# Structure, norms and normative theory in a re-defined English School: accepting Buzan's challenge

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Abstract. This article looks at the significance of Barry Buzan's 2004 reformulation of the English School from the perspective of the normative dimension of English School theory. Picking up a challenge that Buzan set, but which has largely gone unanswered, for those who see normative theory as a key aspect of the English School's contribution, the article assesses three possible responses. It rejects a stance denying the relevance of Buzan's approach to normative theory and is dissatisfied with a second line that distinguishes methodologically between Buzan's social structural theorising and an approach to normative theory that draws principally on political theory. Instead, it argues for the inherent normativity of Buzan's position because of its reliance on values, arguing that many of the analytical benefits of Buzan's approach can also be deployed normatively because of the way he highlights contested and competing dynamics in play at different times and at different levels. The article suggests that this has the potential to revive pluralism as a normative position in the English School in a way that retains and extends the enhanced analytical power that Buzan's reformulation offers.

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## Introduction

It has been ten years since Barry Buzan launched an appeal to 're-convene' the English School of International Relations theory.[1] In that time there has been a significant expansion of work operating under that banner and the English School looks to have successfully encultured a fourth generation of scholars into its approach, ensuring its continued existence as a significant mode of theorising international relations. The 'reconvening' that Buzan called for, though, was about more than ensuring the survival of the English School. It was also a critical engagement that aimed to establish a research agenda that would address some of

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[1] Barry Buzan, 'The English School as a Research Programme: an overview and a proposal for reconvening', Paper to the British International Studies Association Annual Conference, Manchester (December 1999). Published as 'The English School: an underexploited resource in IR', *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (2001).

the shortcomings in its approach. The legacy of 'classical' English School work by Wight, Bull, Vincent, Watson and others was, to be sure, a very positive one, but, particularly by the standards of US-led social science, the English School had a number of key shortcomings in terms of methodology, conceptual specificity and the logic of its theoretical elaboration.[2]

The culmination, at least to date, of Buzan's efforts to fulfil the critical agenda he outlined is his 2004 book, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization*.[3] In this book, Buzan aims at a number of tasks, several of which we shall consider in detail below, but arguably the most striking of his innovations is a self-conscious setting aside of the normative dimension of theory that had been such a distinctive element of the 'classical' approach, especially in work by Wight and Vincent. In pursuit of an agenda that aims first and foremost at re-establishing and significantly expanding the analytical potential of the English School, Buzan sets down both a reassurance and a challenge regarding this normative dimension.

*I do not intend that this structural re-writing of English school theory should replace or override the normative version of English school theory* [...] We need both the normative and structural versions of English school theory standing side by side complementing and questioning each other.[4]

This looks like a tall order and there has certainly been a seeming reluctance to accept this challenge to date, with a rather limited range of published responses to Buzan's book, principally focused upon reviews and a forum section of *Millennium*.[5] This is regrettable, as Buzan's book is a highly stimulating one for anybody with an interest in English School theory and particularly for those who would argue for the centrality of its normative contribution. This article therefore aims to respond directly to Buzan's challenge and to assess the possible normative responses that are available and to offer a preliminary defence of a particular account. This sees in Buzan's reformulation an opportunity to significantly re-shape the contours of the normative debate within the English School, and, in particular, to revive a pluralist position in a distinctive and innovative fashion.

The article starts by looking briefly at the nature of the challenge Buzan poses to the normative theoretical dimension of English School theory. From here it refutes one possible response – the rejection of Buzan's contribution – before considering another response more extensively – the separation of analytical and normative approaches. The article sees some merit to work that is arguably taking this route, but ultimately concludes that this move is unnecessary. The bulk of the article argues instead that inherent in Buzan's approach, because of its focus on values, is an implicit normative position of considerable potential importance. This contrasts with dominant normative positions in English School theory that stress universalism, primarily via human rights, as foundational. Instead, the article aims

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[2] See, for example, Martha Finnemore, 'Exporting the English School', *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (2001).

[3] Published by Cambridge University Press.

[4] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 228–9. Emphasis in original.

[5] Emanuel Adler, 'Barry Buzan's Use of Constructivism to Reconstruct the English School: "Not all the way down"', *Millennium*, 34:1 (2005); Tim Dunne, 'System, State and Society: how does it all hang together?', *Millennium*, 34:1 (2005); Alex Bellamy, 'From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation', *International Affairs*, 80:5 (2004).

to tease out how Buzan's focus on enabling comparative and historical analysis of the value-based and institutionally manifested dynamic practices and patterns of sectors and scales of international societies also calls for examination of normative propositions that give values their status. Agreeing with Buzan that it is very rare for values and institutions in different functional areas and at different scales to 'line up', the article argues that normative theorists need to think further about the reasons for and consequences of the non-alignment of underpinning normative propositions, too. This suggests a reconsideration of pluralism as a normative position and the article concludes with a sketch of what a revised pluralism might look like. Accepting Buzan's challenge, therefore, should cause us to ask some very important questions about how the English School approaches the task of normative theory whilst re-asserting its centrality to the School, even in the face of Buzan's re-working of its analytical framework.

