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Reification in IR: The process and consequences of reifying the idea of international society

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Abstract:

This article studies the contentious problem of reification in IR on the example of the idea of international society. It shows how the idea became reified, i.e. how the move was made from approaching international society as one of several competing frameworks for the study of international politics to considering it an objective fact, a self-evident reality of international politics and an entity in the possession of agency. For this purpose, I trace key writings of the English School and survey their contribution to the idea's development and gradual reification. I posit that reification has been the outcome of individual strategies and disciplinary practices pertaining to the knowledge production process, in particular the perceived need to establish and maintain a research program while continuing to provide viable explanations of world events. In discussing the consequences, I argue that reification adversely affects not only research outcomes but also the study process. A reified category, once it becomes a default language through which to think and talk about international politics, narrows down avenues for diverging interpretations of international politics. Furthermore, endowing international society with agency hides real agents behind specific actions in international politics.

Introduction

International Relations theory, if it is to have continued relevance, should derive its strength from reflection upon its status and from consideration of its limitations and processes of knowledge production from which it arises. It should also acknowledge the provisional and limited nature of its claims (Hutchings 2011: 647) and remain open to challenge (Patomäki and Wight 2000: 226). Self-reflection, however, has not been IR's forte, despite recurrent reminders that theories are aspects of contemporary international politics that need to be explained (Hamati-Ataya 2013, Keohane 1988: 173, Reus-Smit 2016: 428, Wæver 1998: 689, Walker 1993: 6). The possibilities offered by the 'reflexive turn' (Barder and Levine 2012, Bilgin 2008, Guzzini 2013, Hagmann and Biersteker 2012, Hamati-Ataya 2013) still remain to be explored as theory is largely regarded as an abstract knowledge claim rather than an object with "a history and a social life" to be empirically investigated (Hamati-Ataya 2016:

Kindle loc. 2138). While scholars are now more inclined to acknowledge the impact of socio-political configurations on knowledge production, how these configurations work and manifest themselves has only just started to be analyzed (Barder and Levine 2012, Hamilton 2017, Jahn 2017).

In this article, I propose to study one prominent element of the repertoire of IR knowledge claims: the idea of international society. I will approach it not as a framework through which to learn about international relations but as an object of inquiry in its own right, one endowed with history and arising from a particular social setting. The key argument I wish to advance is that a particular strand of IR research, the English School, reified a specific interpretation of world politics. A reified version of international society emerged gradually and has been the unintended and unacknowledged effect of the knowledge production process. Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's (1966), I consider reification to mean the act of changing an abstract idea into something we are encouraged to consider as real and natural or uncontested.

I posit that the idea of international society which began as a theoretical concept, a way to approach and explain international politics, came to be regarded as self-evident and became endowed with history and geographic presence. Turning a theoretical concept into a real-world object has a number of unwanted consequences. The world of international politics started to be studied through a framework that already constructed this world in a specific way. With the "solidarist" turn in the English School debate, the previously reified international society acquired agency. Solidarist literature, studying the problem of humanitarian intervention, constructed a world where international society was both an analytical lens and an agent, thus masking the diverse actors behind international interventions.

For this article, I analyzed IR knowledge claims with special reference to the English School, its classical and contemporary texts. I concentrated on scholarship that either takes the study of international society as its main objective or employs international society as a category central for explaining international politics. I focused only on selected elements in the writings, highlighting what was of particular salience to the argument. I engaged with a selected number of texts since only certain texts "matter sociologically", meaning that they are noticed, read and cited (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013: 418).

My method follows Bourdieu's application of sociological instruments to study the scholarly practice, in particular, his insistence on distorting classifications which academia produces

together with establishing key terms for their validation (Bourdieu 1988, 2004). Academic knowledge, for Bourdieu (2004: 17-18), is particularly powerful because its symbolic authority rests on an “instituted episteme”. Hence the necessity for “epistemological vigilance”, which means that scholars must revisit their own scientific gains as well as bring to light social determinants of their academic production (Bourdieu 1988). Since theoretical paradigms frame the way in which research is conducted and determine what questions can be asked, they need to be subject to scrutiny along with social interests that generate the “tactics of persuasion” (Bourdieu 2004: 15-19). The question of knowledge becomes one of both epistemology *and* sociology (Berling 2013: 59). The article brings this broad methodological approach to a focus by drawing on two works situated directly in IR: Richard Ashley’s (1988) landmark assessment of the anarchy problem and Michael Williams’ (2005) critique of the realist tradition.¹ Similar to Ashley and Williams, I do not ask whether the idea of international society was “descriptively accurate or empirically fit” (Ashley 1988: 228). Instead, I explore how scholarly discourse on international society developed, how the idea of international society came to be recognized as compelling, self-evident and how it acquired ontological objectivity and agency. The English School is undoubtedly a broad and unfixed category, and I cannot claim that the process I am describing pervades all its contributions. I point to one specific feature, which I believe needs to be exposed and engaged with critically.

This article makes three interrelated contributions to the IR discipline. First, it addresses the problem of reification from a sociological perspective. Second, it furthers the agenda of the sociology of IR, in particular the concerns for reflexivity. Lastly, I wish to stake out the field for a discussion about reification as a problem extending beyond the English School and concerning explanations that rely on such notions as the international system or international order.

The argument unfolds in several steps. Following a brief discussion of the problem of reification in IR, I revisit the works of the English School founding fathers paying particular attention to the *Expansion of international society*, a monograph whose contributors blurred the lines between international society as an explanatory framework and a self-evident reality of international politics. I continue with the analysis of more recent literature showing how authors in the solidarist tradition ascribed agency to international society. The subsequent section discusses why reification has been taking place, situating it in the context of

¹ Michael Williams situated his work in the sociology of knowledge. To him the idea of a Realist tradition became the central element in the narrative told by IR discipline about itself (Williams 2005).

disciplinary developments and shifts in the reading of international politics. The final section outlines the negative consequences of reification for the English School and sketches its implications for the IR discipline more broadly.

The problem of reification

Reification constitutes a significant challenge for the social sciences. In sociology, the problem, as well as the related phenomenon of agency attribution, have been widely discussed (Jenkins 2014, Malesevic 2006, Mouzelis 1991, Zerubavel 2016) and considered grave enough to prompt calls for the end of the discipline (Sibeon 2004). The term “reification” is most commonly used to describe processes by which facticity, concreteness and objectivity are attributed to an element of experience. Reification means approaching human products as if they were something else than human products (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 91). It takes place when concepts become conflated with the world they were meant to describe. Reification, explained as a “kind of forgetting” that there existed a “distinction between theoretical concepts and real-world objects” to which they refer or which they purport to describe, progressively naturalizes academic concepts (Levine 2012: 15).

Early charges of reification, voiced for instance by Morris Cohen (1931) or Alfred Whitehead (1926), rested on the assumption that there was a philosophical error behind reifications. Whitehead criticized theorists for the mistake they committed each time they succumbed to the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”. The attribution of thing-like ontological status was seen as illegitimate. Through reification, it was argued, scientists’ constructs lost their descriptive function and took on an explanatory role based on the assumption that they possess “unitary, immediate and concrete referents” (Thomason 1982: 115-117). Burke Thomason argued that the error lies in describing processes as entities. The problem was aggravated by the suggestion that reification may be unavoidable, that “reifying propensities” may be a quality of theoretical thought (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 91). Thomason (1982: 104) concluded that reification is indispensable for practical reasons, and as a part of a “native realism”, it is essential to a meaningful social life.

