

The development of International Relations theory in the UK: traditions, contemporary perspectives, and trajectories[†]

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Abstract

British International Relations (IR) theory is distinguished by a concern with institutions and norms, and by an emphasis on history, philosophy, and law rather than the formal methods of the social sciences; in both respects, but especially the latter, it differs from American IR theory. The origins of British IR theory are traced, and the importance of the 'English School' (ES) is stressed, partly because of the work it stimulates, but also because of its role as a brand which helps to establish the independence of British IR from the otherwise dominant American profession. Along with ES scholarship (pluralist and solidarist), political theory and IR, and critical theory, including critical security

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studies, are the major areas where contemporary IR theory in Britain is located. This is likely to persist, but the generally critical approach taken to social scientific theorizing may be changing, with the increasing importance of historical sociology and critical realist work. It may also be the case that the privileged status of IR theory in British IR may be under challenge.

1 Introduction

In keeping with the task of describing the development of International Relations (IR) theory in the UK, much of this paper will consist of a historical account of the subject, but before proceeding to this task it will be helpful to provide a context by identifying some of the key features of that development, namely the changing status of Britain in the world, the importance of the English language, the existence of a native approach to IR, the ‘English School’ (ES), and a distinctive, albeit somewhat limited, approach to the social sciences. Each of these points will be addressed in turn, but, as will become apparent, they are quite closely related and between them have shaped much of the substantive work done in Britain in the discipline.

First, when the study of IR was first established in the UK, immediately after the First World War, Britain was, if not the dominant world power, then at the very least in the top rank – out-produced industrially by Germany and the United States, but the leader in world finance, and the pre-eminent naval power with the largest overseas empire. By the end of the Second World War, however, the UK was clearly the least powerful of the ruling triumvirate, outclassed in most respects by the United States and the USSR. After 1945, gradually Britain turned into a middle-ranking power, its influence mainly exercised as America’s putative best friend. But although Britain’s quasi-hegemonic status disappeared, the English language remains the language of the discourse of IR – however, this is because the great majority of academic users of the language live elsewhere, in the United States and so the story of the development of IR theory in the UK cannot be separated from the US narrative. Before World War II, the UK and the United States were equal partners in the development of the discourse, but after 1945 IR became, in the words of Stanley Hoffman, an American discipline (Hoffman, 1977). The discipline has grown in the UK but it is still but a small

fraction of the US profession, and British academics in the field generally measure themselves against the American discipline – continental European scholars have become more important of late, but it is still the case that the operational definition of an ‘international reputation’ in the UK usually means that some senior American scholars are familiar with your work.

However, second, unlike most other national IR communities, Britain has its own brand, with extensive recognition in the United States and elsewhere – the ES. More on this below, but it should be noted here that the ES is a partial counter to the first factor mentioned above. It provides a way of doing IR that is explicitly not American, and this is something that is valued by many who would not otherwise explicitly identify with the School. Third, and finally by way of preliminaries, it should be noted that in the UK, unlike in the United States, the largest departments of IR have been separate from departments of Government or Political Science. This has more than institutional significance. British scholars have in the past looked to study IR with the resources of Philosophy, History, and Law rather than, as in the United States, those of political science or the social sciences in general. This is changing somewhat, but it is still the case that most British IR scholars are skeptical of social science methodologies, especially quantitative methods, and of formal model-building. As a result, American critics characteristically accuse British IR of lacking in ‘rigor’; naturally enough, British scholars will reply that History, Philosophy, and Law have their own notions of rigor.

2 Beginnings

The first endowed Chairs of International Relations in the UK were established at Aberystwyth (1919), the London School of Economics (LSE) (1924), and Oxford University (1930) by philanthropists horrified by the destruction of the First World War, but theorizing IR had a much longer history than these dates would suggest. First, Britain had been a great power within the so-called Westphalia System for 250 years before 1914, and its nationals had contributed to the common discourse of European statecraft; much of the ES comes out of this discourse. Second, political economists and ‘Manchester School’ liberals developed a sustained critique of balance-of-power politics based on of a perceived harmony of interests brought about by the mutual gains from

international trade, theorized by Adam Smith and David Ricardo in non-zero-sum terms. In the years before the 1914–18 war, these liberals were behind the progressivist assumptions widely held by the intelligentsia in Edwardian Britain, namely that industrial society had changed the nature of IR, that war was an obsolete international problem-solving mechanism, only likely to be resorted to if special interests dominated state policy, and that gradually the world would move toward a global constitutional order, characterized by the rule of law.