## 'From International to World Society?' and normative theory

Buzan's re-working of the English School's established approach to understanding how its theory works is certainly 'rather radical',[6] which, in the eyes of many, may well be putting it mildly. Few, if any, of the pre-existing categories, taxonomies or relationships remain untouched by Buzan's aim of developing a thorough-going, social structural version of English School theory. His series of revisions removes international system, re-formulates the pluralist-solidarist debate, separates transnational and inter-human sectors from the inter-state one and gives us new meanings for familiar terms including international society and world society.[7] The normative dimension of English School theory is certainly one of the principal victims or beneficiaries (we'll suspend judgement on that at present) of this re-working. In his exposition of the project for *From International to World Society?* (hereinafter FIWS), Buzan, highlights dimensions of the normative, or 'Wightian', wing of the School as amongst the key problems that he aims to address. First up is the overarching ambition to develop a social structural theory that is a theory about norms, rather than normative theory, and that there has been insufficient recognition of the difference between these two types of theory.[8] Second is the overly normative approach of many English School writers, largely as a result of being indebted to traditional political theory for many of their inspirations, ideas, categories and labels. This produces a tendency, in line with the ambitions of political theory and philosophy, to be overly focused on normative questions of the good state, the good life and pursuit of universals, most problematically in the form of the commitment to universal notions of human rights, order and justice.[9] Buzan contrasts this with his ambitions to deploy and develop English School categories as analytical concepts, capturing the occasionally material, but mainly social, structures of the current constellation of world politics.[10] This may be a false dichotomy – the normative legacy of political theory

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[6] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, p. 228.
[7] Ibid., pp. 90–160.
[8] Ibid., pp. 1–2.
[9] Ibid., pp. 11–14, 16–17.
[10] Ibid., p. 14.

and its current over-representation in English School theory *versus* Buzan's morally agnostic idea of analytical concepts that seek to explore the way things are, how they got that way and the dynamics, trajectories and moment in play that will shape the future. Clearly, the substantial quote above suggests that Buzan does not regard them as dichotomous, even if he does see them as being intellectually separable forms of enquiry and he has a strong preference for getting the analytical right and then turning to the normative. Nevertheless, the book is replete with recognition of the importance of values and of normative debates to almost all aspects of the contemporary international system that Buzan describes, and thus the entanglement of the analytical and the normative is an ever-present question.

It is a question Buzan challenges those for whom the normative is the main area of interest to answer, and it is to his credit, and the book's benefit, that we do not get his sense of what that answer might be. To aim to include this in an agenda already notable for its ambition and to weave such a strand through a complex analytical reformulation of the structural side of the English School would be to produce a work of Himalayan ambition and Byzantine complexity. This does not alter the fact that, to my eye at least, FIWS stands as the most important book in the English School tradition since *The Anarchical Society*.[11]

Some sort of answer to this challenge is therefore required. This being an article about the English School, it is perhaps inevitable that I want to suggest that responses are likely to fall into three main categories. In the first main section of this article I plan on saying not much about one of these, rejectionism; but rather more about a thorough-going political theory-based response. I shall then turn to my main aim of trying to sketch out how a normative agenda can tessellate, at least up to a point, with Buzan's social-structural analysis in sections two, three and four. The central thrust of the article is therefore to lay foundations for a normatively focused engagement with Buzan's reformulation of English School theory. This asserts the normative potential immanent in Buzan's approach and highlights the potential it offers to reinvigorate a pluralist normative position as holding particular significance and being a potential sight for interesting and innovative work.

## Rejection or diversification?

Rejectionism is always appealing in the face of a radical re-working of a familiar, comfortable and useful theoretical framework. Some may argue that Buzan's reconstruction of the English School is so radical, so far-reaching and so destructive of what we have come to understand by most of the basic terms of English School theory that it no longer counts as English School theory at all. Given the impressiveness of the book, we might raise our voices in a cry of, 'C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est par l'école Anglais'. We might even add General Bosquet's final remark, too – 'C'est de la folie'. Given my assessment of the significance of FIWS, rejectionism is not a position I am going to adopt. Buzan's

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[11] There seems to be widespread consensus on the significance of the book. See Bellamy, 'From International To World Society?', p. 985; Dunne, 'State, System and Society', p. 170.

critique of the analytical failings of the English School is so well made, and the analytical potential that he identifies in his reformulation so much greater than that present within the English School as it has developed previously that to throw up our hands and reject this would be the act of folly. It is welcome that most of the published responses to FIWS do not take this line, even though they may have significant difficulties with the way that Buzan develops his argument.[12] Buzan gives compelling reasons why the English School needs to address economics, globalisation, regionalisation and the 'nasty' side of global civil society and his analytical framework delivers many powerful and interesting tools for doing so, whilst recognising the historically evolved, value-rich and normatively significant character of the classical English School work. The English School has always been a broad church with different interests, as Buzan himself notes in the way that he identifies different trends associated with principally normative interests – 'Wightians' or 'Vincentians' – structural interests – Bull – and historical interests – Wight (again) and Watson.[13]

The second position that I want to sketch in a little more detail is a response that is likely to pick up on what I have already noted as being Buzan's disentanglement of normative theory and theory about norms. The nature of this separation needs a little elaboration before looking at what this means for a normative theoretical response. Theory about norms drives Buzan's project[14] and, again already noted, he sees in this disentanglement an opportunity to clarify and expand the analytical potential of the English School. This is because of the way that the normative dimension has served to close down the possibility of exploring certain not implausible analytical constructs, like pluralist world society, because of their normative unacceptability and the lack of clarity in the boundaries and categories that characterise central normative debates.[15] What he sees as the highly unsatisfactory pluralist – solidarist debate is the key example here, with Buzan's later reformulation of it demonstrating how removing normative prejudgements or commitments opens up greater analytical potential, even if at the cost of having terms mean something rather different from their familiar usage.[16] It is one of the striking features of FIWS that it offers an account of an English School that is able to contain, analytically, so wide an array of different types of international interaction, driven by different motives and at different spatial scales that Buzan has to resort to historical oddities or science fiction in order to illustrate them: the Mongol horde and Star Trek's Borg, for example.[17]

This separation reflects Buzan's understanding of normative theory as being embedded in a political theory that is certainly influential in the English School. The classic labelling schemes that are typically deployed of Hobbesian, Grotian and Kantian, of which Buzan is rightly wary, given their problematic usage, stand as clear examples of this legacy.[18] Certainly Buzan's account of the nature and

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[12] Adler, 'Buzan's Use of Constructivism'; Dunne, 'State, System and Society'.
[13] For a discussion of 'membership' of the English School see Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *'The English School of International Relations: a contemporary reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 12–42.
[14] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, p. 2.
[15] Ibid., pp. 16–21, 49–50, 58.
[16] Ibid., pp. 45–62, 139–60.
[17] Ibid., p. 100.
[18] Ibid., pp. 158–9.

purpose of political theory in the development of normative positions adds weight to his argument in favour of careful separation but tends to produce a potentially dichotomous account of normative/political theory and social structural modes of theorising. FIWS may exaggerate Buzan's commitment to both the significance and maintenance of this distinction, given the book's agenda of being rigorously focused on the social structural theory about norms, rather than the political theorists' normative theory, but he does nevertheless appear to see clear blue water between these two.[19] His account sees political theory as inherently interested in universals, as usually pitched at the global level and as concerned with questions of the good life and the good state which mean that the problematic and restricted representations of debates – such as that between pluralism and solidarism – and categories – especially world society – are almost inevitable. Normative commitment produces analytical restriction.