From a knowledge production perspective, and specifically academic knowledge production, reification should not, however, be seen as that benign. Reification as “a pervasive characteristic of intellectual discourse” (Giddens 1979: 195) remains a challenge to researchers in the social science, but recognizing it as inadvertently linked to the process of

theory-building veils the fact that it has its roots in social processes. Some reifications, far from mere technical, benign and potentially unavoidable maneuvers in the field of social sciences, are fraught with undesirable consequences.

IR scholars seem to withhold from a broader problematization of reification. Expressing dissatisfaction with “simplified reifications” (Adler-Nissen 2013a: 1), common with reference to the state (Adler-Nissen 2013b: 190), state identity (Williams 2003: 519), European institutions (Kauppi 2013: 203), or security (Jabri 2013: 149), researchers of international politics have not engaged further with how reification takes place in a specific social setting, how it manifests itself in texts and what its consequences might be for knowledge about international politics. Alexander Wendt (1992: 410) poignantly, if briefly, criticized the realist tradition for the reification of anarchy. Wendt’s main aim, however, was to challenge the presentation of the social world as if it were guided by natural laws. He also suggested that reification may be useful under certain circumstances, for instance if we speak about agents with stable preferences (Wendt 1999: 316). Though he refrained from using the term reification, Richard Ashley was interested in how a particular discourse becomes self-evident. With no pretensions to assess whether the anarchy discourse was empirically correct, Ashley explored instead how this discourse gained significance and came to be recognized as compelling (Ashley 1988: 228).

With the notable exception of Daniel Levine’s *Recovering international relations* (2012) and his co-authored articles (Barder and Levine 2012, Levine and Barder 2014), reification has not gained particular consideration in the metatheory of IR. For Levine (2012: 14-16, 23), reifications are encouraged by all IR theoretical approaches and to some extent they are impossible to avoid. Such a stance should not, however, serve as an excuse to succumb into “unchecked reification” or to abandon reflection on reification (Levine 2012: 17, 25-26).

Acknowledging the importance of the sociological approach, in his study Levine decided, however, to consider reification from a philosophy of science perspective (Levine 2012: 25-26). An approach focused on philosophical considerations is undoubtedly vindicated. A claim that reification has occurred is customarily based on a philosophical position of what can be known and how. A charge of reification built on such grounds entails epistemological judgment – it condemns a specific cognitive attitude as false. A philosopher of science may discuss this problem from a monist-dualist perspective (Jackson 2016). Peter Wilson’s analysis serves as an example when he debates how the so-called primary institutions are considered by some English School authors as really existing (Wilson 2012).

I argue that the sociology of knowledge perspective is complementary to philosophical deliberations for it allows us to analyze processes through which reification is brought about and account for its consequences. Sociological factors have a significant influence on how we theorize, why we defend certain paradigms and follow disciplinary trends. I suggest starting our engagement with the problem of reification with identifying how reification is manifested in scholarly output.

The idea and its founding fathers: the prelude to reification

As discussed by the English School, international society is usually introduced with the classical definition put forward by Hedley Bull (2002: 13), which emphasizes common interests, norms, rules, and institutions as the society's defining features. This definition establishes a view of the international that is composed of states and where the formally anarchical structure is not incompatible with societal elements. In contemporary IR literature, the concept is used to guide analysis and facilitate the answering of questions about events and processes in international politics. It has turned into a well-established category in the scholarship about problems of world order, legitimacy and interstate cooperation.

The English School has built an entire research program around the idea of international society² and the concept has been considered the major paradigm of British IR by overseas observers (for instance, Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2005: 391). International society has been prominent beyond the community claiming allegiance to the English School. The power of international society discourse is remarkable if one considers how many academics have come to embrace the concept. Examples range from the discussion of global order (Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, Hurrell 2007a), legitimacy (Clark 2005) and hegemony (Clark 2011) to international law (Allison 2017) and humanitarian intervention (Wheeler 2000). Apart from IR-focused deliberations, the concept of international society gained popularity in area studies. For instance, one of the main questions for scholars of post-Soviet politics was to what extent Russia could be integrated into international society (Aalto 2007, Browning 2008, Lo 2015: 38-40, MacFarlane 2003, Neumann 2011).

² For the history of the English School, see: (Behr 2010, Dunne 1998, Linklater and Suganami 2006). For an overview of its methods, see: (Navari 2009b, 2014).

In the pantheon of scholars associated with the English School, Charles Manning is marked out as one of the first who introduced the idea into IR. He considered international society not only as a legitimate concern but as the *key* subject-matter – the organizing idea for IR as an academic pursuit. Manning (1962) was interested in the way states coexisted in the absence of an international government. According to Manning, international society was an element of a common assumption operating in international politics. It was only because state leaders and diplomats acted on this assumption, that inter-state relations could take on “societal” features (Manning 1962: 30). Contemporary interpreters of Manning’s contribution to IR assert that he saw the society of states as a social construct subject to interpretation (Aalberts 2010, Long 2012, Suganami 2001: 5). However, Manning was not consistent in presenting international society as an idea.

It was on the eve of the Second World War that Manning (1937: 190) suggested, “[p]robably we most of us have our personal mental pictures of an international society in enjoyment of more or less permanent peace”. This formulation frames international society as a normative ideal. But in *The Nature of International Society* (1962), Manning took a fluctuating view of international society. On the one hand, he made a case for international society to be regarded as a notional entity, an assumption held by those who talked and acted in the name of states (Manning 1962: 43), but on the other, he proposed that international society lent itself to empirical study. Manning suggested that international society could be studied just like a “tribe” or any other society subject to anthropological analysis. Knowledge in the discipline of IR could, therefore, be obtained by means analogous to those used by Bronisław Malinowski in his anthropological study (Manning 1962: 204-205). This unexpected embrace of empiricism when it came to the practicalities of studying international society was largely ignored by those relying on Manning’s input in their own knowledge building practices.

In addition to this inconsistency, Manning presented the idea of international society as believed in by *all* engaged in the “game of states”, even if he expressed concern about the precariousness of its status as a prevailing official doctrine.³ Such an approach suggests that political leaders have similar if not identical ideas concerning inter-state relations. The question to be asked was about the degree of cultural uniformity needed for an international society to emerge and hold sway. Manning failed, thereby, to acknowledge the potential

³ For Manning, the “quasi” or “as if” aspect of international society consisted in the fact that states rather than individual human beings were believed to form it. An ontologically objective society can be made of individuals, but states could only be said to form a quasi-society. I thank Hidemi Suganami for this remark.

multiplicity of representations of world politics, all of which could be informed by specific standpoints, ideologies and differing objectives. His question never was about whether “others” might see the world differently.

Martin Wight's fundamental questions

The foundations laid by Manning animated subsequent English School debates. Among the problems that preoccupied the early disciples of the English School were the components of international society and the query as to when international society could be said to have come into existence (Wight 1977: 110). These are closely linked to Martin Wight's concern:

The first question to be considered was, «What is international society?» There is another ... «How far does international society, supposing there be one, extend?» (Wight, Wight, and Porter 1991: 49)

It is important to note that Wight was absorbed by the same problem that worried Manning, that of a proper subject matter for IR as a discipline. In a 1961 lecture, Wight argued that a “sociological analysis would ask the following question: what is this condition we study under the name of international relations? What does it consist of, what are its ingredients?” (Wight, Wight, and Porter 2005: 143). Having admitted that international society is just an interpretation, Wight contended that, as a concept, it brings out the “essential nature” of international relations (Wight, Wight, and Porter 2005: 150). This statement suggests he assumed there was a range of discoverable structures and processes and that one could uncover the true nature of international politics.

