

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

**Jochen Walter**

Paper presented at the Sixth Pan-European International Relations Conference, Turin/  
Italy, 12-15 September 2007

DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Contact: [jochen.walter@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:jochen.walter@uni-bielefeld.de)

## **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 and their occupation with patterns of order in an anarchical international realm, the total lack of perception of Talcott Parsons' quite prominent and influential contemporary sociological theory which oscillates around topics like order, system and society as well as the English School's ongoing complete neglect of Parsons writings about the evolution of societies, is at least surprising. None of the (classical) English School studies gives any reference to Parsonian ideas.

Likewise 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 focuses 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.

---

<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 assumed that Parsons has not been aware of any of the works of the English School.

By sketching some of those similarities (but also differences!), the possible gains of such an outstanding perception of Parsons' thoughts for the English School shall be outlined in the proceedings of this paper.

The second part of the paper analyses the ambivalent role and status of sociological thinking and reasoning in the English School in general. Additionally it addresses the question why Parsons has yet not been perceived. It will be argued that this might especially 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 English School ideas. The following paragraphs thus do not claim to be full-fledged introductions neither to English School-thinking, nor to the sociology of Parsons. Instead they focus on three core concepts both traditions deal with, namely *order*, *system* and *society*.

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

One rather basic – meanwhile not at all exclusive – starting-point of classical English School-thinking and reasoning,<sup>2</sup> is the observation of the international political sphere as being 'anarchical', which means the absence of common government, respectively the lack of a hierarchical structure with a central or superior authority being capable to give orders to the other units within the international political sphere (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 the patterns of order which tend to appear in an anarchical realm (Bull 2002: 3-21; Wight 1966b: 102). Such patterns are seen

---

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

as the result or outcome of the interactions of the central units/actors of the international sphere, namely the *states*. The English School is thus decidedly state-centric and insofar close to (neo)realist 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). In this respect, an international system is 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. It looks at more than mere power relations which are only balanced through systemic, apersonal or objective forces.

Instead it focuses on common rules and institutions which are established within a group of states through 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 ‘international society’ mentioned above, a society without government (Bull 1966: 48), is the main distinguishing concept of the English School, Barry Buzan calls it the

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 intended actions between the states which are on the other hand shaped by them (Bull 2002: Part 2, Wight 1977: 29ff, 1978: 105ff; Dunne 1998 59). As Chris Brown puts it, – according to the English School-tradition of thinking – an institution

---

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

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

like the balance of power will only exist “if a significant number of powerful states choose to create and sustain [it]. [...] A balance of power ultimately rests on the self-restraint of states, and not simply on their ability to restrain others” (Brown 2004: 62).

According to Bull, the states that create and shape the form of the international society commonly share some elemental 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 elemental 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).

Somehow different Linklater and Suganami name “security against violence, observance of agreements and stability of property, private or public” (Linklater/Suganami 2006: 56) as the basic values. And according to Bull “every society will be found to aim satisfying these basic goals, and a society which does not satisfy these goals to some extent hardly deserves its name” (Linklater/Suganami 2006: 56/7).

Within English School-thinking there is thus to be found a conception of what is ‘good’ or ‘desirable’ in the international sphere. An international society is desirable “because it constitutes a rational political order for humanity taken as a whole” (Brown 2004: 63).

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.

---

<sup>5</sup> This at the same time marks the English School’s overlap to constructivist IR theories. See Dunne (1995b);

Regarding this evolutionary process towards a world political system both Wight and Bull emphasize the importance of *global communication*, generally stating that without “communication there could be no international society, nor any international system at all (Bull 2002: 164). World-wide communication also plays 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 is described by Wight 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 extremes 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 especially Max Weber (Parsons [1937] 1969a, b). With these thinkers he shares the general sociological interest of 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 avoidance 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

---

1998: 185-189), Makinda (2000).

values. Social order “cannot have stability without the effective functioning of certain normative elements” (Parsons [1937] 1968a: 92): It 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). Social actions are shaped by norms and values and actors in their respective social settings, try to act according to them.