Building on this background, the reaction to the horrors of the 1914–18 war created the ‘liberal internationalist’ approach to IR which runs in parallel with contemporary American Wilsonian internationalism, although with substantially less official support than the latter initially enjoyed. Two components were central to this approach, each reflecting a reading of the events of 1914: national self-determination and democratic government domestically were seen as the answers to the problem of militarism and irredentism; collective security and the rule of law were seen as the answer to the failure of diplomacy in 1914. Characteristic of much later British theorizing of IR, this was both an explanatory and a normative theory, with descriptive and prescriptive elements. This position would later be described as ‘idealism’ or ‘utopianism’ by self-proclaimed ‘realist’ writers such as E.H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau, but this was a one-sided judgment. The so-called idealists of the inter-war period were actually far more hard-headed than their detractors were willing to admit – they were well aware of the problems associated with international organization, and the difficulty of overcoming nationalist sentiments (Long and Wilson, 1995). Realist critics were certainly right to think that liberals found it difficult to put together an intellectually coherent position to take on the rise of Hitler and the dictators in the 1930s, but this was a common failing. The realist approach exemplified by Carr’s was essentially supportive of the appeasement policy of the Chamberlain government, which, as well as being morally dubious in so far as it involved sacrificing others in the name of peace, was also clearly ineffective.

In retrospect, Carr’s 1939 study *The Twenty Years Crisis* is now seen as a classic statement of the realist position, and is still referenced by leading twenty-first century realists on both sides of the Atlantic, but it would be a mistake to exaggerate his contemporary influence (Carr, 1939/2001; International Relations Roundtable, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2005). Carr held the prestigious Woodrow Wilson Chair at Aberystwyth

until 1947, but in the post-war period lost interest in the discourse of IR which he came to regard with some contempt, putting his talents instead to produce his monumental, pro-Stalin, history of the USSR. In fact, even after 1945, the package of liberal ideas described briefly above continued to dominate IR theory in Britain – not that this was particularly difficult since it remained the case that IR was hardly an academic discipline of consequence in the 1940s and 1950s. Scholarship in the area was largely policy oriented through think tanks such as the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House). Moreover, until the expansion of the university sector, in Britain in the 1960s and after, IR was taught at only two universities, LSE and the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (now Aberystwyth University). But, even before this expansion took place, British IR theory had been given a major boost by the formation in 1958 of the Rockefeller Foundation-funded ‘British Committee on the Theory of International Politics’ (hereafter the British Committee).

3 The British Committee and IR theory in Britain 1958–77

The British Committee brought together an eclectic group of scholars – historians, philosophers, and theologians, but also some figures who are genuinely difficult to classify, including Martin Wight and the secretary to the committee, Hedley Bull. Perhaps the most striking feature of the Committee’s membership from the perspective of twenty-first century Britain is the important role played in its deliberation by theological issues; the only professional theologian on the committee was Donald MacKinnon, but Herbert Butterfield, also from Cambridge, was a deeply committed Christian historian, the author of *Christianity, Diplomacy and War*, and Martin Wight was a Christian pacifist who had been a conscientious objector in World War II (Butterfield, 1953). Accounts of the British Committee make it clear that MacKinnon – one of the most important British theologians of the century – was a leading figure in its deliberations, and much of the discussion was conducted in a theological idiom, to a degree that would be inconceivable today (Dunne, 1998; Vigezzi, 2005).

Perhaps as a result, values and norms played a disproportionately large role in the deliberations of a committee ostensibly devoted simply to the ‘theory of international politics’, and the first, and best, published product

of the Committee – Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight’s *Diplomatic Investigations* (1966)–reflects this emphasis. Equally, the notion that they were exploring *International Society*, as opposed to, say, the *International System*, was a leitmotif of the Committee’s work, and again implies the importance of grasping international relationships as norm-governed. But how distinctive was the work of the Committee? It certainly provided the groundwork, and much of the superstructure, for what later became known as the ES, but most of the time the Committee were engaging with issues that had been part of the European tradition of statecraft that had developed over the preceding centuries – and that includes the explicitly normative issues it addressed. Its work was steeped in the diplomatic lore of Westphalia; the British Committee tended to deplore the less savory elements of the tradition but otherwise their thinking rarely strayed too far from the middle ground of the traditions of Europe. Equally, while the influence of Christian theology on their work may seem distinctive from the perspective of 2009, it was much less so in the 1950s and 60s; although the British Committee members were by no means orthodox Cold Warriors, it is certainly the case that their concern for norms and values was in part shaped by the ideological struggle with Soviet Communism, a struggle that was played out on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1950s.