Martin Wight's scholarship was far from uniform in its treatment of international society. In the introductory essay to *International theory: The three traditions* (1991), Hedley Bull emphasized that Wight distanced himself from behaviorists in that he sought to engage with moral questions and wished to arrive at “an account of the debate among contending theories and doctrines, of which no resolution could be expected”. On the other hand, a tendency towards a spatial or geographical representation of international society was present in Wight's writing. Wight claimed that Western international society, in the aftermath of the Hague conference in 1907, covered a greater part of the world. He interpreted post-1945 world politics as divided into two international societies, the West European and the communist one: “their overlapping, as for example in the United Nations, being less important than their mutual exclusiveness, as in the non-recognition of Red China” (Wight, Wight, and Porter 1991: 50). A prelude to reification is also discernible when Wight (1977:

117) referred to 19th century North and South Americas as international society's "peripheral members".

In the preface to the first volume produced by the English School, *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, Martin Wight and Herbert Butterfield claim that "[t]he frame of reference [for the present collection of essays] has been diplomatic community itself, international society (...) nature and distinguishing marks of the diplomatic community, the way it functions, the obligations of its members". The approach the authors took in the volume was "empirical and inductive", and the stated aim of the publication was to "clarify the principles of prudence and moral obligation which have held together the international society of states throughout its history, and still hold it together" (Butterfield and Wight 1966: 12). What is implicit in such a description is that international society may be considered in terms of membership, boundaries and criteria for admission. Thus, the notional aspect of international society begins to fade away.

Regardless of Wight's intentions, framing the debate in terms of "what is international society ... and how far it extends" suggested it was no longer about assumptions. Instead of asking when such assumptions coalesced or when they became dominant, the English School started enquiring when a society began and where, geographically, it ended. The way these two questions were posed implied the acceptance of international society not as a concept but as a real-world object.

Bull's comprehensive answer

It was Hedley Bull who provided the most comprehensive analytical answer to Wight's question, "What is international society?". Bull outlined the concept in his seminal work, *The Anarchical Society* (1977). The book quickly emerged as a canonical work in the field of IR and was welcomed as a commendable attempt at theorizing IR beyond the realist-idealist opposition.⁴ International society was said to exist "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 institutions" (Bull 2002: 13).

⁴ Contemporarily, international and political studies continue paying tribute to Hedley Bull. In 2017, the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) established the Hedley Bull Prize in International Relations "to recognise one of the most influential thinkers in international relations during the second half of the twentieth century".

Bull seems to have firmly established international society as an *analytical category* serving descriptive purposes and facilitating classification. As Bull argued (2002: 71-72), the purpose of an analytical category is neither to deny the variety of phenomena it deals with, nor to provide a full and realistic description of a particular case; instead, it is to capture general tendencies and, through such simplification, provide an explanation. Simultaneously, Bull saw international society as one of several lenses through which to perceive international politics, one which resulted from a specific tradition of thought intertwined with a normative take on politics. Following Martin Wight's distinction of three traditions of thought – realist, universalist/revolutionary and rational/internationalist – Bull (2002: 23) equated the last with viewing “international politics as taking place within an international society”. Bull undertook a likely impossible task of bridging the description of international political reality with delineating its desired moral course.

Despite his focus on the analytical value of the international society idea, Bull unintentionally laid the groundwork for reification. Bull presented international society as a functional inevitability. If there is to be order in the system of states, Bull argued, a society of states is required (2002: 307-308). Such presentation of the idea undermines its analytical status. It also represents a lack of consistency in Bull's treatment of international society. *The Anarchical Society* approaches it as an idea (2002: 23), an ‘element’ characterizing the system of states (2002: 210-211) and as a formation built of states (2002: 23, 37). Bull also, in his defense of international society, compared the study of the international realm to anthropological accounts of African political systems (1966c: 44). This was not the only instance when Bull took an anthropological view of the society of states. The following quotation provides an additional illustration:

...states, although not subject to a common superior, nevertheless formed a society – a society that was *no fiction*, and whose workings could be observed in institutions such as diplomacy, international law, the balance of power and the concert of great powers. (1991: xii, emphasis added)

The tendency to reify the idea of international society was reinforced in Bull's co-edited volume *The Expansion of International Society* (1984b).

The expansion of international society

Although it has been thirty years since Hedley Bull and Adam Watson's seminal work, *The Expansion of International Society* (1984b) was first published, it continues to animate IR

debates.⁵ The volume built on Bull's *The Anarchical Society* and Martin Wight's *Systems of States* (1977). It describes the expansion of European international society towards parts of the outside world, such as Russia (Chapter IV), Spain and the Indies (Chapter V) and Africa (Chapter VII). The process of broadening membership unfolded because non-European polities, such as the Ottoman Empire (Chapter X), China (Chapter XI) and Japan (Chapter XII) "joined" the society of states. *The Expansion* proceeds with a discussion of the evolution of the European-turned-global international society and ponders the possibility of the Third World's revolt against the West (Chapter XIV) and the question of racial equality (Chapter XVI).

What Hedley Bull outlined in 1977 as a framework, a way of looking at and evaluating the world, became equated with empirical reality when Bull in his chapter on the "universal international society" suggests the emergence of an actual international society as opposed to the theoretical one of natural lawyers (Bull and Watson 1984c: 2). The narrative of the expansion of the "actual" European society of states, traced historically since the 16th century, allows Bull to make a reifying move from international society as an analytical framework to international society as a real-world object.

"By an international society we mean" – explain the editors in the Introduction – "a group of states which not merely form a system but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements". Starting with this definition, the editors of *The Expansion* made a conceptual leap by historicizing international society: "The purpose of this book is to explore the expansion of international society of European states across the rest of the globe, and its transformation from a society fashioned in Europe...into the global international society of today" (Bull and Watson 1984c: 1). The specific phrasing as well as the volume's leading topics – the expansion of European international society taking place through the entry of non-European states and the nature of the new global society of states – contributed substantially to reifying the idea of international society. This society "expands" by accepting new members, which means that it is no longer treated as an analytical concept, allowing for understanding certain processes in international politics. International society becomes a political entity with a narrative of its historical development and a contemporary form.

⁵ The 2014 Globalization of International Society Research Workshop at the University of Queensland was dedicated to the volume. The second edition of *The Expansion* is to be published in 2019.

Focusing on the theme of expansion and transformation of the European society of states, the authors downplayed aspects key to the initial formulation of the concept. They argue, for instance, that “it is not our perspective but the historical record itself that can be called Eurocentric” (Bull and Watson 1984c: 2). Equating the “present international political structure of the world” with the concept of international society, they see European states as “repudiating any hegemonial principle and regarding themselves as a society of states that were sovereign or independent” (Bull and Watson 1984c: 2).

It may be argued that the *Expansion* authors considered it important that international society was treated by states as if it really existed. In other words, they would approach it as real to the extent that states(people) behaved as though that were the case. However, the type of research the *Expansion* authors undertook hardly allowed them to make such a claim.⁶ The conclusion offered by Bull and Watson leaves no doubts about the authors’ understanding of international society as existing in reality:

It is a cardinal fact about our present world, and one that affords some hope for the preservation of international order within it, that the international society which was forged in Europe in the same centuries in which Europe extended its sway over the rest of the globe, has not disappeared now that Europe’s sway has ended, but has been embraced by the non-European majority of states and peoples as the basis of their own approach to international relations. (Bull and Watson 1984a: 435)

Moving from international society as an analytical concept to international society as a historical fact and historically existing spatial entity constitutes a bold reifying move. Despite the fact that reification has not been subject to reflection or criticism, *The Expansion* has inspired a broad research agenda. The topic of “entry” into international society has been explored with reference to: Russia (Neumann 2011), Turkey (Wigen 2014), Greece (Stivachtis 1998), South-Eastern Europe (Ejdus 2015), West and Central Africa (Pella Jr 2014), and Japan (Okagaki 2013).