This second possible normative response to FIWS is therefore to accept this division and argue that the normative and social structural analytical tendencies within the English School ought to go their separate ways, rejecting Buzan's entreaty that they be complimentary and mutually engaged. We have two 'versions' of English School theory and the methodological divide between them is too wide to bridge. The correct normative response to FIWS is therefore to attend to the English School as political theory, and address some of the many weaknesses that it possesses as a piece of political theory.[20] On this reading, the normative content of pluralism and solidarism, for example, and the liberal progressive character of the advocacy of world society in liberal terms that encompasses inter-state, inter-human and transnational spheres of activity – the 'Vincentian' vision – is normatively unproblematic. A focus on universal human rights as the keystone of the normative version of the English School should remain.

The problem with Buzan's call for mutual engagement and progress, complimenting and correcting the two styles of theory, on this view, is that it fails to recognise the extent of the methodological difference that Buzan has opened between two distinct and irreconcilable versions of theory. The kind of 'social scientific' social structural analysis that Buzan favours and elaborates in FIWS does not and can not sit alongside the kind of normative approach that he sets to one side throughout the book. However, he hopes this can be brought back on board once we have gone along with the social structural version and recognised its huge analytical superiority because of its ability to inform understanding of a far wider and more diverse range of historical international systems, and to better identify the significance of non-state-based and regionally-scaled contemporary dynamics.[21] The problems with this strategy seem to be a significant element of Dunne's critique of Buzan's work.[22]

Normative theory is simply ill-suited to encompassing the kind of analytical breadth that Buzan gives to the English School because its *raison d'être* is to enable

[19] Ibid., pp. 12–15.
[20] See, for example, Chris Brown, 'International Theory and International Society: the viability of the middle way', *Review of International Studies*, 21:2 (1995); Nicholas J. Rengger, *International Relations, Political Theory and the Problem of Order: Beyond international relations theory* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[21] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 22–6.
[22] Dunne, 'State, System and Society'.

us to rule out, on ethical grounds, the admissibility of certain political forms, practices and values. It is an inherently 'narrower' purview. Arguably it asks 'deeper' questions than social structural analysis is capable of, particularly about the ethical superiority of some of the enormous variety of answers that human societies have produced to those great philosophical questions about the good life and the good state and what it is that holds us together, ethically, as human beings in the face of so much social, political, economic, cultural and historical separation. Even if we wish to fight shy of the qualitative connotations of 'width' versus 'depth' ('never mind the quality ...'), and not everyone necessarily does,[23] we might well want to accept that these are different types of questions, ill suited to simultaneous analysis utilising a common set of intellectual tools.

Definitive answers to these great philosophical and normative questions are, of course, elusive, but that is what makes the questions so important and the pursuit of answers such a rewarding, enlightening and stimulating form of intellectual activity. Buzan's *schema* cannot accommodate this, because his analytical imperative imposes on normative theory a set of restrictions about what is admissible in analytical terms that it cannot accept. The normative tone of FIWS is principally utilitarian, in line with its analytical intent, and whilst utilitarianism of some form or another, principally rule utilitarianism, is not an unknown ethical position in the English School – Bull is the pre-eminent example, but Jackson and James would also fit[24] – it is not a position that the Wightians and Vincentians, with their more deontological tendencies, are able to swallow easily.

Thus the core of this second response to FIWS is to make the English School a better piece of political theory.[25] There has been a great deal of work in this direction in recent years, although not much of it utilitarian in tone, and the English School is the better for it. Some of this work has focused on trying to explore and enrich the account of political theory that is found in classical English School writing, correcting misreadings of canonical figures and exploring the influences of classical English School writers to help us understand why some of the limitations in their normative theory are present. Thus, for example, there has been work done offering a sophisticated critique of the account of Grotius offered in the English School and the uses to which his ideas have been put in developing an overly simple account of the development and expansion of the European society of states.[26] Misreadings of Grotius have also been seen to cause damage to both the representation of his work in modern international theory and the ability of such theory to deploy effectively Grotian insights and arguments.[27] William Bain has started to develop an account of how natural law thinking influenced the English School and how it is that the legacy of natural law has the potential to greatly enrich and strengthen the normative theory of the English School.[28]

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[23] Ibid., p. 167.

[24] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: a study of order in world politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Alan James, 'System or Society', *Review of International Studies*, 19:3 (1993); Robert H. Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[25] Dunne, 'State, System and Society', p. 170.

[26] Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[27] Renée Jeffery, *Hugo Grotius in International Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

[28] William Bain, 'One Order, Two Laws: Recovering the "Normative" in English School Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 33:4 (2007).