In fact, the notion that the work of the Committee is distinctive, and thus can be characterized as the basis of a specifically national school of thought, is best understood as a judgment that was made some time later, after the changes that took place in the American discourse of international theory in the 1960s and 70s, in particular the rise of the ‘behavioralist’ school and the later dominance of rational choice theory in American IR (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984). In effect, the British Committee, also known as the ES after the early 1980s, was trying to keep current what had been the common approach to the theory of IR in the ‘Anglosphere’ for the first half of the twentieth century – and, in the person of Hedley Bull, the Committee led the charge against the new, putatively ‘scientific’ IR theory (Bull, 1996). The central point here is that the British Committee spawned a distinctive school of IR not as a conscious strategy, but simply by carrying on doing what they had always done, at a time when others in the discipline in the United States were quite radically changing gear.

Why did British and American theorists gradually adopt different trajectories at this time? Part of the story here relates to the ‘two cultures’

problem in British intellectual life, the inability of the humanities and the sciences to communicate (Snow, 1966). Figures such as Bull, Wight, and Butterfield were almost pathologically non-scientific in their approach to the world. But the parting of the ways might also be related to institutional factors. Aside from a small number of schools of diplomacy, IR was studied in the United States as a sub-branch of political science, and graduate education in the field usually involved exposure to the methods of the behavioral sciences and the work of comparativists and, at least at a minimal level, of contemporary political theorists. The much smaller contingent of British academic scholars in IR was mostly to be found in specialist IR departments, in particular at LSE and Aberystwyth, or in think-tanks such as Chatham House; the infiltration of ideas from political science was more difficult under these circumstances. A common assumption among IR scholars was that their subject was *sui generis* with its own theories and specialized vocabulary distinct from the other social sciences. Such a belief was rarely to be found in the United States.

The British Committee became the basis for the ES in the 1980s, but estimating its contemporary influence is difficult. In the 1950s, the field was very small and the work of the Committee was little known outside of the LSE where Bull and Wight taught, and perhaps Cambridge, where IR was barely taught at all. Certainly in the mid-1960s, *Diplomatic Investigations* was immediately recognized as an important collection – but it is worth remembering that even at LSE, which was then pretty much established as the spiritual home of the Committee, the leading intellectual influences within the Department were not affiliated to the Committee. More to the point, whereas LSE and Aberystwyth had been the sole major departments in the time before 1964/65, with the major expansion of British higher education that took place then the academic study of IR began to take off. The new universities branded themselves as non-traditional, and IR – apparently ‘relevant’, and attractive to students – fitted this profile, but at the same time the ethos of the new institutions was not friendly to the rather old-world nature of the British Committee. Through the 1960s and 1970s, there were many other branches of IR theory current – for example, the groups of conflict and peace researchers centered around John Burton at University College, London, or associated with Michael Nicholson and the Richardson Institute, which came to be based at the University of

Lancaster, or the radical theorists of North–South relations at Sussex University, the strategists in ‘War Studies’ at Kings College London, or the Institute of Strategic Studies, along, of course, with many independent scholars whose work cannot be summarized so easily. It was also the case that, in the 1970s, a number of theorists were attracted to the work of some American scholars on complex interdependence and European integration – in short, no simple account of what ‘IR theory’ meant in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s is possible; in the 1980s and 1990s, the position became a little clearer, and this will be the subject of the next section.