The agency of international society

While on the one hand some scholars created the impression that international society actually existed, others started endowing that society with agency. From the perspective of this article,

⁶ See for instance a broader discussion of Bull’s approach to official statements of state-leaders’ and his dismissal of the rhetoric of communist states (Kaczmarek 2017).

the key concern is that attributing agency to international society constitutes a reifying move. The attribution of agency “to entities that are not actors or agents” is considered the principal indicator of reification (Sibeon 2004: 4-5).

Admittedly, agentification is not uncommon in IR. International organizations or states acquire agency in numerous scholarly analyses. Agentification has been discussed as a problem with regard to moral agency of such extensive bodies as the United Nations (Erskine 2004) and the personification of states has been subject to reflexive IR research agenda (Höne 2014). Classical English School authors were much more keen to see states or statespeople as agents and refrained from ascribing agency to international society. Bull (2002: 74) identified states as “providers of world order” and as the carriers of “political functions of international society”. Other prominent authors conferred agency in governments, statespersons or diplomats acting in the name of states (Jackson 2000, Manning 1962).

Chris Brown’s work (2003) is pioneering in its attempt to describe agency with regard to international society. Brown linked agency with purpose and suggested that the society of states, being a practical as opposed to purposive association, could have no objectives other than to facilitate coexistence of its members. This would suggest it was impossible to endow international society with agency but Brown (2003: 58) noted an important change occurring in the goals structure. The broadening of the human rights regime and the ascendance of solidarism, he noted, informs and modifies the goals framework of international society. To capitalize on this remark and delve deeper into the agency question, it is necessary to revisit the development of the idea of solidarism.

The pluralist-solidarist debate

The distinction between pluralist and solidarist views on international society was originally proposed by Hedley Bull (1966a) and has since been recognized as the best-known tension within English School theory (Wheeler and Dunne 1996). Bull defined solidarist international society as one where collective enforcement of international rules and the guardianship of human rights was possible. Solidarist international society was thought of as one where justice is prioritized; i.e. there is the possibility for progress and the potential for achieving superior human values. From this strand of thinking arose the proposition that states have duties to humanity. This thesis proved difficult to reconcile with sovereignty, a principle upon which the pluralist conception of international society is built.

The pluralist view postulates diversity as the fundamental feature of international society. It is based on the assumption of coexistence and appreciation of difference. The pluralist interpretation embraces the idea that states are inclined to agree only on a narrow set of purposes and will avoid activities taking individuals as the point of reference (Weinert 2011). However, for Bull and those who follow him, even the pluralist view of international society implies a goal-oriented structure aimed at securing order. Andrew Hurrell (2007a: 3), for instance, explains a pluralist society as one in which there are three fundamental goals: “the preservation of the society of states itself, the maintenance of the independence of individual states, and the regulation – but not elimination – of war and violence amongst states and societies”.

The pluralist-solidarist tension returned as the central scholarly concern following the end of the Cold War and greater normative ambitions of liberal democratic states (Linklater and Suganami 2006). It was expected that liberal values would acquire widespread acceptance and that intervention aimed at peace-building and human rights protection would bring positive results (Dunne and McDonald 2013). To make sense of these developments, the English School argued that the society of states was moving towards a solidarist dimension. It was claimed that the newly achieved Western domination was coupled with greater normative ambitions as well as with the attempts to impose the solidarist agenda on other states (Buzan 2004: 47-49, Hurrell 2007a: 58). Nicholas Wheeler (2000) termed the period the “solidarist moment”.

With the ascendance of the idea of solidarism, international society was explicitly endowed with agency and responsibility (Hurrell 2005, Wheeler 2000). International society, with an extended range of cooperative norms, rules and institutions and composed of states converging in terms of ideology and internal governance, was seen as having goals much more ambitious than the preservation of order. This society, and especially liberal states purportedly forming its core, have been identified as exhibiting a growing acceptance of international intervention. Solidarist society of states *acting* in defense of human rights could, under certain conditions, undertake legitimate humanitarian intervention (Wheeler 2000).

When international society acts

The humanitarian intervention debate has been an important offshoot of the solidarist question in international society. Foregrounded with Nick Wheeler’s theory of humanitarian

intervention, outlined in his seminal work *Saving Strangers* (2000), the approach was intended to help in deciding what should count as legitimate humanitarian intervention.

The research question guiding Wheeler's analysis asked, "How far the society of states has developed a new collective capacity for enforcing minimum standards of humanity" (2000: 12). The query is premised on the assumption that international society has a collective capacity to act, to establish and follow a moral judgment regarding the standards of humanity. The way the question was asked within the framework of the *Saving Strangers* volume to some extent presupposed the answers. There were "strangers" to be saved in the first place, and there was international society with an obligation to come to their rescue. The "solidarist theory of humanitarian intervention" required idiosyncratic presuppositions: the liberal notion of individual freedom and the Enlightenment vision of the need and possibility of undertaking collective action. This society, Wheeler persuasively argued, has the "prevailing morality" and the capacity for setting boundaries of acceptable conduct (2000: 10-12). Wheeler not only recognized the "voice of solidarism" in diplomatic exchanges and "solidarity exhibited by the society of states" but advocated a "solidarist project", claiming that it is possible to reconcile order and justice, especially regarding the enforcement of human rights (Wheeler 2000: 285). The deeply contentious aspect of this analysis is that international society is, on the one hand, the analytical framework and, on the other, becomes the agent.

For Wheeler and a number of other researchers, the practice of humanitarian intervention represented a "new solidarism in the society of states". The aim for international society was now seen as reaching beyond the classical goal of the preservation of order (Hurrell 2007a: 59-60). International society was to *save* strangers and *empower* states (Buzan 2004, Jackson 2000: 21, Wheeler 2000). Ian Clark's (2005: 23) initial work implicitly ascribed agency to international society, especially when he pointed out that international society pursues different types of aims, from coexistence to cooperation, depending on the extent of shared values among states. In one of his recent interventions, Clark (2013: 14, 152) explicitly embraced international society as a "powerful agent", despite simultaneously considering it as a theoretical concept. Clark's key contention is that international society, "very much engaged as an active participant" is responsible for particular patterns of vulnerability (Clark 2013: 2). In addition to the structure of the argument, the language used agentifies international society. Clark's (2013: 4-6) international society: "makes a difference", "conceives of" and "responds to problems", "intervenes", "treats the vulnerable as seemingly knowable categories of people". The volume's question has not been formulated in terms of how constructing the

international in terms of a society of states is limiting and may be exacerbating the problem of vulnerability, but how international society is the “major architect of the vulnerable” (Clark 2013: 157).

Wheeler and Clark’s arguments share two important underlying presumptions: not only is it possible to think of international politics in terms of solidarist international society, but that society has moral purposes, which it should strive to fulfill. The merger of the analytical starting point with an agency-bearing entity is problematic and remains unresolved in both authors’ writing. It also contributes to masking the actual agents behind concrete humanitarian interventions. Such framing of agency makes it impossible to localize and discuss decision-makers’ responsibility. In that respect scholarly discourse follows rather than questions the policy practitioners’ discourse that agentifies “international community” (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn 2011, Kaczmarek 2016).