Arguably the principal road-block in the path of natural law normative theory in the English School is Hedley Bull, whose moral scepticism has been discussed as a legacy of his education.[29] This scepticism also has damaging impacts on Bull's ability to engage effectively with the longest and richest tradition of normative theorising in International Relations – Just War theory.[30] Bain's aim, it seems, is to ground the English School's normative vision self-consciously in natural law. One can almost detect a faint whirring as Bull spins in his grave, given his trenchant views on natural law, but Bain's is one good example of how a response to Buzan pushes us in the direction of a normative project in the English School that is separable from the social structural analytical project.[31]

Bain's turn is, though, somewhat in line with the secular natural law ideas that typically inform the accounts of human rights that Buzan sees as so important in restricting the concept of world society in English School theory to date. From Vincent to Wheeler and beyond, the notion of natural, universal rights as providing a moral compass for an inevitably solidarist world society that encompasses inter-state, inter-human and transnational domains of activity has been only rarely challenged.[32] Other cosmopolitan possibilities, drawn from elsewhere in political theory, have also reinforced the normative universalism of solidarism, via, for example, Andrew Linklater's deployment of critical theory and cosmopolitan ideas of harm drawn from historical sociology.[33]

This is not the place to revisit the pluralist-solidarist debate, though, or attempt a thorough assessment of the diverse normative agendas of the English School, past and present. These incidences do, hopefully, show how it is that making English School theory better political theory is an on-going, active and fruitful research agenda and offers one response to Buzan – a polite declining of his invitation to mutually profitable engagement on the grounds that the mode of analytical theorising that he proposes is simply too far from the normative mode of analysis to be found in classical English School work for compatibility to be useful.

The dream of a grand social structural theory able to accommodate not just a wealth of historical and contemporary political structures, actors, power distributions, modes of operation and geographical scales, but also rich and philosophically sophisticated normative analysis simply cannot be fulfilled. Normative theorists can take much from FIWS, especially the recurrent questions Buzan asks about the 'how/why' dimension in relation to compliance with values (is this because of coercion, calculation or belief?) and when and how it is normatively

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[29] Renée Jeffery, 'Australian Realism and International Relations: John Anderson and Hedley Bull on Ethics, Religion and Society', *International Politics*, 45:1 (2008).

[30] John Williams, 'Mislaid foundations and lost opportunities: Hedley Bull and Just War theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16:2 2010).

[31] Hedley Bull, 'Recapturing the Just War for Political Theory', *World Politics*, 31:4 (1979); Hedley Bull, 'Natural Law and International Relations', *British Journal of International Studies*, 5:2 (1979).

[32] John Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: humanitarian intervention in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); John Williams, 'Territorial Borders, Toleration and the English School', *Review of International Studies*, 28:4 (2002); John Williams, 'Pluralism, Solidarism and the Emergence of World Society', *International Relations*, 19:1 (2005).

[33] Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998); Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *The English School of International Relations: a contemporary reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 155–88.

defensible to deploy coercion.[34] However, they cannot really hope to bridge this methodological chasm and the questions they ask and the answers they develop are always likely to be different from those Buzan provides.

That leaves the third option – acceptance of the challenge that Buzan lays down and the search for a way in which the social structural analytical dimension can be reconciled with normative theory. This is not to say that the proponents of option two – assuming for a moment that they would accept my taxonomy – do not have a great many good points to make. In particular, the argument here about the different nature of the different types of theory Buzan is calling to be reconciled is a powerful one. Normative theory is probably not capable of the kind of breadth that Buzan's *schema* permits and it cannot be escaped that its purpose is to help us understand what it is that we ought to find morally second-rate and thus unworthy of our further sustained and detailed attention.

Buzan's social structural perspective can tell you as much about an almost asocial interstate system in which hierarchic and exclusive warrior values dominate to permit slavery, genocide and raging discrimination, and where coercion is about the only mode through which these values are shared as it can about a universal, consensual, multi-cultural socialist utopia (Iain Banks's 'The Culture' might provide the appropriate sci-fi reference here).[35] Normative theory is unlikely to be able to do this because, at least in any form I am familiar with, it is about rejecting such abhorrent propositions as genocide, slavery and discrimination and it privileges 'belief' over 'coercion' as a mode of internalisation. However, there are grounds for optimism here, and it is to this third option – accepting the challenge – that we must now turn for the remainder of this article.

### Foundation and empire: bases for analytical – normative interaction.

Resistance is, in this case, futile, although, as we have seen above, assimilation far from guaranteed. The analytical superiority of Buzan's revised English School to its traditional or classical origin is manifest to anyone for whom analytical capacity is a key measure of 'good' theory. An imperial English School project – and a rival to the imperial discourses of (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism is one of Buzan's ambitions – will have to take forward its distinctive and essential commitment to the normative in order to succeed.[36] Buzan's normative agnosticism may well disappoint those for whom the normative element of the English School was always its most interesting and attractive aspect, but he does not close this door.[37] We have already seen the explicit propping open of the door in his appeal for a response and rejoinder, but the door is kept more permanently open by the *social* structural nature of the project and its consequent emphasis on values and the way in which values and institutions in particular interact in forming the dominant character of any particular constellation of international or world society.[38] Buzan

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[34] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 152–4.
[35] Chris Brown, '"Special Circumstances": intervention by a liberal utopia', *Millennium*, 30:3 (2001).
[36] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 1–4.
[37] Dunne, 'State, System and Society', p. 167.
[38] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 172–203.

may draw a distinction between normative theory and theory about norms, but that distinction is useful only up to a point and cannot be seen as a hard line between separate intellectual endeavours. I do not think he sees it as such, either, but is instead proposing a division of intellectual labour.

Buzan's rejection of hard-line materialist structural theory demands that we address values.[39] Indeed, Buzan arguably goes further than most classical English School writers in his endorsement of Alan James's idea that the category of international system is a largely unnecessary one as the probability of any really existing configuration of actors conforming to its asocial structure is so small.[40] That all of the myriad possible constellations Buzan's theory encompasses are predicated upon values, with the issues of the nature, content and basis of sharing of those values being the analytical issues at stake, means that a connection to normative theory is hard-wired into Buzan's theory.

