of historical reasoning as follows: “An adequate understanding of the past and the present is also necessary to see what may happen in the future and how we can hope to influence it” (Watson 1992: 2).

The *juridical pillar* is represented in the English Schools dealing with the observation of solutions to the problem of international anarchy, like commitments, rules, human rights, or laws, ordering this anarchy to a certain degree (Bull 2002, Vincent 1986).

Workings to be subsumed to the *philosophical pillar* are concerned with the construction of an essential canon of philosophical texts which serves as the philosophical-intellectual fundament of the English Schools approach. Gathered in this canon are mainly philosophical or juridical thinkers concerned with the international sphere such as Thomas Hobbes, Niccolò Machiavelli (both representing – in Wight’s terms – ‘Realism’), Hugo Grotius (representing ‘Rationalism’) or Immanuel Kant (representing ‘Revolutionism’) (Wight 1991).<sup>6</sup>

And as within the historical pillar, *philosophy* in the English School also represents some mode of thinking, respectively asking specific *philosophical* or *fundamental* questions, “to the extent that they are general, contested, abstract and resistant to empirical verification” (Dunne 1998: 121).

With some good reason history, law and philosophy can thus be described as the three basic pillars or traditions of classical English School-thinking. But what about sociology as

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<sup>6</sup> As Dunne has noticed, “it is in the intellectual workshops of the English School that the ideas of the classical theorists of international relations have been distilled and transmitted to a wider International Relations audience” (Dunne 1995: 136; see also Little 2002). See as another typical example also R.J. Vincents account on Edmund Burke as a thinker of international interventionism (Vincent 1984).

one of the closest neighbouring disciplines to political science respectively International Relations?

Given for example Wights statement that international society “can be properly described only in historical and *sociological* depth” (Wight 1966: 96, my italics, J.W.), one may wonder why the *sociological content* of English School-thinking is only seldomly expressed or thematized explicitly in the writings of the (classical) English School authors. What is the status of sociological thinking in the English School then?

That there are no sociological authors to be found in the English Schools canon of classical thinkers may not be surprising as sociology – at least as an academic discipline – appeared only relatively late on the scene and was right from the beginning trapped in some kind of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Beck 2000), thereby widely ignoring international processes. Only very few classical sociological authors may thus qualify for the canon of thinkers of the *international*.

But what about a sociological mode of reasoning or arguing? Is there any such in the English School? With regard especially to Wights (or later to Watsons) writings about international state systems this can surely be approved. Wight deals with historical state systems by analyzing the “habitual intercourse of independent communities, beginning in the Christendom of Western Europe and gradually extending throughout the world” (Wight 1966: 96), thereby using methods (somehow loosely) associated with historical sociology.<sup>7</sup>

Giving reference especially to those historical studies and to some new developments within the English School, Linklater and Suganami have recently proposed a modified *methodological trias* for the English School, which comprises a *historical*, *ethical* and *sociological* dimension (Linklater/Suganami 2006: 114).<sup>8</sup>

According to them, the English School’s approach to the study of international relations is characterized by its “stress on explaining what goes on internationally by penetrating the minds, and uncovering the assumptions and motives, of its key actors” (Linklater/Suganami 2006: 115). This is what they call the *sociological dimension* in English School-thinking. Dunne quite similar argues that the main interest of the members of the British Committee was to reconstruct and understand the rules by which the

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<sup>7</sup> Watson indicates Michael Mann’s first volume of “The Sources of Social Power” as an useful approach for his own project and Mann is – as far as I am aware – the only major sociological thinker given reference to his “The Evolution of International Society”.

<sup>8</sup> Especially the second, normative dimension is introduced to acknowledge the growing importance of the so-called solidarist wing inside the English School, concerned with ethical questions (Linklater 2002).

international society was constituted together with “the meanings that diplomats and state leaders gave to their actions” (Dunne 1998: 97).

Following these interpretations, the sociological account of the English School seems to mean analyzing (inter-) actions occurring between different (international) units/ actors in different (historical) situations and how the thereby succeeding perceptions of the different interacting actors shape and create patterns of order or the creation of an overarching whole<sup>9</sup> – may that be a system or a society.

Linklater and Suganami call the use of ‘ideal-types’ – in the Weberian sense – as a means of describing international relations as another sociological dimension in English School-thinking (Linklater/Suganami 2006: 103, 115).

These sketches on the sociological content in English School-thinking – taken together – draw a rather fuzzy picture, as it is not clear why these features may be called sociological at all. Additionally they do not make plausible why there are nearly no references to contemporary sociological thinkers, concerned with quite similar problems, like conceptualizing order in the social realm or the content of terms like system or society.

#### **4. Parsons as a victim of the anti-scientist stance of the English School?**

As it is widely known, Bull's article “International Theory. The Case for a Classical Approach” (Bull 1969) – besides outlining a classical approach – was mainly a fierce attack on the so-called ‘scientist approach’ which was at this time winning more and more influence especially in the United States. Bull sharply rejected an approach to international relations “whose propositions are based either upon logical or mathematical proof, or upon strict, empirical procedures of verification” (Bull 1969: 21) thereby explicitly referring to authors like John von Neumann, Karl W. Deutsch or George A. Modelski. Bull polemicized against their deny of the capacity of judgement and their ‘intellectual puritanism’ claiming that

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<sup>9</sup> Such a statement is prominently to be found in Bull's central definition of an international society whereas a society of states 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 interests” (Bull 2002: 13; italics added, J.W.). Herein lies the sometimes stated proximity to constructivist IR approaches, like that prominently developed by Alexander Wendt (1992). See for example Dunne (1995b; 1998: 185-189), Makinda (2000).

where practitioners of the scientific approach have succeeded in casting light upon the substance of the subject it has been by stepping beyond the bounds of that approach and employing the classical method (Bull 1969: 28).

But Bulls intellectual main target for criticism surely was Morton Kaplans international theory, despite the obvious similarities in their usage of the system-term. According to Bull, what distinguishes Kaplan's work from his own was Kaplan's "attempt to use the concept of a system to explain and predict international behaviour, especially by treating international systems as a particular kind of 'system of action'" (Bull 2002: 11).

[...] NEEDS TO BE OUTLINED FURTHER

## **5. Conclusions**

NOT YET WRITTEN

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