Critics and educators

Proponents and explorers of the idea of international society add important qualifications to their work. Andrew Hurrell (2007b), for instance, argues that broad images of the world, and particularly those shaping politics, should be subject to academic scrutiny. Ian Clark (2013) notes that according agency to international society depends on “unacceptable assumptions about international society homogeneity, and ends with hopeless reification”. Authors underline that assumptions about international society homogeneity are unacceptable, nor should one take neat and tidy arrangements of the global system for granted (Clark 2013, Hurrell 2007b). They also add another exceptionally important qualification:

The language of ‘international order’ [...] is never politically neutral. Indeed a capacity to produce and project proposals, conceptions, and theories of order is a central part of the practice of power. (Hurrell 2007a: 20)

Praise is indisputably due for calling attention to the homogeneity problem and for admitting that power is at work in how scholarly categories are constructed and applied. Nevertheless, the expression of these significant doubts does not go hand in hand with the exploration of their consequences. A thorough discussion has not taken place of what becomes of the idea of international society if one decides to take these qualifications on board. Scholars expressed these concerns but never embraced them. These fundamental observations were treated as a caveat, rather than *the* key element. Ian Clark, for instance, acknowledges the possible

negative consequences of international society. International society should be understood, Clark argues, as encompassing a range of formations both benign and malign in consequence (Clark 2013: 19). This critique points to negative outcomes but they are ascribed to international society's power to "socialize" not only the positive but also the negative, and to develop practices around "deformities" of international politics. Still missing is the discussion of potential negative effects of producing schematic yet powerful representations of the international and the consequences these representations have for scholarly analysis and political practice.

The prevalent supposition present in the English School literature is that international relations take place in a social setting co-constructed and mutually intelligible to those involved. The existence of a social dimension to international politics (Reus-Smit 2009), however, tends to be interpreted in various ways in the writings on international society. In addition to the ambiguity as to which aspects of international politics can be considered social, little attention has been paid to the deeply problematic notion of the social. Patricia Owens, pointing to the appropriation of the concept of society by international theory, criticized the ahistorical approach to this idea manifested in the dismissal of the origins of the concept itself and in its adaptation without due consideration of the specific circumstances it was meant to describe (Owens 2015: 81, 285-286). The use of social terminology, Owens argues, seems a harmless abstraction and it was purposefully emptied of context to make it into a universal explanatory tool (Buzan 2004, referenced in Owens 2015: 83). With regard to Hedley Bull's writing, Owens noticed that Bull simply asserted the society's "functions" without addressing the origins and problems of sociological functionalism (Owens 2015: 82).

Part of the literature argues that specific practices and institutions constitute and thus prove the existence of international society (e.g. Holsti 2004, Navari 2009a). This supposition is problematic for a number of reasons. The most fundamental is that it involves judgment about the reality of social institutions. In addition to this philosophical conundrum, there are also several challenges of practical nature to this claim that can be exposed through an analysis of existing texts. First, institutions have been defined broadly. Bull interpreted them as sets of habits and practices (Bull, 2002, p. 13). Christian Reus-Smit argued that the modern society of states is underpinned by two fundamental institutions: contractual international law and multilateralism (Reus-Smit, 1997, 1999). Buzan divided institutions into primary and secondary. Primary institutions, in Buzan's view, should be understood as fundamental and durable practices that evolved from interactions between states and remained constitutive of

actors and their legitimate activities. Secondary institutions, in turn, were consciously designed by states for specific purposes (Buzan, 2004, pp. 164–170). The list of institutions has been broadened by the English School authors also with the view to reinvigorate international society as a still adequate framework to account for developments in international politics. Ian Clark presented hegemony as one of the primary institutions of international society (Clark, 2009, 2011). Authors outside of the English School camp, too, declared they were following Hedley Bull’s definition of institutions. For instance, Holsti (2004: 20) included “modern colonialism” as one of international institutions (2004: 239). Such a broad classificatory approach may lead to a contentious conclusion that colonialism – defined as an institution of international society – supposedly serves the co-existence of both the colonizers and the colonized. That one group sees it as oppressive ceases to be an issue on the grounds that international society is avowedly based on the commonality of interests.

Even programmatically critical engagements with international society tend to reinforce rather than question the reified international society. Edward Keene (2002), who chose to examine international society and its membership requirements from the point of view of the non-Western world, criticized the overreliance on the West European example and the superficiality of order built on the supposedly shared foundations of international society. Having identified historical inaccuracies in the “Eurocentric grand narrative”, Keene proposed we should acknowledge the dualistic nature of order and acknowledge its imperialist elements. However, that the international society existed, has not been the key point of contention. Nor has it been the historicized narrative of its *emergence*. The expansion of international society continued to be the overarching frame even if the focus was on the attitudes of Western states towards the “encountered” political orders.

The international society’s declared critics have not questioned the reifying move from approaching international society as a concept to regarding it as a real-world object. Contributors to the edited volume *International Society and Its Critics*, while voicing well-grounded concerns, started from the premise that the English School approach to international relations is characterized by a common view that “there is an international society” (Bellamy 2005a). Rather than engaging critically with this problematic statement, authors attempted to broaden – to the point of breaking – the category of international society. In the volume, an international society is presented as composed of “a large number of different material and ideational structures, agents, cultures, beliefs, and perspectives” (Bellamy 2005b: 12). As a result, if unintentionally, contributors reproduced the perception that international society is

not a concept but a fact. They rightly noticed, for instance, that the English School paid excessive attention to statespeople and diplomats but limited themselves to advocating for a feminist perspective on international society, asking “where women are in international society” and suggesting that gender relations have been an integral part of the “evolution and expansion of international society” (True 2005: 151-152). Having approached international society as existing, the general conclusion of the volume called for a more nuanced engagement with it: “The School needs [...] to identify and explore the many structures that underpin international society” (Bellamy 2005b: 25).

The teaching practice has not been spared the reified presentation of international society. Textbooks, even if their role is not to advance scholarship, play an educational and repository function. They are generally held to be authoritative and delineate what is worth knowing. The way international society has been represented in textbooks is thus worth considering. Several contemporary IR textbooks approach international society as an unquestioned being, part of international reality out there. The Oxford University Press textbook *The globalization of international politics: an introduction to international relations* by John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (Baylis, Smith, and Owens 2007, 2010) is one prominent example. The handbook is recommended as “the leading introduction to international relations” and its two editions (4th and 5th) both dedicate separate chapters to the *emergence* and the *globalization* of international society (2007: 48, 2010: 45). The chapter entitled “The evolution of international society” presents international society as “composed of interconnected but independent sovereign states” and concludes that “the collapse of the Soviet Union from 1989 completed the globalization of international society” (Armstrong 2007: 37). Through such geographical framing, international society acquires a territorial dimension. This discussion is also specifically positioned in the handbook. It forms part of a chapter entitled *Historical context*, which additionally legitimizes the view of international society as a real-world object evolving throughout history.

Another Oxford University Press textbook (Jackson and Sørensen 2007, 2016), *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and approaches* considers the history of international politics in terms of the globalization of the *state system* rather than the globalization of international society. Authors state clearly that international society is a “tradition in IR”, which places emphasis on rules and norms of international law, international organizations and diplomatic activity. There are, however, several instances when international society becomes reified quite apart from the representation of it as just one among many theoretical

approaches. The discussion about two elements of juridical statehood – constitutional independence and recognition – attests that both are needed to pave “the way for membership of International Society” (Jackson and Sørensen 2007: 19). Reified international society becomes indispensable in the debate of international responsibility when statespeople are said to have responsibility to international society and its members (Jackson and Sørensen 2007: 19, 26, 147).