His focus is rightly on the complexity of the interaction of these different values and the kinds of social structures to which they give rise, their geographical scope and the basis of their effect on behaviour. However, the question remains of the normative content of these values, and not just in terms of the extent to which they facilitate the effective operation of a particular international or world society, or sector of that society. This is the utilitarian bias in Buzan's implicit understanding of normative theory which leaves out questions to do with the foundational claims upon which such values rest.[41] Buzan's neglect of these questions is also perfectly reasonable in the context of the project he is pursuing and his determination not to prejudice analytical understanding on the basis of normative disapproval – Colombian drug cartels and *Al-Qaeda* are members of transnational society in the same way that Amnesty International and Save the Children are.[42] However, it is this issue of foundations that poses the most interesting, I think, challenge to the normative perspective. The complexity of the interaction in social, political and economic dynamics, levels and scales that Buzan brings into analytical orbit with one another through his reformulation extends to include normative interaction, too – the neglected dynamic in Buzan's scheme.

Buzan's backing away from the explanatory theory ideal-type – this reformulation is not going to produce the kind of 'theory' that he associates with the US-led social science project in which predictive power is the principal determinant of theoretical quality – in favour of comparative historical analysis has a normative counterpart.[43] The teleological liberal-solidarist project of the Vincentians also gives way to a more comparative and historical normative perspective. Rather than assuming that the decline of institutions like colonialism or dynasticism are progressive moves, as traditional solidarists tend to, they are simply shifts in the institutional constellation. For Buzan, their declining utility in the face of changing values decides which institutions persists and which don't, not normative teleology.[44] Buzan's embracing, analytically, of the kinds of socially undesirable phenomena mentioned above does not result, at least not necessarily, in his

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[39] Ibid., pp. 24–5, 230.
[40] Ibid., pp. 99–107.
[41] Ibid., pp. 253–7.
[42] Ibid., pp. 80–7.
[43] Ibid., pp. 116–7.
[44] Ibid., pp. 179–98.

analytical *schema* being normatively uncommitted. What it does seem to require, though, is that the normative character of these, and a host of other, phenomena, actors and analytical possibilities are recognised. The kind of asocial, violent, discriminatory system that stands at one end of Buzan's spectrum in inter-state society does offer a normative proposition about international society, even if it is one that hardly anybody is likely to find attractive. It is a bad or wrong-headed or misguided normative proposition but it is such a proposition nonetheless and has to be if it is rooted in values. The connection between a value-based social structure and its representing some sort of normative vision of how such a society ought to be run is an inevitable one. Equally, why we regard it as bad, wrong-headed and misguided is not just a factor of its inability to generate the kind of goods that we hope for from an interstate society. Instead it is something foundational about the kind of life, state or version of the good that it envisages.

This is one of the most important elements of the classical pluralist-solidarist debate. Solidarism rejects a Bull or Jackson-styled defence of the normative value of the international society of states because it privileges order over justice, the rights of states over the rights of individuals and entrenches a host of inequitable practices that contribute significantly to human misery. The justification of this tends to rest on a fatalistic assumption that this is the best that we can do in circumstances that might lead to much worse, or an absence of any agreed foundational claims to support universal propositions. This is, for normative theorists, an inadequate claim about the foundations and nature of the good.

Thus Buzan's emphasis on modes of internalisation only gets us so far along the normative path, his distinction between society (rational, utilitarian) and community (organic, identity-based) is arguably more important here than he allows because it suggests that normative resonance is likely to be more associated with community than society.[45] Buzan's subsuming of society/community within the modes of internalisation debate, essentially seeing society as analogous with calculation and community with belief, is fine when normatively agnostic analysis is the order of the day.[46] As he notes, this keeps open the question of the content of society/community and thus normative judgement is unnecessary – they may be nice or nasty, or some mixture of the two, just as they may be held in place by any mixture of coercion, calculation and belief.[47] Normative theorists, though, have to be interested in the content of society and community and ways of assessing their 'nastiness' or 'niceness' and thus this neat analytical move is re-opened to some degree. A classically defended pluralist international society is too 'nasty' to be defensible because its defenders do not offer normatively persuasive accounts of its 'niceness' – either actual or potential.

Buzan's analytical restructuring does not result in a normative response that has to embrace some kind of radical anti-foundationalism or moral scepticism in order to keep up with the huge expansion in analytical potential that Buzan offers. But it does have to remain open-minded about normative issues in a way that Buzan, rightly, argues the established normative positions in the English School have not because of the way in which solidarism has come to dominate the

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[45] Ibid., pp. 108–18.
[46] Ibid., pp. 129–32.
[47] Ibid., pp. 131–2.

progressive cause.[48] The core of a normative response that embraces Buzan's reformulation and aims at offering some sort of synthesis between the analytical and normative positions must be a re-energising of the normative argument in favour of a reformulated pluralism.

The normative foundations that we search for in this regard are not, therefore, of the natural law-type that pursue definitive answers to the questions of the moral agency of human beings and the correct relationship between individuals, communities and authority structures. Normative ambition in response to Buzan's re-working is instead a matter of overlap, synthesis and interplay. There is therefore a contrast to solidarist readings that stress Wight's argument that a degree of solidarist world society is a prerequisite for international society,[49] or that heavily emphasise a few select passages in Bull that hint at solidarist leanings in the face of Bull's more widespread tenor of moral scepticism.[50] Instead, there is no inherent need to close this normative argument down to one that sees natural law/natural rights types of solidarism as the only outcome. The questions that are raised are about devices for establishing inevitably temporary, but not necessarily trivial and transitory, limits on permissible pluralism, in the sense of ethical diversity, rather than in the sense in which Buzan deploys it to identify limited social consensus on values focused on coexistence and linked to thin institution-alisation. Pluralist ethics do not have to be about lowest common denominator *moda vivendi* focused on coexistence as classical pluralists tend to suggest. The diversity of 'source stories' about the moral agency of human beings and their various collectives and structures has the potential to generate powerful universal prohibitions, such as in the universal condemnation of slavery and genocide, without requiring a resolution of those competing source stories.