4 Contemporary IR theory in Britain

The contemporary IR discourse in Britain could be seen as beginning with the publication of Bull’s *The Anarchical Society*, which became the inspiration for the ES, but the publication of articles by Robert Cox and Richard Ashley in the early 1980s could also be seen as seminal in inspiring British ‘post-positivism’ (Bull, 1977; Cox, 1981; Ashley, 1984). Post-positivism is a rather confusing term; here it indicates a resistance to the broad commitment to covering-law models of explanation characteristic of contemporary American Political Science. With a few distinguished exceptions (e.g. Nicholson, 1989), British scholars of IR have not engaged in formal theory or in the use of quantitative, econometric methods to test hypotheses, and have not contributed to the ‘normal science’ that has sprung up around the neorealist/liberal institutionalist research program developed by American IR theorists. The standard process of establishing independent, dependent, and intervening variables, setting up one’s hypotheses and then testing them as laid down by the standard texts on Political Science methods, is not one much engaged in by British IR theorists. Instead, the latter characteristically invoke different goals of inquiry – understanding and interpretation rather than explanation – resist quantification and formal theory, and focus quite heavily on conventional historical narratives. So much for what British scholars do not do – it is rather more difficult to summarize the positive features of contemporary British IR theory; for most of the rest of this section, the different bodies of work produced since approximately 1980 will be described before, in the next section, addressing the future. One final preliminary: there is a sense in which everyone who

contributes to the discipline of IR is a ‘theorist’ in so far as they reflect on what they do, but in what follows I will focus on those who self-identify as theorists, conscious that this does some injustice to important figures who write in the area of foreign policy analysis, international political economy, strategic studies, and the like. The most obvious victims of this injustice are British International Political Economy specialists – in particular [Susan Strange](#), a dedicated self-proclaimed anti-theorist whose work on the interaction between money, credit, and political power was actually deeply theoretical, providing the best guide to the current credit crunch – and the British-based Gramscians who have done so much to develop Robert Cox’s thought ([Gill, 1993](#); [Strange, 1997](#); 2002).

4.1 *The English School*

Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society* (1977) can be seen as both a summary of the thinking of the British Committee, and the starting point for the development of the ES, once Roy Jones had identified the latter in a hostile article, and this identification had been adopted by its adherents ([Jones, 1981](#)). Bull’s position established a framework, but left open some of the most important issues. After a while, thanks especially to Nicholas Wheeler, these issues came to be conceptualized as based on the difference between ‘solidarist’ and ‘pluralist’ accounts of international society ([Wheeler, 1992](#); [Dunne and Wheeler, 1996](#)). Both pluralists and solidarists take a state-centric view of the world and both agree that international society is norm-governed; where they differ is over the nature of the norms in question, and the *telos* of international society.

For the pluralists – who include within their number Robert Jackson, James Mayall, and, most of the time, Bull himself – the normative framework of international society consists of various institutions that are designed to facilitate cooperation between polities who may have quite radically different conception of the Good ([Mayall, 1990](#); [Jackson, 2000](#)). These institutions include such practices as diplomatic immunity, and those elements of international law which are designed simply to facilitate cooperation and co-existence. Attempts to understand international society as an entity that might be collectively committed to goals that go beyond co-existence are doomed to fail – states may well wish to co-operate to pursue, for example, the expansion of trade via the

WTO, but this is a body whose members have chosen to join, whereas the core institutions of international society are not voluntary, but bind all its members. This is possible precisely because these institutions are not goal-directed.

Solidarists, on the other hand, see a society of states as desirable because it constitutes a rational political order for humanity taken as a whole. Human flourishing requires social intercourse which in turn requires political order, that is, a context within which the general arrangements of society can be attended to, laws made and enforced, hard cases adjudicated. Problems of scale alone would make a single global political order impossible; laws lose their effectiveness at a distance, and tyranny is less likely if political society occurs on a human scale. Thus, a multiplicity of political authorities – an international society – is the best arrangement for realizing the good for humanity taken as a whole. As Bull puts it, rather uncharacteristically, in a late work, states are ‘local agents of the common good’ (Bull, 1984). This conception of an international society clearly is consistent with the current international human rights regime in a way that the pluralist account is not (Vincent, 1986). Whereas pluralists see the role of international society as being to underwrite the continuation of different conceptions of the Good, solidarists believe that there is, at root, only one such conception, and international society provides the framework within which this conception can emerge. Thus, Wheeler’s *Saving Strangers* traces the putative emergence of a norm of humanitarian intervention via UN Security Council Resolutions in the 1990s – this is a progressivist reading of international society, and one which grants more weight to the role of norms than any realist, or most solidarists, would allow (Wheeler, 2000). Wheeler’s account is overtly constructivist, and the links between constructivism and the solidarist wing of the modern ES are clear (Dunne, 1995).