Why do ideas become reified?

Reification can undoubtedly be attributed to the lack of precision in the use of the idea of international society and the unspecified philosophical grounding for particular uses. One rarely acknowledged but central problem within the English School is the indecisiveness regarding the ontological status of the society of states. International society is presented either as an ideal-type (Keene 2009), an analytical framework (Buzan 2004), a product of conscious intent (Navari 2009b: 45) or a prescription for how things should be (Jackson 2000). Alan James (1986) and arguably also Charles Manning (1962) never approached it as a model invented by academics but as an observable fact which could be based in statespeople behaving as though international society existed.

Equally important, however, are the socially conditioned developments in the field of IR. Far from arguing that reification has been intentional, I posit that it has been the outcome of individual strategies and disciplinary practices pertaining to the knowledge production process. The former comprises the perceived need to have an institutional home for one’s research, belonging to which increases recognition. The latter include the urge to establish a research program and the customary requirement to explain events in international politics while maintaining rather than discarding an already well-grounded research agenda. In this article I focus on the latter.

The history of the IR discipline has a bearing on the evolution of the international society debate. Work on international society began at an important juncture for IR as an academic pursuit. In the interwar years, IR scholars felt the need to grant the discipline its proper significance in relation to other areas of study. The uncertainty about the field was still significant following the Second World War. International Relations was seen as “too immediate and direct in its utilitarian direction” and prone to produce “dabblers in a journalistic type of thinking” (Butterfield quoted in Hall 2012).

Charles Manning, and the London School of Economics where he worked, contributed greatly to the formation of the discipline in Britain (Mayall 2003: 3, Northedge 2003: 7, Suganami 2001). Manning, holding the position of chair for over thirty years since 1930, is frequently credited with the “establishing of [IR]’s distinctive place in the training of the young” and with demonstrating to students “the relevance of a range of social disciplines, from Economics to Psychology, to *the study of the behaviour of states in the international society*” (Northedge 2003: 14-15, emphasis added). Manning (1954: 47), concerned that IR may be seen as a “redundant subject”, to use his own expression, thought of the society of states as the ontology of International Relations. He believed international society to be the idiosyncratic subject-matter, justifying the need to create and maintain a separate discipline dedicated to its study. Manning (1954) titled an undergraduate IR course, described as an elementary-level presentation of international relations, the *Structure of International Society*. Doing so, he partook in a longer tradition. Noel-Baker, whom Manning succeeded in the Sir Ernest Cassell Chair in 1930, taught *Political Aspects of the Society of States* (Northedge 2003: 12,14). F.S. Northedge, the future convener of IR department at the London School of Economics, took “IR as a Special Subject” under Manning and later taught the *Structure of International Society* as a first-year course. Quite rightly, Hidemi Suganami writes about the “decisive role” Manning played in “establishing ‘international society’ as the central focus of the university teaching of International Relations in Britain” (Suganami 2001: 101).⁷ Manning’s concerns with the adequate subject matter for IR research and teaching are not uncommon even today. These doubts have been lurking in the background of research endeavors and resurface periodically, for instance when Justin Rosenberg (2016) laments the lack of any “big idea” in IR and IR’s constant borrowing from cognate disciplines.⁸

The key institutional functions that Manning held and the imprint he left on the teaching practice illustrate the entanglement of the idea of international society with institutional and disciplinary developments as well as its impact on the thinking patterns. In these early years the idea of international society was crucial for the emerging “disciplinary identity” (Thies 2012: 118). Apart from Manning and Northedge also Geoffrey Goodwin, Martin Wight and Hedley Bull are credited with considering, despite their differences, that “in an increasingly integrated world, international relations were too important for their study to be left to the

⁷ The idea of international society and states as ‘as if’ persons forming it had a strong influence on Manning’s students. It was also promoted among IR teachers from other universities (Porter 2003: 34).

⁸ See also the discussion Rosenberg’s text sparked in the disciplinary blogosphere (Peltonen 2017).

historians, lawyers and economists” (Mayall 2003: 3). At the same time, the department and professors dedicated to IR research and teaching continued to experience the prolonged insecurity linked in part to the “innovative character of the subject matter of IR, and the fact that the department [at the London School of Economics] was small and interdisciplinary” (Long 2012: 79). These conditions and the perception that international society is important for the discipline have most likely facilitated reification while dissuading potential criticism. In addition, the concept of international society was useful as a rationalization of Britain’s shifting role in international relations (Acharya 2011: 624-25). Despite claims to speak about the world at large, it reflected a specific national context and historical experience (Vigezzi 2005) and helped uplift Britain’s “post-imperial” place in international politics.

Once IR disciplinary boundaries had been established, there emerged the need to distinguish the British from the American perspective on the study of international politics. One way to mark the dissimilarity was to emphasize a distinct methodological approach, another was to resist the domination of realism after WWII (Hall 2012) by proposing an alternative paradigm for understanding international politics, centered on common rather than competing interests. At this particular juncture the idea of international society was particularly handy. Long before Stanley Hoffmann (1977) noted that IR was an American social science, scholars gathered in the British Committee on the Theory of International Relations were keen to distance their work from American IR: “The British have probably been more concerned with the historical than the contemporary, with the normative than the scientific, with the philosophical than the methodological, with the principles than policy” (Butterfield and Wight 1966: 12). Hedley Bull continued that pursuit arguing for an approach that derives from history, philosophy and law (Bull 1966b: 361).

The English School was programmatically opposed to the behaviorism dominating American IR in the 1960s. In Bull’s interpretation (Bull 2008: 102), Martin Wight sought to engage with moral questions rather than arrive at certainty. Bull, in turn considered the “philosophical-historical investigations of the classical approach superior to methodological-behavioral proofs because they were time-tested, self-reflecting, and judgmental” (Der Derian 2003: 64-65). The conventional narrative about the history of IR in Britain was “the story of the triumph of native British philosophy over imported American methodology” (Hall 2012: 5).

Over time, the concept of international society became identified with a critical stance towards the ‘scientific approach’ and its reliance on propositions based on ‘logical or mathematical proof, or upon strict, empirical procedures of verification’ (Bull 1966b: 362). In

that sense, international society acquired a symbolic meaning in the defense of the “traditionalist approach”.⁹ As international society started to be equated with resistance towards the “scientific approach”, the idea’s symbolic role reinforced defensive rather than critical attitudes. The popularity of anti-positivism was conducive to maintaining a school of thought which, in the words of Steve Smith, “never bought into the positivist assumptions” dominating in the US and preserved its approach to international relations for later generations (Smith 1996: 11).

The common narrative of international society facilitated the desired distinction from realism and from US methodological approaches thus granting recognition in the academic community. That academic research and writing is in principle dedicated to the advancement of knowledge on international politics does not exclude other objectives, such as the need to cultivate a research tradition and to keep a research program going. The English School has put Hedley Bull into the role of an acclaimed “dead father”, to borrow a concept from Ashley and Walker (1990: 264). His ideas, or rather how they have been recorded in disciplinary memory, helped ground and legitimize the English School as a distinct tradition. Paraphrasing Williams’ (2005: 2) criticism of the realist tradition, claims about international society started functioning as forms of legitimation, confirming the validity of the English School area of enquiry.