This overlap is not serendipitous, either, because of the commonality of normative questions that all human societies face – Bull's famous troika of rules on violence, property and contract are one example – and the ways in which certain types of answers are durable and become deeply embedded in practice.[51] Some of these are highly transferable, too, in interaction between societies, individuals and authority structures. Others are exclusive, or gain only limited resonance in other ethical *schemas* or lose their purchase within a particular group, perhaps as a result of interaction with others. These kinds of dynamics play out most clearly in Buzan's scheme in relation to primary institutions and the effects that these have on the overall characterisation of an international or world society at any particular historical point.[52] As Buzan makes us keenly aware, there is no reason why the different sectors of an international or world society *have* to line up: one can have different kinds of dynamics at play in inter-state, inter-human and transnational sectors and the analytical distinctions he develops between those

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[48] Williams, 'Pluralism, Solidarism and the Emergence of World Society', pp. 19–23.

[49] Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), pp. 33–4. Also Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 28, 35–9.

[50] Dunne, 'State, System and Society', p. 167; Hedley Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race: Disarmament and arms control in the missile age (second edition)* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger), pp. 20–1; Bull, 'Recapturing the Just War for Political Theory'; Bull, 'Natural Law and International Relations'; Jeffery, 'Australian Realism'; Williams, 'Mislaid Foundations'.

[51] Bull, *Anarchical Society*, p. 13.

[52] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 161–204.

sectors mean that contradictions of this kind can be accommodated and understood within the workings of such a society in a way in which the Vincentian account of world society finds very difficult. We can understand competing foundational normative claims and the normative debates that they give rise to in the same way, but that, of course, does not help us achieve the normative theorists' ideal of being able to resolve such disputes in favour of one normative *schema* over another.

The argument here is that we should not really be surprised about this – the world is a messy place – and neither should we be unnecessarily concerned about it, either, at least up to a point. Buzan's implicit utilitarian leanings would lead towards an accommodation of this difference via an empirical appeal to whether or not the existing constellation of forces effectively delivers the key goods valued by that society or not. The English School's normative theorists typically want a resolution of the underpinning foundational argument, though, and for the practices of the different sectors to line up as a result. For natural law/natural rights solidarists Buzan is insufficiently demanding, for Buzan, it seems, the normative solidarists are excessively analytically restrictive. The *impasse* that drives the separation strategy threatens to reappear. However, the final section of this article argues this need not be the case.

## Pluralism and institutions in international and world society

The foundational normative claims inherent in the values that underpin the primary institutions of an international or world society are the focus of this section. It is these primary institutions, operating in each of the three sectors of an international or world society as Buzan defines them, that define the overall character of those societies.[53] As we have seen, these normative claims do not necessarily have to be entirely consistent across an international or world society. In fact, it would be pretty surprising, empirically at least, if they were.

In an international society, in which the inter-state domain is of greater significance than either the inter-human or transnational one, then the foundational normative claims inherent in state sovereignty rub up against those of universal human rights in a very familiar way and with, to many, depressingly familiar results in terms of the lack of action against human-rights abuses.[54] The inadequacies of efforts to address environmental challenges, especially where those challenges are conceived of in foundationally normative terms that stress notions such as Gaia or a 'biosphere' that possesses moral standing, offer a parallel instance from the transnational sector.

What we have to remember is that these are 'second order' societies – they are made up of institutions, collectives and other 'artificial' bodies, not 'first order' ones consisting of individual human beings. Thus the normative complexities in understanding international and world societies are different, up to a point, from those involved in first order societies. We can not reason analogously from first

[53] Ibid., pp. 176–204.
[54] See, for example, Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.

order to second order societies analytically,[55] and neither should we normatively, or at least not without very careful argument. We therefore have a degree of detachment from the kinds of normative questions that Buzan reads into the Wightian strand and the Vincentian answer that guides much contemporary solidarism. The idea of the English School as offering a 'second best ethics' for a second best world is not a new one, of course,[56] and it could be that this is one strand of a normative response to Buzan's reworking – second order society ethics. However, that is to miss the point of seeing values as being at the very heart of Buzan's account and the consequent connection to the normative *schemas* that give those values much of their power, coherence and appeal. This has to connect through to first order societies of human beings. The decline of primary institutions such as colonialism and dynasticism stem not just from their ineffectiveness in the face of superior modes of utility maximisation, but in complex ideas to do with how we relate utility to foundational normative claims about first and second order societies. Even if such institutions were to 'work' in the sense of delivering utilitarian benefits we must not engage in these practices because they offend prior moral claims about the value of individuals and their proper relation to social collectives and political authority.

There is no clear blue water between first and second order normative questions but neither is there a simple one-way transmission belt and the particular historical, social, cultural, political and economic circumstances that support different international and world societies have to be understood contextually and with an awareness of their own internal tensions, dynamics and contradictions. One of the English School strengths that Buzan is keen to retain is the ability to enable comparative and historical analysis, and those perspectives need to inform our normative analysis as well. Historical and contextual analysis does not have to produce relativism, though, because of the way that such analysis enables a greater appreciation for the central normative questions and thus the normative requirement to prioritise certain sorts of answers over others. The historical record that the English School draws upon highlights the significance of normative pluralism for exactly the kinds of complex problems, interactions and possibilities that Buzan's social structural analysis is alive to. This is an opportunity worth seizing.