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 or she can expect to get help from the others.

But social order is not reducible to overarching norms and values. According to Parsons, the social scientist has also to acknowledge social arrangements and structures that are effective in the ‘real world’, which means 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, integrate and uphold this order. But he is then more influenced by concepts adapted from cybernetic theories,<sup>6</sup> and with that comes a more static thinking of the social, concerned with problems of the maintenance of a system.

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).

The ‘general system of action’ which had already been outlined in Parsons’ early work “The Structure of Social Action” remains the main frame of his thinking, meanwhile his focus shifts to a more analytical thinking, asking how its subsystems function to maintain the overarching system.

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). Each of these differentiated subsystems fulfils a specific function for the

handling of the 'general system of action' with its environment,<sup>7</sup> namely 'adaptation' (behavioral system), 'goal attainment' (personality system), 'integration' (social system) and 'latent pattern maintenance' (cultural system).

This fourfolded scheme of functions – the famous (and by many feared) AGIL-scheme – is derived from Parsons general occupation with social action which – according to him – always shows these four dimensions in principle. And every subsystem of the 'general system of action' is itself differentiated into four subsystems, whereby each one fulfils exclusively *one* of these four functions – and so on.<sup>8</sup>

According to Parsons the social system is generated by the process of social interaction among individual units or actors, whereby the actor “may be either an individual or some kind of collective unit” (Parsons 1977: 179). Every social interaction can be conceived a social system and must be analyzed in relation to the 'general system of action'.

Its exclusive function which it fulfils for the whole 'general system of action' is the integration of the very same.<sup>9</sup>

The social system is in itself differentiated into the political system ('goal attainment'), the economic system ('adaptation'), the societal community ('integration') and the pattern maintenance or cultural system<sup>10</sup> ('latent pattern maintenance').

The societal community integrates the whole social system and is thus seen as its core.

Only a social system, that is sufficiently differentiated into these four different functional subsystems and is able to handle its relations to the environment of the overarching system satisfactorily, may according to Parsons legitimately 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 as the core of any society is on the one hand analyzed as the patterned normative order “through which the life of a population is collectively organized” (Parsons 1969a: 11). As such it contains statuses, values, particularized norms, rights, laws and obligations (Parsons 1977: 183, 1969a: 11). On the other hand, societal

---

<sup>6</sup> Like for example the writings from W. Ross Ashby or Norbert Wiener (see Walter 2005: 278/9).

<sup>7</sup> Differentiation within systems 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).

<sup>8</sup> One may just think of a Russian doll.

<sup>9</sup> Somehow it also represents its 'core', as it especially links the cultural and the personality system.

<sup>10</sup> Which may not be mixed up with the cultural system on the level of the 'general system of action'.

community refers to a collective structure in which the members of a society are united, respectively associated. And where there are members there are always outsiders too.

‘Solidarity’ plays a prominent role here as well (Parsons 1991: 96-101). Its character varies according to the level of differentiation of a given social system. In less differentiated social systems, which lack a certain degree of functional differentiation, solidarity between its members is defined as ‘mechanical solidarity’, which means that “the patterns of action expected from units are [...] uniform for all units in the system” (Parsons 1977: 183).<sup>11</sup> In contrast to this, ‘organic solidarity’ refers to “those aspects of the social system in which roles, subcollectivities, and norms are differentiated on a functional basis” (Parsons 1977: 183).

The ‘pattern maintenance’- or cultural system as a subsystem of the social system/ society centers around the institutionalization of cultural ‘value patterns’ and links a social system/ society to the cultural system of the ‘general system of action’ which mainly means ‘moral’ (Parsons 1977: 185). It legitimizes the normative order of a society. While earlier (respectively more primitive) societies ground this legitimisation in religious orientations, more differentiated and secularized societies have institutions like ‘art’ or ‘science’ to handle different value and moral issues.

