Conceptualizing world society

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Abstract Despite Barry Buzan’s significant attempt to conceptualize world society, a set of questions pertaining to world society remain highly debated and are taken as central concerns to our investigation in this special issue. For example, what is the relationship between international and world society? Does the idea of world society promote or undermine international society? Does international society provide the basis for the development of world society and under what conditions? In which areas could we observe the development of a world society? Are there primary world society institutions? What is the distinct contribution of an English School conception of a world society to the study of international relations? Is world society thinking related to other theoretical approaches to the study of international relations and how? Can the normative, historical, and analytical approaches to the concept of a world society be reconciled? Is the concept of a world society the key to resolving the pluralist–solidarist debate and can this debate illuminate the concept of a world society? Do the different senses of a world society in the literature of the English need to be terminologically distinguished? These questions need to be revisited in order to advance the English School world society debate and tighten the English School’s theoretical coherence and to maintain its relevance.

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Introduction

This special issue seeks to reassess and advance the English School debate on the concept of a world society. Its origins are traced back to an English School panel that Aaron McKeil organized within the framework of the International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Convention in Atlanta. During the panel discussion it was widely acknowledged that unlike international society, which constitutes the flagship concept and idea of the English School of international relations and which has been extensively developed conceptually, world society, also a key concept of English School theory, has received much less attention.

Despite Barry Buzan's significant attempt to conceptualize world society with reference to the social structure of globalization (Buzan 2004), a set of questions pertaining to world society remain highly debated and are taken as central concerns to our investigation in this special issue. For example, what is the relationship between international and world society? Does the idea of world society promote or undermine international society? Does international society provide the basis for the development of world society and under what conditions? In which areas could we observe the development of a world society? Are there primary world society institutions? Is the development of a world society a contemporary phenomenon or can instances of world society be observed in the past? What is the distinct contribution of an English School conception of a world society to the study of international relations? Is world society thinking related to other theoretical approaches to the study of international relations and how? Can the normative, historical, and analytical approaches to the concept of a world society be reconciled? Is the concept of a world society the key to resolving the pluralist–solidarist debate and can the pluralist–solidarist debate illuminate the concept of a world society? Do the different senses of a world society in the literature of the English need to be terminologically distinguished? These questions need to be revisited in order to advance the English School world society debate and tighten the English School's theoretical coherence and to maintain its relevance.

The study of the society of states requires a proper grasp of the influence and processes of the political world beyond it. Yet, to maintain the English School's relevance in a globalizing context, an English School position on meaning and significance of a world society is needed. From a gathering of English School scholars, both established and from its emerging fifth generation, this special issue brings together several investigations to reassess and advance the English School world society debate.

World society in English School thought

Barry Buzan's efforts to 'reconvene' (or perhaps, more precisely, 'relaunch') the English School have largely been successful, with the English School's increasingly acknowledged profile as a distinct approach, a steady stream of new English School contributions, and the publication of a number of introductory texts (Buzan

2001, 2004, 2014; Navari and Green 2014; Wilson et al. 2016). Yet, the clarification of what Buzan called the English School's 'Cinderella' concept of a world society remains incomplete (Buzan 2004, p. 11).

This was a key agenda item and justification of Buzan's efforts and is a persistent problem for the English School (Buzan 2001). Christian Reus-Smit has argued that constructivist insights undermine the ability of the study of international society independently from the world society surrounding it (Reus-Smit 2002, 2005, 2009). Furthermore, without clarifying the political world beyond the society of states or the sources and image of world order transformations, the relevance of the English School in an increasingly globalized context is not promising. For instance, Michael Barnett and Kathryn Sikkink maintain that international relations, 'is now a discipline focused on the governance of a global society' (Barnett and Sikkink 2008, p. 79). More recently, Chris Brown has claimed, 'The coexistence of an international society and a global polity is a central fact of our age' (Brown 2015, p. 14). Yet, the English School's concept of a world society that makes it relevant to these developments is handicapped by its conceptual opacity and contested meaning amongst English School scholars.