Thus in a way analogous to Buzan's demonstration of the potential for diversity in the values underpinning simultaneously existing primary institutions within contemporary international society, the diversity in the modes of acceptance of those values and diversity at different geographical scales, normative diversity is also present.[57] Resolution of such diversity seems to be empirically highly unlikely and thus normative analysis that focuses on achieving such resolution at the level of first order societies is out of sync with the kind of analytical project that Buzan proposes. Thus one of the key normative questions that Buzan poses – when is it morally justifiable to coercively impose values – cannot be answered solely in relation to first order society principles because there is not a simple normative

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[55] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 117–8.
[56] Brown, 'International Theory and International Society'.
[57] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 49–63.

hierarchy which places human rights at the top of the list and renders all other institutions, practices and ideas completely morally contingent on respect for human rights.[58]

There is not a single, simple, non-contextual answer to the problem of when it is right to kill in order to save lives, nor is there a single, simple answer to the authority structures that should be empowered to take those decisions. The social structures, based in values, that frame our reasoning, judging and decision-making do not line up normatively in ways that resolve dilemmas. Frequently they may do the opposite – deepen or create dilemmas as the conflicting normative foundations on which they rest pull us in opposing directions. The more deep-rooted these are – the more internalisation is through long-held belief – the more irresolvable the dilemmas. This, though, is not a result of a failure to see the 'truth' of one of these normative propositions, but instead a manifestation of the moral contestation that characterises our social response to universal moral questions that produce diverse or plural answers. This may be uncomfortable, and we are frequently aware of the discomfort this lack of alignment produces in political response to crises and disasters. This is often a spur to thinking, arguing and acting in ways that try to make our normative propositions fit together more neatly, but that, too, is a social process that reflects on, engages with and amends the plurality of normative discourses that shape our lives, practices and institutions.

As we saw in option two, deploying the resources of political theory may well be the answer preferred by many for whom the normative dimension of the English School is its distinctive contribution to International Relations theory. Advocates of natural law/natural rights approaches may be particularly likely to reach such conclusions. But there are other ways, of the non-foundational kind roughed out here, to follow through on the potential that this article sees in the value-based analytical account that Buzan develops.

**Normativity in international and world society.**

Buzan's re-working dramatically alters not just the analytical but also potentially the normative perspective of the English School. As a result, a normative response, as we have seen, needs to be more open to the kind of comparative and historical analysis that Buzan aims to deliver whilst nevertheless giving us the kind of 'deep' answers to ethical questions that enable us to advocate for a more just world.

The key problematic category that has emerged from this article is 'pluralism'. It is possible to argue that a pluralist account of world society (in the traditional English School meaning) is neither implausible, nor necessarily morally inferior to a solidarist one.[59] Buzan makes the point that pluralist (in the sense of coexistence focused, institutionally thin) inter-human and transnational sectors of international or world societies (in his sense of international society as unequally balanced between a dominant inter-state and weaker inter-human and transnational sectors,

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[58] Ibid., pp. 105–6.
[59] Williams, 'Pluralism, Solidarism and the Emergence of World Society'.

with an even balance characterising world society) are empirically more likely than solidarist ones, and that solidarism is more likely to be a feature of the inter-state domain because of the greatly reduced number of actors involved and their inherent agreement on certain things because of the need for mutual recognition of their authoritative status.[60] He allows for the development of the inter-state sector to extend all the way up to the point at which states create some kind of over-arching authority and we leave an anarchically structured political system behind us. A Kantian confederation remains an inter-state society, and thus one of the key normative ambitions for traditional solidarism is encompassed within this arena.[61]

The inter-human sector is, though, perhaps the most challenging to normative theory because it is the home to the first-order society of human beings that has traditionally been portrayed in English School theory as characterising the heart of world society.[62] A global, or even regional, inter-human sector that was normatively solidarist would mark a major achievement and Buzan is keen to acknowledge the potential for such development through his emphasis on the significance of the EU as a potential regional world society.[63] However, despite the development of human rights as an institution, the mode of acceptance of this normative proposition is highly variable. Limited degrees of internalisation combine with calculation and coercion to explain some actors' adherence to the discourse of human rights. In other places the basis upon which rights rests is hotly contested or even rejected. There are also competing normative propositions stemming from primary institutions such as sovereignty, nationalism and the market that conflict with human rights but relate to some serious and deeply held normative ideas, as well, of course, to some held for shallow, instrumental reasons. The working out of these competing normative pressures in arenas such as humanitarian intervention is a very familiar English School theme.[64]

It is, of course, normatively tempting to attempt to bring these things into line, and to argue that we can create an account of sovereignty, for example, that is contingent on human rights and the creation of certain forms of civic space and interaction that are authoritatively governed in accordance with the global protection and promotion of such arrangements. The arguments made by Jean Bethke Elshtain in defence of US leadership and a War on Terror offer one particularly strong version of this,[65] as does Fernando Téson's development of the logic he sees underpinning humanitarian intervention to cover the forcible removal of tyrannical regimes.[66] The normative privileging of certain types of states and the creation of institutionalised and hierarchical governance mechanisms to address issues such as preventive war and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction can also be read in this light.[67] Global inter-human solidarism via natural rights

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[60] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 58–9.
[61] Ibid., p. 160.
[62] Vincent, *Human Rights*.
[63] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, p. 203.
[64] See, for example, Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.
[65] Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: the Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).
[66] Fernando Téson, 'Ending Tyranny in Iraq', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 19:2 (2005).
[67] Allen Buchanan and Robert O. Keohane, 'The Preventive Use of Force: a Cosmopolitan Institutional Perspective', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 18:1 (2004); Lee Feinstein and Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'A Duty to Prevent', *Foreign Affairs*, 83:1 (2004).

creates the first-order society of humankind that offers foundations for building and judging inter-state and transnational institutions.

However, Buzan's approach lacks this kind of normative certainty and this article has found this openness to be attractive. I share Buzan's concern with the idea and practice of coercion as appropriate to the promotion of a normative project, although that is not to say that coercion does not have its place. That, however, is a different kind of question to the normative one that this article has attempted to raise: given the historical predominance of a plurality of normative projects embedded in patterns of values that underpin social norms constitutive of international and world societies, is there anything about the plurality of values that characterise international society – whether past, present, future or even hypothetical – that is normatively desirable given the poverty of the classical pluralist answer?