There are also cases, where a social system is not fully differentiated internally; Parsons calls them ‘partial’ social systems (Parsons 1991: 20, 101). Meanwhile these ‘partial’ social systems are of somehow minor importance in Parsons general theoretical framework, they gain importance when he is dealing with the international sphere. Even though Parsons mainly thinks of societies as being identical with nation state-societies – as only they show a relatively high degree of functional differentiation and integration –, his theory of *social* systems is generally applicable to the analysis of international or global social systems.<sup>12</sup> Parsons for example acknowledges that there have been and still exist social systems which are comprised of the interactions between different politically organized societies, which not necessarily mean nation states (Parsons 1972).

However, he conceives those interactions occurring on an *international* level not as a society, as this international social system is itself not (fully) differentiated internally, which means it lacks for example a fully developed integrative subsystem (a societal

---

<sup>11</sup> Parsons names ‘citizenship’ or the ‘bill of rights’ as examples (Parsons 1977: 183).

community). An international system would only be a society if it would show a high degree of functional differentiation regarding all four dimensions ('goal attainment', 'adaptation', 'integration', 'latent pattern maintenance').

As it lacks this condition, Parsons sees the international system only as a 'partial' social system. But he conceives this social system as one, which is certainly 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).

Parsons clearly rejects the Hobbesian notion of a state of nature when dealing with international affairs because if such a state would actually exist, "none of us would be here to write about" it (Parsons 1969b: 294).

Meanwhile it is claimed that there is no societal community in the sense of a collective structure with members and non-members on the international level, Parsons mentions that there are laws and statuses to be found which somehow order and integrate the international social system.

He also acknowledges signs for the emanation of a cultural system on the international level, which is a highly symbolic system as it mainly consists of moral-ethical codes and guidelines. Because the international social system is not fully functionally differentiated such a system only shows 'mechanical solidarity', which means that there are values to be found, which are effective for all members of the international social system and institutions which try to uphold and stabilize them (thereby representing the social systems 'pattern maintenance' system). And even apart from that, Parsons refers to a "very considerable scope of international normative order and of solidarities operating under it in private spheres" (Parsons 1969b: 300).

Parsons principally regards an even stronger common normative order on a world-wide scale as being possible. In this context he highlights certain fundamental universal significances of Western cultures as being influential for the further evolution of society: the general development towards a 'modern state' which can be observed in many different national societies and a trend towards one common economic system, which he sees as operating on a world-wide level already.

---

<sup>12</sup> But there are only few applications to be found in his writings (Parsons 1967, 1969b, 1977b).

A stronger normative order could according to Parsons emanate on this basis and the trend towards an international *society* could continue (Parsons 1977b: 230-241). This tendency gains further strength as Parsons acknowledges the growing importance of mass media of communication which leads to an increasing global awareness of common interdependencies: “Inevitably, important events in any major country will have rapid repercussions in all others. [...] With rapidly diminishing exceptions, we are all members of the world political community – for better or worse” (Parsons 1967: 467, see also Parsons 1969b: 303/4).

This at the same time means, that Parsons does not claim the complete lack of functional differentiation within the international social system, but that its level of differentiation is relatively low yet.

### *Intellectual encounters*

Some similarities between the English School and Parsons’ sociology should now be rather obvious:

- The English School and Parsons commonly conceive the Hobbesian notion of the state of nature as a war all against all as one of their initial intellectual starting points. Both deny the existence of pure disorder in their respective areas of interest, which converge when Parsons observes the international sphere. They see patterns of order emanating between the interacting actors or units which they regard as forming a system. Meanwhile the English School regards nation states as being the primary institutions forming the international system/society, Parsons normally refers to individual human actors. But when he is dealing with the international sphere he also accepts politically organized societies as forming an international social system.
- Both approaches then articulate their dissatisfaction with traditional accounts which try to explain the achievement of social order in their respective realms. Whereas the English School-thinkers reject ‘Realism’ as well as ‘Revolutionism’ in their pure form and therefore devote themselves to the formulation of a *via media*-approach, Parsons does nearly the same when he tries to build a bridge or middleway between utilitarian and normative-hermeneutic approaches.