This conceptual challenge reflects the intellectual difficulty and awkwardness of fitting the idea of a world society into a tradition that has come to be defined as the 'international society approach' (Wilson 1989; Wilson et al. 2016; Buzan 2014). The early English School scholars, Manning, Wight, and Bull, were more interested in exploring and defending the idea of an international society than the alternative, and in some ways, rival, idea of a world society. Manning recognized the existence of a world society as the political world beyond the society of states in general, and argued, 'international relations and world society are, as it were, interchangeable notions. Respect must be paid, in any pertinent analysis, to both' (Manning 1957, p. 152). Yet, on the whole, international society was their prized concept, expounding it was their *métier*, for they saw it as a stabilizing force and source of order in world politics. The concept of a world society was, for them, the terrain of their rivals, theoretical and political, the moralizing idealists and world systems behaviouralists (Bull 1966, 1972; Banks 1973). Bull's 1972 symposium on the concept of a world society was a kind of trap for the invited world society presenters, where Bull's conceptual analysis in his presented 'World Society: Some Definitions and Questions' carved their ideas apart (Der Derian 1996). The peripherality of this concept in the work of Manning, Wight, and Bull is reflected in how they used it loosely in several distinct senses: as (1) the political world beyond the society of states in general, as (2) the ethical ideal of Kantian universalism, or as (3) the future sociological unification of humankind (Manning 1962; Wight 1987, 1991, 2015; Bull 1977, 1979, 1984). As Buzan noted, they treated the idea of a world society as a 'theoretical dustbin' for everything not within the society of states (Buzan 2001, p. 477).

In the English School's second generation, R.J. Vincent took a greater interest in the moral and sociological significance of the concept than his predecessors and slightly shifted its usage. Yet, distinctions between his use of the concept (1) as a catch-all for the political world as a whole, (2) for the shared interests of actors beyond the society of states, and (3) as the idea of a sociological unification amongst humankind, were only implicit in his writings (Vincent 1978, 1986, 1992, 1993;

Buzan 2004, pp. 38–44; Dunne 1998, pp. 166, 167). In addition, too often overlooked in the English School world society debate are Michael Donelan's contributions to the concept. We might best understand Donelan as an outlier of the English School. He championed the concept of a 'community of mankind', which conveyed the ethical universalism sometimes associated with the concept of a 'world society' (Donelan 1982). This concept is akin to but distinct from Bull's 'great society of mankind', which Bull conceived as the constituency of the society of states, constituted by the existence of a worldwide international system, not by virtue of an ethical ideal (Bull 1977, p. 19). In contrast, Donelan raised the question of the sources and epistemology of a universal ethical community, be it innate and intuitive natural law, prophetic divine revelation, or enlightened reason (Donelan 1990).

With all these different senses of a world society within the literature of the English School, the meaning, world order significance, and existence of a world society became a key battleground of the English School's pluralist solidarist debate, when it arose in the 1990s (Wheeler 1992). Solidarists used the Kantian universalist sense of the concept, but also conflated this with its meaning as a sociological unification of humankind, and as a solidarist transformation of international society (Wheeler and Dunne 1996, 1998). In opposition, pluralists saw the continued primacy of the society of states and did not see an existing world society, either as a sociological unification of humankind or as a world order transformation transcending the society of states (Armstrong 1999; Jackson 2000, pp. 341, 342). Some nuance is afforded to Jackson, however, who sees humanitarian and cosmopolitan values as competing with rival values in international practice (Jackson 2000, pp. 169–178). Bain reconciled these pluralist and solidarist camps by revisiting the 'ever elusive meaning of world society', and proposing its conception as the community of humankind's moral equality (Bain 2007). Yet, later interventions into this debate have shown how a world society can have pluralist as well as solidarist conceptions (Williams 2005, 2014, 2015; Weinert 2011, 2015; Neumann 2001; Wilson et al. 2016). Complicating the conceptual interface of the two debates further, Buzan has recently made the distinction between a state-centric solidarist international society and a cosmopolitan solidarist international society (Buzan 2014, p. 114).

We can see the state of the interface between the English School's world society debate and its pluralist solidarist debate in Fig. 1.

However, Fig. 1 only begins to clarify the interface of the English School's pluralist–solidarist and world society debates because the interface involves synchronic as well as diachronic analysis. Abstractly, a pluralist international society or a state-centric solidarist international society can exist synchronically with a pluralist or solidarist world society. But, the emergence of a solidarist world society can hypothetically entail the diachronic transformation of a pluralist international society towards a cosmopolitan international society, perhaps along the lines of a global European Union, a World Union. This solidarist transformation could hypothetically continue further with a diachronic disappearance of the society of states and emergence of a world society dominance of world order, a world society's total eclipse of the society of states. But, the possibilities are more complex still, since this diachronic transformation could, at least in the hypothetical

	<i>Pluralism</i>	<i>Solidarism</i>	
<i>International Society</i>	Pluralist International Society	State-Centric Solidarist International Society	Cosmopolitan Solidarist International Society
<i>World Society</i>	Pluralist World Society	Solidarist World Society	

Fig. 1 The interface of the international/world society and pluralism/solidarim debates

abstract, take on a different character, with the emergence of a dominant pluralist world society rather than a solidarist world society.