Post-Cold War international politics helps understand why reification of international society proceeded. The end of a bipolar confrontation and the subsequent period of Western dominance, marked by the promotion of human rights and interventions in the name of liberal values, posed a challenge to many theoretical traditions in IR. The concept of international society with its focus on diplomacy, war and balance of power suddenly seemed out of date. The English School scholars, wishing to retain their research program and adapt the conceptual apparatus to new conditions, reinvigorated the pluralist-solidarist debate but in such a way that international society became endowed with agency. International society was now the agent behind humanitarian interventions and human rights promotion. The movement to re-invigorate the English School has been intentional. It was aided by the establishment of the English School section under the aegis of the International Studies Association in 1999

⁹ It is noteworthy that Morton Kaplan, one of the leading critics of traditionalism, reprimanded Hedley Bull for misrepresenting the scientific approach (Kaplan 1966).

and promoted with the help of a dedicated web-page with an introductory statement titled *Reconvening the English School of International Relations Theory*.¹⁰

Simultaneously, the English School continued to be positioned as the key challenger to realism. Wheeler's *Saving Strangers* is the extensive conversation with realism presented in parallel to the development of the book's argument. The implicit objective has been the refutation of realist claims in IR theory. The book discusses two building blocks of realism – the primacy of power politics and the state-centric nature of politics. While realism regards humanitarian intervention as contingent upon powerful states' parochial interests, solidarism advocated by Wheeler underlines a moral obligation to intervene regardless of these interests and in accordance with cosmopolitan ethics transcending loyalty located in the state. What becomes evident is that it was not only the question Wheeler explicitly identified as guiding his research but also the agenda of countering realism that determined to a significant extent the argument pursued in his study. This case serves as yet another illustration of how the development of a discipline interacts with its knowledge claims.

Scholars' engagement with recent intellectual trends in the discipline has not reversed reification. Until recently, the narrative of “joining” international society and “applying” the standards of civilization substituted a thorough engagement with the accounts of history and viewpoints present beyond the West. Once the critique of Eurocentrism became a more pronounced trend in the discipline, the English School's narrative about the international society's expansion was deemphasized and replaced by an account of ‘interaction’ (e.g. Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017). This move, however, neither acknowledged nor tackled the reification problem.

Consequences of reification

Taking into consideration its power, academic discourse should be considered a method of truth and order. The authority accorded to academic production enhances its constituting effect. The literature on international society mobilized particular understandings of international politics. Reifying international society, some English School authors failed to recognize and acknowledge their own contribution to the constructed-ness of the IR's world.¹¹

¹⁰ See: <http://www.englishschoolir.net/> (last accessed: 21 November 2017).

¹¹ I borrowed the phrase from Epstein (2013: 502).

By endowing international society with territorial presence, history of expansion and agency, scholars turned an interpretive framework into a real-world object. Rather than studying international politics with the help of this concept, international politics started to be discussed as international society. I develop these points and their consequences in the following paragraphs.

The reification of international society undermined the English School's contribution, which in its initial years brought a much-needed nuance to the discipline torn apart between competition-centered realism and cooperation-focused idealism. Against dominant positivist trends, the English School drew attention to the role of frameworks through which interpretation takes place. Martin Wight called them traditions and discussed at length how realist, rationalist and revolutionary arguments are developed. Hedley Bull spoke of frameworks for analyzing international politics: international system, international society and world society. The concept of international society was supposed to be one of several ways to interpret developments in world politics. The reification of international society, however, diminished the sophistication and nuance the English School was bringing to the study of world politics.

The idea of international society started to be perceived first as a universally relevant theoretical framework and then as a real-world object. It became ingrained in scholarly discourse and naturalized to the extent that even scholars whose main research interest is in challenging Eurocentrism in IR and inquiring into "others'" conceptions of the international find it difficult to do away with the concept of international society. For instance, a starting point for discussing Turkey's view of the world is nonetheless placed in relation to the Ottoman Empire's acceptance into the international society (Bilgin 2016: 493). This example illustrates the extent to which a theoretical category can become internalized and how it may start determining the way in which the world is perceived and described (Light 1988: 329). A theoretical/interpretive category becomes a default language through which to think or talk about politics. It turns into a mental structure that organizes perception of the social world (Bourdieu 1988: xiv). As a result its constructedness becomes forgotten.

Detached from its roots, the reified idea of international society can easily start being perceived as value-free. However, an answer to any question of political theory involves value judgments (Levine 2012: 24, Suganami 2008). While ideological production may not be the intention behind political analysis (Shapiro 1988: 7), it is usually the result of practices shaping a specific domain of knowledge. Reification veils the fact that international society is

a concept permeated with liberal values and heavily influenced by a specific narrative of European history. Liberal values played an important role in the way the idea of international society had been constructed. Bull interpreted the world suggesting that there exist goals common to all societies, such as limiting violence, honoring agreements and securing the stability of possession (Bull 2002: 4-5). In addition to the endorsement of the values of “life, truth, and property”, Bull’s liberalism is also present in the importance he attached to the concept of order as well as in his objection to world government (Bull 2002: 254). Admittedly, Hedley Bull stated at the outset of *The Anarchical Society* that his study was not value-free. However, he did not spell out how he dealt with the value-laden premises of his work. We only know that “it is important in an academic inquiry into politics not to exclude them” (Bull 2002: xv).

The literature claimed that international society allowed for the preservation of the precarious orderliness of interstate relations in the world under anarchy. Whereas Bull’s international society was bringing order, solidarist international society, described as the “guardian angel”, was acting for the benefit of common humanity (Wheeler 2000: x). Such phrasing endows the reified international society with positive meaning. The discussion about international society has often been led with the help of positively-charged adjectives such as *common*, appreciative nouns such as *order*, *commitment*, *cooperation* or *consensus* and verbs conferring importance and trust, for instance, *to recognize* and *to share*. The language used reinforces our perception that international society is the outcome of positive developments.

The study and practice of international politics

One of the most problematic consequences of reification is that it suggests an explanation may be exclusively valid and universally applicable. Reification gives a particular body of work the aura of scientific objectivity, a “false sense of necessity [and] inevitability” (Levine and Barder 2014: 869). Untamed, reification fuels self-affirming research. It may slip into “vulgar messianism” and leave scholars trapped into a world of their own “reified mediations” (Levine 2012: 14-16, 23). This is what David Lake (2011) called well-fenced – *isms*. Contributors to the English School, aiming to explain the world of global politics, did so through a framework that already constructed this world in a specific way. They then went on to ask questions about the international society that they themselves constructed.

Reification is a perennial problem in all social sciences, but it has profound consequences for the study of IR. Despite its claim to universality, international society is a representation of

world affairs that is a product of specific social relations and historical circumstances. Accepting international society as what is “out there” neglects the idea’s situatedness in a social and political context. It also narrows down the avenues for different interpretations.¹² Voices speaking from outside of the West and/or those attempting to articulate their perspective on international affairs from positions of less power and privilege have a task even more difficult since they are up against an interpretation that has been naturalized to the extent that it acquired thing-like properties.

Reification of international society may contribute to a change in the priorities for scholars’ thinking. It may spur determinist reasoning where structural conditions of the seemingly existing society hinder the study of individual states and decision-makers’ role in pursuing specific policies, such as international intervention. Asserting superior virtue to the reified international society alters the way judgments are made about these policies. The reified international society narrative allows for relocating responsibility from the sphere of human activities to that of the seemingly naturally existing international society or its institutions. If IR thinkers construct international society as really existing and value it positively, they not only risk depriving actors in international politics of their responsibility for specific policies, but they may also ignore asking important and inexorable questions about specific developments in international affairs.