That means that the English School and Parsons both deny the possibility that order could be explained only with regard to the (self-) interests of isolated actors which are

balanced somehow automatically ('Realism', utilitarianism) or with regard to some universal normative principles, according to which humanity is a whole *per se*, and has to overcome the existent structural power arrangement to fulfil its ultimate goal ('Revolutionism', normative approaches).<sup>13</sup>

- As it has been stated above, Bull regards the maintenance of the existing order, respectively system, respectively society, as a nearly universal commitment of the actors building these structures. A society only deserves this very name, when its basic values are satisfied. Parsons approach is surprisingly close to this as he is mainly interested in the maintenance of a given system and in the level of self-sufficiency a social system shows. Only when a social system is differentiated functionally to a sufficient degree, Parsons calls it a society.

- The English School and Parsons both regard values, norms and laws as being extremely important as their function is to order a system respectively a society. They are seen as the outcome of social actions, which means they are not universal principles but the result of social constructions and therefore social in character. Values and norms are not only shaped socially but they simultaneously shape social interactions.

According to Parsons every social system contains at least to a certain degree some sense of value patterns which integrate the whole system as well as social arrangements that institutionalize normative patterns that are part of the cultural system.

- The English School's usage of the terms system and society differs insofar from Parsons' as values or norms only appear in an international society. According to Dunne, Bull wanted to "restrict the notion of a system to a functional/mechanistic model" (Dunne 1998: 129).

Buzan lately argued that the English School's distinction between system and society should be reconsidered because if

---

<sup>13</sup> It should be mentioned by the way, that both approaches are thus generally conceived as being conservative in their appeal as they are interested in the maintenance of the given arrangement (the American society (Parsons), the international system (ES)), which are both regarded as being worth to be preserved.

all human interaction is in some sense social and rule-bound, then what results is not a distinction between international systems and international societies, but a spectrum of international societies ranging from weak, or thin or poorly developed, or conflictual, to strong, or thick or well developed or cooperative (Buzan 2004: 100).

Parsons argues quite similar as he conceptualises human interactions and therefore social systems as being social in general. But according to him the term society should be reserved for those social systems which are properly differentiated internally and thus gain a level of certain self-sufficiency in relation to their environment(s).

The interesting point here is, that whereas Buzan proposes to delete the system-term from the English School's vocabulary because of its mechanistic/ anti-social connotations,<sup>14</sup> Parsons would not even describe the English School's international society as a society because it lacks the demanded level of self-sufficiency and especially of social integration. However, there is no mechanistic or anti-social content in Parsons' term of a social system, quite to the contrary.

This is maybe the most fruitful encounter of both approaches as a theoretic-sensitive adaptation of Parsons concept of functional differentiation could open the English School's view for international or worldwide arrangements and institutions of social order that flank, underlie or supersede mere relations between nation states.<sup>15</sup>

Especially Parsons' concept of an independent 'pattern maintenance' or cultural system could be of considerable interest, as it is thought of being independent from the existence of a fully differentiated international or world societal community.

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

These similarities should of course not be overestimated. Parsons surely differs from traditional English School-thinking in many points. It shall thus not be argued here, that Parsons should be discovered or accepted as a neglected thinker of the English School. Nevertheless there actually *are* certain important similarities and possible fruitful encounters to be found. Therefore the question seems to be legitimate, why the English School ignored Parsons in general; especially as the English School is sometimes appraised for its attitude of an overtly intellectual eclecticism (Makinda 2000).

---

<sup>14</sup> See also James (1993).

<sup>15</sup> See of course the other papers of this panel.

One reason for the non-perception of Parsons might have something to do with the general 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) was mainly a fierce attack on the so-called 'scientist approach' which was in the 1950s and 60s gaining much ground 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). He was 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

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 Bull's intellectual main target for criticism surely was Morton Kaplan's international theory. He especially rejected 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). Bull does not go into detail what this actually might mean or how this rejection is justified at all.<sup>16</sup> According to this weakly validated neglect, the term 'system of action' became kind of a scientist bogeyman even though its actual meaning remained rather unclear.