Many of the conceptual tools needed for parsing the interface of the pluralist–solidarist and world society English School debates are provided by Buzan’s major 2004 statement *From International to World Society?* That attempted to set the world society concept to rights. With one stroke he conceived the political world beyond the society of states as the non-state realms of ‘inter-human’ and ‘transnational’ actors. With a second diachronic stroke, he conceived a transformative world society as a structural transformation wherein the relations of state and non-state actors are in a state of play, rather than strict hierarchy. However, these conceptual contributions only let this Cinderella concept out of the tower, so to speak. As Buzan put it, his contribution ‘is an opening rather than a closing, a provocation rather than a definitive rendering’ (Buzan 2004, p. 268). In this respect, one of Buzan’s important contributions has been the initiation of the English School world society debate.

Following his statement on the English School conception of a world society, a series of critical and qualifying responses have produced a world society debate amongst English School theorists (Adler et al. 2005; Williams 2005, 2014; Clark 2007; Pella 2013). Buzan’s conception has been critiqued for not being constructivist all the way down (Adler 2005), for abandoning normative questions (Dunne 2005), and for overlooking the historical sources of a world society (Dunne 2005; Clark 2007). This debate entered a new round with Pella’s intervention (Pella 2013). Pella’s proposal is to conceive the political world beyond the society of states as a realm of ideological contests played out amongst non-state actors (Pella

2013, 2015). This proposal is unsatisfactory, however, since it is unclear how all these activities and ideological contests add up to a world society. What makes it a society? Without some notion of shared rules, norms, institutions, and values amongst humankind, Pella is abandoning the conceptual features that distinguish an English School conception of a world society from other traditions of world society thought (Brown 2001; Buzan 2004). The most recent statement in the English School world society debate has been Buzan's call to explore the question of primary world society institutions (Wilson et al. 2016, pp. 127–130).

In the light of the number and persistence of conceptual problems in the English School world society debate, the debate is in need of the reassessment and redirection that this special issue seeks to assemble. The conceptual proposals and critiques keep piling up, but as Williams has recently suggested, 'there is a clearer sense of what world society is not, rather than what it is' (Williams 2014, p. 127). Can there be a last word on an English School conception of a world society? Is there a shoe that fits?

Structure

This special issue includes eight articles. Seven of these articles seek to further the discussion about world society, while the last article constitutes Barry Buzan's response to the efforts of the contributors to conceptualize world society.

In the opening article, Cornelia Navari argues that if we are looking for sociological theories that spell out the institutions of the emerging world society, we have two main choices: John Meyer and his students from the Stanford-based World Polity School and Barry Buzan, based at the London School of Economics and from the English School 'world society' stable. It was in the 1970s that Meyer first put forward his ideas of an emerging 'world polity', while Buzan came forward with his schema only latterly, in his 2004 *From International Society to World Society*. According to Navari, the two theories contend in both processes and the role of major institutions, but agree to a surprising extent on identities and transformational routes. Both theories have a good deal to say about the requirements for a world society and the institutions that comprise it, and a comparison between them reveals a good deal about how to theorize world society and what a plausible sociological theory would require.

Matthew Weinert's article begins with the observation that Hedley Bull defined world society as 'a worldwide network of interaction' embracing state and non-state actors animated by commonalities of interests and values upon which common institutions and rules are constructed. According to Weinert, three problems have plagued subsequent concepts of world society: its conflation with solidarist international society, identification with all humankind, and equation with all transnational social activity. To overcome these, Weinert proposes that we begin not with the social aspect of world society, but with how distinct understandings of the world as a shared social space have engendered specific sets of relationships and programmatic activities. To illustrate, Weinert uses the concept of cultural heritage, which constitutes a durable dimension of our world. Assaults on cultural heritage

have spurred development of cognitive and normative commitments and associated practices to protect, conserve, and protect cultural heritage, while later developments have sought to (re)produce the very globality such practices presume.

Aaron McKeil provides a comparative assessment of English School and constructivist conceptions of a world society. He argues that neither constructivist nor English School literatures currently provide a clear conception of a world society, only its theoretical relief in the analytical abstract. They offer no consensus on a world society's present existence, nor a clear image of its potential historical form. McKeil identifies five points that support this argument. First, the literature of the English School often refers to the political world beyond the society of states as a world society without sufficient conceptual reasoning or evidence to justify the usage. Second, both literatures occasionally betray a limited grasp of the profundity of social transformations that the emergence of a world society entails. Third, this suggests the evidence of a world society is the emergence of a qualitatively new kind of cosmopolitan culture. Fourth, a potential idealism in these literatures is undercut by identifying conflict and instability as a contributing cause of a world society's potential emergence. Fifth, the contemporary emergence of a world society via human rights and rise of non-state actors is found to be unconvincing. As a result, a final gesture towards a possible 'overlapping consensus' on human rights is made by McKeil as a possible source of a future world society.