Inter-state and transnational societies can appeal to a familiar liberal argument about the need for a diversity of institutional solutions to the problems involved in operationalising liberal values in defence of pluralism. This is that there is no 'one size fits all' answer to the challenge of liberty and different circumstances, including material circumstances, may well affect the ways in which second-order societies work these things out. Having a variety of workings out helps us learn from others' mistakes. The inter-human sector is more difficult to address because it is here that the case for normative solidarism is most frequently based and the costs of these workings out in terms of human misery are most keenly felt – recall our rejection of the Mongol Horde and the Borg.

Buzan's social structural analysis reiterates the need for pluralism to make a positive normative argument for such ethical diversity at a first-order level and to move away from the kind of pessimism that Buzan ascribes to the established pluralist case in English School theory.[68] This is not just on the basis that he offers – pluralists' excessively gloomy reading of the historical record over the last century and a half or so – but also their giving away to normative solidarists the normative superiority of an ethical universalism as the ideal situation, if one that is sadly unattainable, at least at any reasonable cost, in any sort of foreseeable future.

A defence of first-order pluralism is relatively rare in English School theory, although it has been made on occasion, for example in relation to the virtue of toleration.[69] These arguments develop an account of pluralism as being the defining feature of human life and possibly the universal feature that we all share as humans – that we are different. This is indebted to political theory, as so many normative approaches are, although in this case the political theory of Hannah Arendt, rather than the familiar English School canon of Grotius, Locke or Kant from where much solidarism draws its inspiration.[70]

This argument has also been extended to show institutional effects in international and world society, via linking toleration to one of the primary institutions of international society, territoriality, in the form of territorial

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[68] Buzan, *From International to World Society?*, pp. 212–17.
[69] Williams, 'Territorial Borders, Toleration and the English School'.
[70] Williams, *The Ethics of Territorial Borders*, pp. 82–115. Also John Williams, 'Hannah Arendt and the International Space In-Between?', in Anthony F. Lang, Jr. and John Williams (eds), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations: Readings across the lines* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

borders.[71] The idea of territorial borders as possessing an ethical value that is not automatically derivative from their role in establishing the geographical limits of sovereign authority or via their contribution to the maintenance of inter-state order, instead seeing them as important aspects of community-based accounts of the nature of the good life for humans, has a number of merits. The quality of the argument is not especially important to the argument being made here, however, where instead it is the plausibility of such arguments as a basis from which pluralism can be developed in accordance with Buzan's analytical *schema* that is important. The pluralist value *par excellence* becomes toleration, although cast in a distinctive way, and our ability to make normative judgements rests upon the limits of toleration defined in terms of reciprocity.

This normative account also, as with traditional solidarism, inevitably privileges the normative significance of the inter-human sector of Buzan's scheme and thus it is to developments in the inter-human realm that it is most carefully attuned. This, I think, is unavoidable because of the way that first-order society questions are at the heart of normative theorising. It does not, though, produce an account that leads straightforwardly to the moral contingency of inter-state and trans-national domains, or the privileging of the global over the regional as tends to occur with rights-based solidarism.

As already argued, pluralism of this stripe does not see answers about the 'correct' relationship between these sectors, actors within them or the values that underpin their characteristic institutional arrangements as being derived *a priori* and in the abstract. Normative analysis is as historical and comparative as the kind of social structural analysis that Buzan gives us, but that does not mean that it is without direction. A more tolerant world is a better world, and whilst traditional solidarism identifies the seat of normative progress in the inter-human domain, this kind of pluralism does not have to be so prescriptive. Toleration as a virtue may best be developed in the inter-human realm, and its absence there would likely result in a normative dynamic that was greatly weakened, but toleration is also a function of the operation of the inter-state and transnational sectors, too, and there is an interdependence amongst these sectors and the different regional scales in which they are manifested to varying degrees that enables toleration as a virtue to be developed in a contextualised way and also in a way that enables us to recognise the normative necessity of coercion in the face of radical intolerance.

**Conclusion**

This article has made strong claims for the significance of *From International to World Society?* in the future development of English School theory. It has also attempted to respond positively to the invitation that Buzan sets out for an integrated analytical-normative theory, rather than a steady separation of the two. Normative analysis is a key feature of English School theory, not just in terms of distinguishing it from other types of IR theory like realism and liberalism, but

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[71] John Williams, *Ethics and Territorial Borders: drawing lines in the shifting sands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

because of the way that it embraces the necessity, indeed inescapability, of normative theorising in order to understand the human world. It is not a bolt-on extra.

For this reason, then, this article argues that a positive response to Buzan's invitation is the only appropriate course of action. His approach is inherently open to normative investigation because of its focus upon values, with the interaction between values and institutions, especially primary institutions, a key normative question. Additionally, Buzan's emphasis upon comparative and historical analysis, and his opening up of the sub-global level, also fits with normative investigation and analysis and has the potential to revive pluralist normative theorising in particular.

For the sake of clarity, this article has aimed to contrast such an embracing of Buzan's reformulation with an alternative option that sees the English School as a branch of political theory. This is partly because Buzan himself draws this distinction, but it is worth stressing that this distinction is perhaps one of degree rather than of kind, analytically useful in distinguishing the principle thrusts of the normative responses considered here, but in no real sense is this a yawning divide. The tools of the kind of political theory considered in option two, especially where this is indebted to comparative political theory and the history of political thought, are obviously useful to a normative project that sees historical and comparative analysis as key to its success. Equally, the kinds of non-foundational approach to ethics that we might associate with critical theory or pragmatism ought also to be at home in such a conversation.[72] The existence of an alternative approach to normative theory is also a healthy sign, as well, and, as this article acknowledges, the development of the English School as political theory may well be a more attractive option for many interested in its normative dynamic.

Nevertheless, the main message of this article has been that Buzan's radical re-write does not marginalise, downgrade or separate out normative theory. A complementary and questioning relationship is, in fact, built-in to his theory, even if he does not see it clearly within the pages of *From International to World Society?*

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[72] Linklater, *Transformation of Political Community*; Molly Cochran, *Normative Theory in International Relations: a pragmatic approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).