The crucial point here is, that Kaplan adapted this and other terms directly from Parsons' writings, but gave it a rather static/mechanistic meaning as he emphasized and strengthened mainly its cybernetic content.<sup>17</sup> When Kaplan for example describes the political subsystem as an 'ultrastable regulator' of the society (Kaplan 1966: 7), he does not take this term from Parsons but from Ashby's cybernetic theory, which aims for an understanding and explanation of mechanical/technical systems (Ashby 1956). Even Kaplan's strong reliance on the explanatory power of models is not derived from Parsons but stems from cybernetic modes of modelling as well.

---

<sup>16</sup> Nor does any other English School-text.

<sup>17</sup> Deutsch also prominently refers to Parsons writings, but with a somewhat softer appeal (Walter 2005: 283/4).

Even though Parsons conceptualizes systems as being intellectual abstractions he also refers to ‘empirical systems’, which he defines as a “set of phenomena in the observable world that can be described and analyzed by means of a theoretical system” (Parsons 1977: 177). Parsons is thus devoted to a view which he calls ‘analytical realism’ (Parsons 1969b: 730).

In a nutshell, Parsons sociology does not properly meet the criteria, which Bull outlined for the so-called scientist approaches. But according to the English School’s rejection of Kaplan’s or Deutsch’s approaches to international politics, Parsons’ own writings may have been sorted out as possible sources of intellectual inspiration as both Kaplan and Deutsch centrally refer to Parsons.

#### **4. The intellectual trias of the ‘classical approach’ of the English School – Sociology missing?**

The English School’s non-perception of Parsons refers to the more general observation, that sociological thinking is of somehow minor importance for the English School in general – whether or not this has something to do with the initial non-compliance of Parsons.

In his above mentioned 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 School’s 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 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). Linklater and 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 School’s 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>18</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 therefore be described as the three basic pillars or traditions of classical English School-thinking. But what about sociology as 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

---

<sup>18</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).

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 Wight’s (or later to Watson’s) 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>19</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>20</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 international society was constituted together with “the meanings that diplomats and state leaders gave to their actions” (Dunne 1998: 97).

---

<sup>19</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 in his “The Evolution of International Society”.

<sup>20</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).

Following these interpretations, the sociological content 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 – may that be a system or a society.<sup>21</sup>

The non-perception of Parsons becomes even more astonishing, if one regards Parsons general interest in those questions which are labelled as sociological in some English School-writings, together with the highly original concepts Parsons developed to answer them.

Apart from this, the sociological content of the English School should be clarified much further as this might open the alley for more fruitful – and then maybe mutual – encounters with contemporary sociological thinkers such as Niklas Luhmann or Anthony Giddens, which themselves heavily refer to Parsons' approach.

### *References*

Ashby, W. Ross (1956): *An Introduction to Cybernetics*. London: Chapman & Hall.

Beck, Ulrich (2000): "The Cosmopolitan Perspective. Sociology for the Second Age of Modernity". *British Journal of Sociology* 51, pp. 79-106.

Brown, Chris (2005): "The 'English School' and world society". In: Mathias Albert, Lena Hilkermeier (eds.): *Observing International Relations. Niklas Luhmann and World Politics*. pp. 59-71.

---

<sup>21</sup> 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; Suganami 2003: 253).

Bull, Hedley (1966): "Society and Anarchy in International Relations". In: Herbert Butterfield, Martin Wight (eds.): *Diplomatic Investigations. Essays in the Theory of International Politics*. London: George Allen and Unwin, pp. 35-50.

Bull, Hedley (1969): "International Theory. The Case for a Classical Approach". In: Klaus Knorr, James Rosenau (eds.): *Contending Approaches to International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 20-38.

Bull, Hedley (2002): *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.

Bull, Hedley/Watson, Adam (eds.) (1984a): *The Expansion of International Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Bull, Hedley/Watson, Adam (1984b): "Introduction". In: Hedley Bull, Adam Watson (eds.): *The Expansion of International Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 1-9.

Buzan, Barry (2004): *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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

Cutler, A. Claire (1991): "The 'Grotian tradition' in international relations". *Review of International Studies* 17, pp. 41-65.