Constructivist connections are also made by Barry Buzan in his attempt to establish the ES as a research program to stand alongside the dominant American research programs of neorealism and liberal institutionalism (Buzan, 1993). Buzan argues that the ES provides a methodology that can be applied to a range of different situations, and, in an era of globalization, it is possible that it may be more profitably devoted to an explication of the notion of a ‘world society’, even if for the time being a state-centric approach is called for (Buzan, 2004). There is no

doubt that Buzan's initiative has had the effect of keeping alive debate on the core ideas of the School at a time when it seemed likely that they were running out of steam – and he and his collaborators, especially Richard Little, have also very valuably linked ES thinking to the study of long-term historical patterns, building on the work of Adam Watson (Watson, 1992; Buzan and Little, 2000). Finally in this section, mention should be made of the work of two scholars who neither fall easily into the solidarist–pluralist distinction, nor are part of Buzan's re-launch. Andrew Hurrell's recent major work *On Global Order* is a conscious attempt to bring together solidarist and pluralist approaches within the ES, while Ian Clark, in a series of monographs, has established himself as currently the most productive scholar to be using the notion of international society to frame his work (Clark, 2007a,b; Hurrell, 2007). Both of these authors offer an original approach to themes established by the ES.

4.2 Political theory and IR

Terry Nardin's work typifies the new-found significance of political theory for IR theory, but could easily have appeared in the previous section. His account of international society as a 'practical association' fits neatly into the pluralist position, but is based on the work of Michael Oakeshott rather than that of Hedley Bull (Nardin, 1983). It is also worth noting that Nardin is a US citizen – and it might be asked why his work (and for that matter that of the Canadian Robert Jackson) appears in an essay devoted to British IR theory. The answer is straightforward; most British scholars have little to contribute to contemporary mainstream American theorizing, but the same is also true of the minority of North American theorists who are not 'positivists' as that term is defined above. These latter scholars have much more in common with the British mainstream, and, on the whole, their work is more highly valued on this side of the Atlantic. Post-positivist IR theory is one area where British and American scholarship is still closely interrelated and on terms of equality – the American minority and the British majority are of roughly equal size in absolute terms, and British training in political theory (as opposed, for example, to methodology) is as good as its American equivalent. Nardin and Jackson are contributors to a genuinely transatlantic intellectual enterprise.

Something similar could be said of another major aspect of the interface between political theory and IR theory – that concerned with international/global justice. Here, a shortlist of major contributors might include Charles Beitz, Simon Caney, Thomas Pogge, John Rawls, Henry Shue, and Michael Walzer, and the fact that one of these scholars is British (Caney) and another works in the UK (Shue) is of little significance – they all contribute or have contributed to the same, Anglo-American, discourse (Beitz, 1979/1999; Rawls, 1999; Caney, 2005; Pogge, 2005; Walzer, 2007). It is also interesting that these authors rarely self-identify as scholars of IR; they see themselves as political theorists who engage with international topics – the distinction between IR theory and political theory fades away for them in the same way that it does for IR theorists such as Mervyn Frost, Nicholas Rengger, and the present author, who are based in IR Departments (Rengger, 1999; Brown, 2002; Frost, 2008). The distinctive feature of this discourse is a questioning of the state-centric framing of the issue of justice in the theoretical literature of IR. Such a framing leads more-or-less inevitably to a vision of justice as between states that is essentially procedural rather than social or distributive, and that is summarized by principles of international law such as sovereign equality, non-intervention, and non-aggression; on this account, the manifest inequalities of income, wealth, and resources that characterize real-world relations between states are irrelevant from the perspective for justice – a just international order is simply one in which states relate to each other on the basis of impartial rules, impartially applied. It is fair to say that all the writers listed above reject the view that this state of affairs can simply be taken for granted in the way it has been by theorists of IR – some of these writers (Rawls, Walzer, Brown) hold that the state (or ‘people’ in the case of Rawls) remains the core institution for the delivery of justice, but for them this is a conclusion that has to be justified in terms of features of the community (state, people) and cannot simply be taken as a premise of the discussion. The other named writers reject this conclusion; they hold the cosmopolitan position that the appropriate frame of reference for questions of justice must be the global community consisting of all humanity. Just as inequalities within domestic society need to be justified, so international inequality needs to be subjected to moral scrutiny – and the conclusion of these writers is that such scrutiny can only lead to the

conclusion that current inequalities are radically unjust and must be rectified.