Filippo Costa Buranelli argues that after the demise of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian republics have struggled to maintain a degree of regional identity within the wider region of Eurasia by combining historical, religious, and value-related discourses of commonality. In particular, 'the Central Asian people' has always been hailed as the 'glue' of this region, despite the fact that states in this area are following different political and economic orientations. Although 'Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmens and Uzbeks have lived for centuries together as brothers', as it is often heard in regional official statements, this 'regional world society' is being fractured by what Costa Buranelli calls the hyper-institutionalization of pluralist institutions of international society. Using an English School approach, Costa Buranelli explores the detachment of the Central Asian international society from the Central Asian world society and investigates into the role played by the institutions of the former in weakening the substance of the latter.

Dimitrios Stroiikos starts with the observation that in recent years there has been a renewed scholarly interest in world society as a key English School concept and its relevance to the study of non-state actors and their role in the promotion of cosmopolitan values. Yet, less attention has been paid to the idea of science and technology as a key feature of solidarist conceptions of justice and as a unifier of humankind usually expressed in the form of scientific internationalism. Consequently, Stroiikos suggests two things: first, that it is important to incorporate the role of scientists and engineers as agents of international society and to assess the significance of scientific internationalism in terms of its impact on facilitating world society, and second, that it is also necessary to consider how this solidarist conception of science and technology is staged as complementary to a pluralist logic. This is because of the social embeddedness of scientists and engineers as actors who also think and act on behalf of the state. Stroiikos develops this argument

by examining two key turning points that paved the way towards the advent of the Space Age: the spaceflight movement of the 1920s and 1930s and the 1957–1958 International Geophysical Year (IGY).

Thomas Linsenmaier argues that in a world of regions, inside/outside dynamics—the identity politics of international society—are effectively reinstated. Accounting for these dynamics from an English School (ES) perspective requires prior clarification of the place and role of the concept of identity in ES theory. Constitutive of society in both inter-state and inter-human domain, of international and world society, respectively, identity is, according to Linsenmaier, a key to social structural ES theorizing. He claims that this is visible in the (in)congruence of identities across domains, constellations of international and world society, instilling a state with the desire for belonging. Induced in this way is the ‘movement’ of a state in international society, triggering the identity politics of (regional) international society. According to Linsenmaier, this is illustrated, by the patterns of inclusion and exclusion currently on display at the Eastern boundary of the contemporary European society of states that transpire as the result of ‘neighbourhood’ states aspiring to join ‘Europe’.

Yannis Stivachtis’ paper provides an empirical contribution to the literature on world society by examining the interplay between international society and world society during the Greek War of Independence. In doing so, the paper demonstrates that as in the case of international society, world society can also be subglobal/regional. Stivachtis argues that the Philhellenist movement represented a European world society that came into existence when people throughout Europe who shared common interests and common values participated in common, inter-/transnational activities in the pursuit of a common cause: to defend the Greek cause as a way to defend Christianity and preserve European civilization. He also suggests that in its pursuit of a common cause or goal, world society can politically engage with international society in an effort to influence its values and policies on a particular issue or set of issues. Therefore, world society and international society not only can coexist and but they can also interact with one another. The case of Greece shows how European world society engaged with European international society and how the Greek War of Independence created a tension between the two. He concludes that the independence of Greece constituted a major illustration and accomplishment of the European Concert in action. However, European world society played a major role in the final outcome. Not only did European world society provide the means to the Greeks to pursue their cause but kept the hope of independence alive even when the Greek revolt appeared to be dead. Moreover, European world society performed an additional function: that of serving as an additional factor in the calculations of European powers. Moreover, the paper argues that the political, sociocultural, religious, and economic interaction between the Greeks and the Europeans preceding the Greek revolt in conjunction with the Greek efforts to adopt European practices during the Greek War of Independence played a major role in shaping European public opinion during the Greek revolt. In return, European world society exercised considerable influence over the decisions and actions of the governments of the European powers.

In his paper, Barry Buzan revisits his 2004 book *From International to World Society*, in the light of both the seven papers in this special issue, and the English School literature on world society written since then. The paper focuses on two themes. First, it addresses the different meanings in the usage of ‘world society’. It distils these down into three forms: *normative*, *political*, and *integrated* world society and shows how these relate to, and extend, my earlier taxonomy of *interhuman*, *transnational*, and *interstate* domains based on the type of unit that defines them. Second, it pushes forward on the question left unanswered in my earlier work about how we might understand the concept of primary institutions in relation to world society. Buzan shows how some, but not all, of the primary institutions of inter-state society have deep roots in world society. He then proposes that the key primary institution for normative world society is collective identity, and for political world society, lobbying.

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