Dunne, Timothy (1995a): "International Society. Theoretical Promises Fulfilled?". *Cooperation and Conflict* 30: 2, pp. 125-154.

Dunne, Timothy (1995b): "The Social Construction of International Society". *European Journal of International Relations* 1: 3, pp. 367-389.

Dunne, Timothy (1998): *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press.

James, Alan (1993): "System or Society?". *Review of International Studies* 19, pp. 269-288.

Kaplan, Morton A. (1964): *System and Process in International Politics*. New York: Free Press.

Linklater, Andrew (2002): "The problem of harm in world politics: implications for the sociology of states-systems". *International Affairs* 78: 2, pp. 319-338.

Linklater, Andrew/ Suganami, Hidemi (2006): *The English School of International Relations. A Contemporary Reassessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Little, Richard (2002): "The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations". *European Journal of International Relations* 6: 3, pp. 395-422.

Makinda, Samuel M. (2000): "International Society and Eclecticism in International Relations Theory". *Cooperation and Conflict* 35: 2, pp. 205-216.

Münch, Richard (1982): *Theorie des Handelns. Zur Rekonstruktion der Beiträge von Talcott Parsons, Emile Durkheim und Max Weber*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Parsons, Talcott (1967): "Polarization of the World and International Order". In: Parsons, Talcott: *Sociological Theory and the Modern Society*. New York: Free Press, pp. 466-489.

Parsons, Talcott ([1937] 1968a): *The Structure of Social Action. A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers. Vol. I: Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim*. New York/London: Free Press.

Parsons, Talcott ([1937] 1968b): *The Structure of Social Action. A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers. Vol. II: Weber*. New York/London: Free Press.

Parsons, Talcott (1969a): "The Concept of Society: The Components and Their Interrelations". In: Talcott Parsons: *Politics and Social Structure*. New York/London: Free Press, pp. 5-33.

Parsons, Talcott (1969b): "Order and Community in the International Social System". In: Talcott Parsons: *Politics and Social Structure*. New York/London: Free Press, pp. 292-310.

Parsons, Talcott (1977a): "Social Systems". In: Talcott Parsons: *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*. New York: London: Free Press, pp. 177-203.

Parsons, Talcott (1977b): *The Evolution of Societies*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Parsons, Talcott (1991): *The Social System*. London: Routledge.

Suganami, Hidemi (2003): "British Institutionalists, or the English School, 20 Years on". *International Relations* 17: 3, pp. 253-271.

Turner, Bryan S. (1991): "Preface to the New Edition". In: Talcott Parsons: *The Social System*. London: Routledge, pp.xviii-xlv.

Vincent, R.J. (1984): "Edmund Burke and the theory of international relations". *Review of International Studies* 10, pp. 205-218.

Vincent, R.J. (1986): *Human Rights and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walter, Jochen (2005): "Politik als System? Systembegriffe und Systemmetaphern in der Politikwissenschaft und in den Internationalen Beziehungen". *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 12: 2, pp. 275-300.

Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979): *Theory of International Politics*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing.

Watson, Adam (1992): *The Evolution of International Society. A comparative historical analysis*. London/New York: Routledge.

Wendt, Alexander E. (1992): “Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics”. *International Organization* 46: 2, pp. 391-425.

Wight, Martin (1966): “Western Values in International Relations”. In: Herbert Butterfield, Martin Wight (eds.): *Diplomatic Investigations. Essays in the Theory of International Politics*. London: George Allen and Unwin, pp. 89-131.

Wight, Martin (1977a): *System of States* [Edited with an introduction by Hedley Bull]. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

Wight, Martin (1977b): “De systematibus civitatum”. In: Martin Wight: *System of States* [Edited with an introduction by Hedley Bull]. Leicester: Leicester University Press, pp. 21-45.

Wight, Martin (1978): *Power Politics* [Edited by Hedley Bull, Carsten Holbraad]. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers.

Wight, Martin (1991): *International Theory: The three traditions* [Edited by Brian Porter, Gabriele Wight]. Leicester: Leicester University Press.