As against this position, John Rawls argues that a full account of justice, distributive as well as procedural, is possible only for a 'people' governed by common political institutions and possessed of a moral nature; there is no 'global people' of this nature, and so global justice remains procedural – liberal and decent peoples have a duty to help 'burdened societies' to reach the point at which they can develop just institutions and become members of a society of peoples, and although this duty could involve some actual redistribution, it is more likely to take the form of promoting good, responsible, and effective political practices. As will be apparent from this discussion, much of this work operates in the realm of 'ideal theory'; the point of the exercise is explicitly prescriptive – the aim is to provide a model of a just world order against which existing institutions and policies can be measured. In a sense, this work recaptures some of the spirit of the 'idealist'/'utopian' literature of the inter-war period – although it does not fall into the trap of assuming that its models are descriptive of current realities, as is the charge laid, somewhat unfairly, against these idealist predecessors.

The interface between political theory and IR theory has had other manifestations than that of the justice industry. One has been a more sophisticated account of the 'classical' writers, ancient and modern, than was characteristic of an older generation of IR theorists. This is visible in overviews of the field (Boucher, 1998; Brown *et al.*, 2002) and in studies of particular traditions, such as Michael Williams's work on Hobbes and Morgenthau (Williams, 2005). Figures such as Kant and Hegel who were largely ignored, or radically misunderstood, by British Committee scholars are now given their due (Brown, 1992). And, of course, international political theorists have contributed extensively to the literature on human rights, cultural diversity, and humanitarian intervention.

4.3 Critical theory

There are three bodies of work within contemporary IR theory in Britain which can be described as 'critical theory'. The first two are directly linked to the Frankfurt School notion of critical theory, and the project of 'knowledge as emancipation' knowledge associated with Frankfurt, and recently in particular with Jürgen Habermas (1986). These are the

theorizing of cosmopolitan democracy of Andrew Linklater and David Held, and the ‘Critical Security Studies’ movement associated especially with Ken Booth (Held, 2004; Booth, 2007; Linklater, 2008). Held and Linklater approach the issue of cosmopolitan democracy from somewhat different directions, although both are Habermas-influenced, and both link their ideas to the phenomenon of globalization. Held’s work is oriented toward an explicitly normative account of the need to democratize contemporary IR; the central thesis is that, in an age of globalization (of which Held has been a major theorist) the desire for democratic self-government can no longer be met at a national level and so the project of democratizing the international order must be prioritized, however difficult a task this may be.

Linklater is less concerned with institutional change, more with the transformation of notions of political community, and the evolution of an ever-more inclusive dialogue. This touches on a great many themes in contemporary British IR theory – and in many respects Linklater is a pivotal figure in the discourse. His first book, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, was a major early contribution to the reuniting of political theory and IR, ranging over a study of the major contributors to the law of nations, and ending with a discussion of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, while one of his most recent books, co-edited with Hidemi Suganami, is a major study of the ES (Linklater, 1981; Linklater and Suganami, 2006). The Marxian side of Linklater’s work relates in particular to issues of political economy, the Hegelian to the importance of community, but it is the Kantian/Habermasian notion of moral development that has increasingly dominated his work, and he is currently committed to a large-scale trans-historical and trans-cultural project on the notion of ‘harm’, some element so of which have recently been published in his recent collection on *Critical Theory and World Politics*. Doubt may well be expressed as to whether the notion of ‘harm’ really can be stripped of its cultural and historical underpinnings, but in any event, his is, overall, the most impressive contribution to the development of theory in British IR since the work of Hedley Bull.