Reification has repercussions beyond the ivory tower for it provides a powerful tool for upholding the status quo in international politics. Reification of *the international* as a society of states not only neglects how international politics may be viewed from another vantage point (Kaczmarek 2017), it also grounds certain assumptions about the nature of international politics. Presenting international society as not only existing but of utilitarian nature and positive value stimulates the thinking that values and policies pursued by a group of states can be treated as though they were the values and policies of all. A post-colonial critique would contend that the reification of international society in the discipline of IR contributed to the validation of the dominant policy-practices and normative frameworks of the West.

Ways forward

¹² A similar phenomenon was observed by Jonas Hagmann and Thomas J. Biersteker in their analysis of IR teaching programs. They observed that IR students had been predominantly confronted with views on and explanations of international politics developed in specific national contexts, which in turn privileged the projection of national frameworks onto a variety of world problems and contexts (Hagmann and Biersteker 2012: 308).

Since reification may influence the priorities for our thinking, I argue that de-reification, first and foremost, involves *recognizing* that an idea (in this case the idea of international society) became reified. Next, it is crucial to discuss and acknowledge the consequences of reification with respect to scholarly thinking as well as those potentially present beyond the academic setting. Continuing rather than exposing and confronting reification may produce circular and teleological arguments and it is imperative that the scholarly community is ready to recognize them as such.

For Levine (2012), the dangers of reification can be mitigated through self improvement, i.e. by way of changing our scholarly ethos. The responsibility, therefore, lies with individual scholars who should manage their vulnerability to reification (Barder and Levine 2012: 600-601).¹³ However, since reification is perpetuated and becomes significant through collective practices, it is necessary to consider reflexivity and intersubjective praxis in conjuncture. Indeed, knowledge production is never entirely a solitary affair.¹⁴ It is not easy to be open about doubts with respect to our own ways of thinking and arguments when the disciplinary standard privileges resolution over hesitation, praises coherence over disjointedness, and extols productivity over slow and careful thinking and writing. Through specifically targeted incentives, scholars are also motivated to focus on “new and innovative” research rather than on re-thinking past or contemporary knowledge production practices.¹⁵

To engage in self-reflexive practice means to rethink and rework one’s own identity, values and assumptions. But reflexivity does not need to be concentrated on the self. Our reflection can and should concern our individual knowledge practices as well as those we feel we are subjected to or we participate in due to social, mainly disciplinary, pressures. The existing arrangements of IR discipline offer a number of ways to translate individual reflection into a collegial experience, i.e. through the working groups of such professional associations as the International Studies Association and its regional and national counterparts, for instance the European ISA and British ISA. Presidential addresses and plenary sessions at annual conventions, which have the power to influence IR agenda, have already been used to draw attention to neglected themes and aspects of scholarly practice. Workshops and symposia accompanying annual conferences provide physical and intellectual space for joint reflection

¹³ For an example of such individual reflexivity in practice, see: (Alejandro 2017).

¹⁴ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this aspect.

¹⁵ For instance, the International Studies Association awards research workshop grants to those who engage in new and innovative research, as described on the following webpage <http://www.isanet.org/Programs/Grants/Workshop-Grants/Submit>.

on scholarly practices and on pedagogy. The latter, i.e. how we teach to do and present research, constitutes yet another important location for engendering and fostering reflection on individual knowledge production practices and on the existing disciplinary norms and pressures.¹⁶ While institutional bodies, such as professional associations, may be sites where social pressures are created and reinforced in the first place, they may also become the loci for reflection and change.

Conclusion

The English School scholarship is far from uniform, but the idea of international society continues to be its defining feature. The very beginnings of an academic tradition we now know as the English School suggested that reification was unlikely to become a problem. The idea of international society was presented as one following an interpretivist tradition. With time, however, and with the ever-growing research agenda, the English School disciples departed from uniformly regarding international society as an interpretative framework.

To highlight the workings and effects of the English School discourse, I analyzed it broadly, taking into consideration the foundational and more recent texts, as well as from up close, paying attention to specific formulations, phrases and representations. I discussed how Manning, Wight and Bull's declaratory treatment of international society stood in contrast with but did not prevent equating international political reality with that society. I pointed specifically to *The Expansion of International Society*, where the tense relationship between an analytical concept, a desired world outlook and a description of the world as it is became amalgamated. International society, initially thought of as a way of interpreting the world, has increasingly become associated with the world. The article brought to light how, in the unfolding discussion, scholars attached agency and responsibility to what came to be termed "solidarist international society". One of the most contentious aspects of the solidarist debate has been that international society has been both: the analytical framework and the agent.

Casting a critical gaze at practices of representing the international, I did not wish to antagonize IR scholars nor render their work devalued. In this account of 'making' international society by IR scholars, I was motivated by a concern that the actual process by which international society has been produced by academics has been either underappreciated

¹⁶ See also (Hagmann and Biersteker 2012).

or forgotten. There are no easy fixes but, to paraphrase Bourdieu's (2004) suggestion about sociology, IR needs to use its gains to monitor itself. Reflection on one's research frameworks and tools, as well as on disciplinary pressures, should be a normal rather than extraordinary part of scholarly engagement with international politics. I hope that my deconstruction of the process of reification shed light on IR knowledge production practices and contributed to the study of "knowledge as a system of action" (Hamati - Ataya 2012: 303).

The obvious question to ask towards the end is whether we need to dispose of the idea of international society altogether and whether the presented argument is, to paraphrase Roy Jones (1981), a case for the English School's closure. Discarding the idea would be impractical for it already has an overwhelming presence in academic writing and it has become ingrained in policy rhetoric. However, it is important to point to and continuously explore its limitations. It is also vital to realize the benefits stemming from *disorientation* (Hutchings 2011: 646). Disorientation involved in the questioning of certain English School claims and in problematizing how questions about international politics were asked, opens space for greater reflection on our own strategies of knowledge production. Acknowledging that international society is an idea and one among several perspectives for thinking about international politics is the first step. International society may be treated as a concept in the light of which we can make sense of some aspects of world politics. Taking a narrow view of its potential is a more fruitful avenue than broadening the concept so that it becomes a substitute for global history and international politics (see e.g., Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017). It is worth considering whether the idea of international society could be employed to describe processes rather than an entity or entities. Finally, it is necessary to continuously evaluate the idea's power for constructing the world in a specific way. Here, it is helpful to return to Hedley Bull who recognized and underscored that "all discussions of international politics (...) proceed upon theoretical assumptions which we should acknowledge and investigate rather than ignore or leave unchallenged" (Bull 1972: 57).

It is not enough to undertake reflection only at the individual level. Since knowledge production is a social process, individual strategies should be accompanied by a collective reflection on research and teaching practices. While in this article I followed previous thinkers in acknowledging that in some cases reification may be unavoidable, I also argued that in the theorizing process, it is crucial to recognize that: i) a decontextualized and ahistorical use of ideas contributes to reification; ii) reification of certain ideas within specific socio-political contexts has more far-reaching political consequences than reification of other ideas; iii) we

should avoid reifying especially those ideas with which we claim to represent international affairs in their entirety; iv) reification should not be left unacknowledged for the sake of maintaining a research program even if scholarly community is not always open to a critical discussion of the products of its thinking.

Finally, critiquing international society's reification is an initial step towards understanding the problems associated with similar notions in IR that are in for broader use, such as the "international system" or "world order". This article is but one step towards a more reflexive discipline of IR.

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