The only serious competitor for the latter accolade would be Barry Buzan, whose contribution to the revitalized ES is noted above. Buzan is also, perhaps inadvertently, a contributor to critical security studies – his book *People, States and Fear* is a key contribution in so far as it changed for ever the previously more-or-less automatic assumption that the

referent object of security was the military security of the state (Buzan, 1991). Instead, Buzan argues that the term must be given a wider frame of reference, and his work with his collaborators in the ‘Copenhagen School’ of security studies (in particular, Ole Wæver) has focused on how issues, often of a non-traditional nature – such as environmental change or migration – become ‘securitized’ (Buzan *et al.*, 1997). This work is constructivist rather than normative, and much closer to the Habermasian notion of critical theory is the work of the ‘Aberystwyth School’, especially that of Ken Booth. For Booth, security, whether of states, groups, or individuals, is ultimately an ontological status, that of feeling secure, which at any one time may be under threat from a number of different directions – Booth places most emphasis on the security of the individual which he sees as threatened by a number of features of contemporary international politics, but perhaps most especially by the state itself. Denial of human rights, ill-treatment and persecution for reasons of gender or sexual orientation, the deprivations of famine and poverty – these are all factors that threaten the security of individuals, and for Booth they should be the focus of critical security studies. His recent magnum opus, *Theory of World Security*, is an ambitious, wide-ranging study, the message of which is that the current state of the world is dire and getting worse – only a wholesale recasting of the international order will prevent disaster, and such a recasting will be bitterly resisted by the beneficiaries of the current, unjust order.

The third group of critical theorists, who I name here the ‘late modernists’ would agree with much of Booth’s diagnosis, but part company with his, and Linklater’s, belief that Enlightenment values and human rights are part of the solution to the ills of the world as well as, in some respects, part of the problem. ‘Late Modern’ is a portmanteau term and most of these authors will resist any such label, but these authors can be considered together because they share the view that the notion of critique must be extended to the central Enlightenment belief that knowledge can be the basis of human emancipation. Like several of the other bodies of work discussed above, this is an area where British IR theory means IR theory produced in Britain, rather than by Britons, and where transatlantic connections are very evident; as with political theorists more generally, many of those marginalized by the North American IR community find a somewhat more congenial home in the UK, although I am sure they would not wish for this congeniality to be over-stated.

There is a great deal of work that could be considered here; a few areas only will be mentioned.

First should be noted the Foucauldian work on ‘governmentality’ and ‘biopolitics’ of authors such as Michael Dillon and Julian Reid (Reid, 2006; Dillon and Reid, 2008); this work reshapes the notion of sovereignty by focusing on the constitution of life itself. Equally powerful are David Campbell’s studies of an ‘ethic of encounter’ drawing in particular on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, but applied to the first Gulf War and the Bosnia crisis (Campbell, 1998, 1999). Campbell’s work very effectively problematizes conventional accounts of applications of ‘just war’ and those approaches to international ethics which take the identities of parties to a conflict for granted – from his perspective these identities are constructed through encounter and by political leaders. Somewhat similar themes are discussed from a more Lacanian perspective by Jenny Edkins – and as with Campbell (and rather against the stereotypical view of post-structuralists) – she is always keen to link this work to ‘real-world’ issues such as the politics of famine, and the traumatizing effect of political violence (Edkins, 2003, 2008).

There is no particular reason why an emphasis on gender in IR, or a feminist approach to the subject, should necessarily be ‘late modernist’ – and in many disciplines it is not – but in IR theory, the association seems inevitable; certainly scholars such as Christine Sylvester and Cynthia Weber would probably self-identify with this wing of contemporary IR theory (Sylvester, 2001; Weber, 2004). This work ranges very widely, from feminist critiques of realism, to studies of women’s co-operatives, from the relationship between the women’s movement and peace movements, to the way in which the international helps to constitute male and female identities. To what extent it can be said to have changed the field outside of its own specialized area is debatable – most general IR courses now have a ‘Women and IR’ lecture (usually at the end of the course), but pay very little attention to this work. Still, the very fact that ‘tokenism’ is now required is perhaps of significance.

5 Future trajectories?

It is as difficult to predict the future of IR theory in Britain as it is to predict the future of IR in general, but one thing that can be said is that a generational shift is currently taking place. Of the authors identified

above as important within contemporary IR theory, Booth, Brown, Buzan, Clark, Frost, Linklater, and Little are all at, or within a few years of, retirement age, and although none of them shows any inclination to stop writing, or indeed to retire, it is more or less inevitable that their influence will decline in the years to come. However, the next generation of scholars have already proved their worth, and in some areas no gap will be visible as the older scholars fade away; writers such as Rengger, Dunne, and Wheeler, along with others of a younger generation not mentioned above, such as Toni Erskine and Anthony Lang, will readily take their place (Lang, 2007; Erskine, 2008). Most of the 'late modern' writers mentioned above are also of the younger generation, but what is less clear is who eventually will take the place of the leaders of the Critical Security Studies movement.

So much for continuity – what of change? Two areas currently under construction are worth looking at briefly, both of which, interestingly, have a rather different attitude toward the dominant US discipline than that evinced by the post-positivists whose skepticism in respect of American IR theory was outlined above. These two areas are not in any genuine sense 'positivist' or committed to the kinds of theory that still dominate the American discourse, but they share with that discourse the goal of social *science* – that is to say that they do not share the anti-scientific attitudes characteristic of the dominant modes of British theorizing of the last few decades. These two areas are critical realist IR theory and international historical sociology.

Critical realism is a branch of social theory which developed from 'scientific realism'. Scientific realists stress the possibility of reliable knowledge of theory-independent phenomena even when the latter are unobservable; critical realists apply this approach in order to defend the emancipatory possibilities of social scientific knowledge in the face of both late-modern critics of science and more conventional, so-called positivist, social scientists; the latter are seen as unable to unearth features of social systems which are not directly observable (such as social structures) and committed to an inappropriate division between positive and normative knowledge. The inspiration for a great deal of critical realist work is Marxian; Roy Bhaskar is an important influence (Bhaskar, 1987).

IR scholars in this field have been much concerned with the 'agent-structure' problem and with the nature of causation – they are

particularly concerned to combat the, as they see it, simplistic notion of causation common in mainstream social science; these are interests which have produced a fruitful interaction with some branches of American constructivism, especially the work of Alexander Wendt (1987). A central figure here is Colin Wight, who provides an overview of a great many of the methodological problems that have beset IR theory, in the process demonstrating that they are not actually methodological problems, but rather relate to ontological issues, the nature of reality (Wight, 2006). Equally important is Milja Kurki's restatement of the importance of Aristotelian notions of causation in the face of the dominant Humean understanding of a cause as a constant conjuncture (Kurki, 2008). This work has yet to stimulate a great deal of 'applied' IR theory, but it has played an important role in undermining the dominant post-positivist approach to the field.

'International historical sociology' is more difficult to define (Hobden and Hobson, 2001). Essentially, it brings together an interest in sociological theory, large-scale historical studies, and, often, historical materialist approaches, along with theories of the state (Rosenberg, 1994). This kind of work gives a distinctive twist to themes identified earlier; it extends the range of international political theory in the direction of international sociological theory, it picks up the ES's interest in history but disassociates it from the School's own particular narrative of international society, and it links with a left/Marxian tradition but without being committed to the reading of that tradition offered by the Frankfurt School and their British followers. Moreover, the interest in Weber and Durkheim that has been stimulated by this discourse also fits into much realist theorizing – touching base with the Weberian roots of Morgenthau's work, and Waltz's explicit use of Durkheim. Critical realist work in IR is, at the moment, largely devoted to methodological issues, but the promise is that it will promote scientific empirical work; historical sociologists are already engaged in such work, albeit for the time being on a small scale.

An interesting possibility is that this may actually prefigure a move *away* from theory in British IR, which may be no bad thing (Brown, 2006). For a variety of reasons, 'theory' has come to have more significance in British IR than might be deemed altogether healthy; when the British International Studies Association (BISA) was formed in the early 1970s it was by no means as dominated by 'theory' as it is today and

few of the early theorists of IR discussed above thought of themselves primarily as theorists – for them, theory was an outgrowth from empirical study. This was a healthy attitude, although nowadays the level of sophistication demanded of theorists is much higher than it once was, and this makes it more difficult to be an amateur theorist. Without denying the importance of theory it is not unreasonable to say that the balance between theoretical and empirical work has been a little too slanted toward the former in recent years – the balance is now tilting back in the other direction, not because of a rejection of theory, but because of the growth of approaches to theory which are more open to a fruitful dialogue between theory, practice, and empirical study (Brown, 2010; Pouliot, 2010).

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