

International society is to international system as world society is to...? Systemic and societal processes in English school theory*

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Abstract

This article argues that the distinction between international system and international society within English School International Relations theory, originally put forward by Bull and Watson, should not be abandoned. The distinction is shown to correspond to complementary etic and emic approaches to the study of social reality. The former approach is most appropriate for studying the unintended emergence of patterns of social organisation, the latter approach for the study of intersubjective negotiations over shared rules and norms within a bounded social context. Elaborating, rather than eliminating, the notion of international system suggests the adoption of the concept of ‘world system’ to complement the English School’s concept of world society. Drawing on the neo-Weberian sociology of Mann and Tilly, the article suggests that the concept of world system is not only theoretically coherent but also congruent with conceptualisations of large-scale change offered by contemporary world historians and historical sociologists.

Keywords: international society; international system; etic; emic; English School; historical sociology

* A draft of this article was presented at the 2013 annual meeting of the British International Studies Association in Edinburgh. Earlier versions of the article were improved by constructive feedback offered by Ronnie Hjorth, three anonymous reviewers and the editors of the Journal of International Relations and Development.

Introduction

The English School perspective in International Relations argues that, beyond the nation-state, there exists a ‘second-order society’ composed of distinct political communities, which are nonetheless bound together by interests, norms and identities. At the core of the English School perspective, there is a three-fold distinction between international system, international society and world society. Although sometimes regarded as representing distinct *types* of international order, scholars have moved towards seeing these categories as referring to different *aspects* of the same international order. Nonetheless, central contributors to this perspective have come to express their misgivings about this typology. Buzan, for example, has described world society as the ‘Cinderella’ concept of the English School and argued that the unsatisfactory nature of the concept is a crucial flaw within this tradition of scholarship (Buzan 2004: 10–11). Simultaneously, Buzan has sought to demote the concept of international system, by which he refers to the purely mechanical or material aspects of international relations, in favour of a more a more comprehensive notion of international society, understood in constructivist terms as encompassing the social and intersubjective aspects of second-order societies. Buzan’s recasting of the concept of international society in a social constructivist mould is not only an important development within the English School scholarship; it is also indicative of more general scepticism that has arisen within International Relations theory towards the acknowledgement of systemic processes as distinct from processes of intersubjective negotiation and agreement.

Contra Buzan and the ideational constructivist approach he draws upon, this article adopts an ‘organisational-materialist’ perspective in order to argue that abandoning the distinction between system and society would be a wrong turn for the English School. Examining the concept of the international system as originally articulated by Bull and Watson, this article argues that system and society may be employed usefully to refer to those aspects of international relations revealed by etic and emic perspectives respectively. This distinction, employed in anthropology and other social sciences, demarcates research strategies employing external concepts for the analysis of a social

setting and those that seek to elucidate the intersubjective understanding of participants. The concept of international system should be retained because it may be used to identify those features of the international order which fall outside the conscious awareness of participants and arise as unintended, emergent outcomes of social interactions.

A clarified concept of international system, in turn, enables us to bring consistency to the English School's typology by introducing the parallel concept of world system. To elaborate such a concept, the article develops an organisational-materialist account of the character of systems and societies by drawing on the neo-Weberian approach of historical sociologists such as Tilly and Mann. These scholars have argued that societies should not be thought of as bounded social wholes, but rather as assemblages embedded within wider networks of social interaction. World system, or 'human web', is introduced as a label, or shorthand, for the overall network of interactions linking individual persons. International relations, the article suggests, can be understood as a specific kind of social interaction that takes place within the overall world system. Scholars of world history and 'big history' have increasingly employed similar conceptual schemes in their efforts to make sense of the large-scale patterns of interaction that have resulted in institutional structures of the contemporary world. Thus, not only would the introduction of such a concept increase the symmetry, coherence and clarity of the English School perspective; it would also allow for further intellectual cross-pollination with world history and historical sociology. Furthermore, the article suggests that the concept of world system could contribute to making sense of the 'Cinderella' concept of world society. Rather than an 'analytical dustbin' (Buzan 2004: 28), world society can be thought of as arising where the common awareness of human interconnectedness through the world system results in a shared commitment to an agreed set of intersubjective norms binding on individuals.

The distinction between alternative etic and emic perspectives, developed in the course of this article, is of relevance not only to the debates internal to the English School. By demonstrating that intersubjective agreements between actors and shared frameworks of meaning do not exhaust social

reality, this article offers reasons to be hesitant about the adoption of ideational social constructivism as a general-purpose social ontology for International Relations theory. As an alternative, it illustrates how the framework of organisational materialism, developed by the neo-Weberian historical sociologists, can help explain the historical emergence of both large-scale systemic processes, best examined with etic methods, and bounded norm-governed spheres of interaction, best examined by means of emic methods. By refusing to restrict itself to a purely emic approach, such a pluralistic perspective is better positioned to draw upon the rich scholarship in the field of world history to make sense of the processes that constitute ‘second-order societies’ and the emerging world polity.

The English School and the distinction between system and society: Is the concept of international system redundant?

The classic texts of the English School set out a tripartite distinction between international systems, international societies and world societies. Of these ideal types, it is the notion of international society – a society of states governed by its own distinct set of norms – that has had the most appeal for subsequent scholars within this tradition and beyond. The concept of international society and the historical analysis of the evolution of its constitutive norms seem to be the most important contribution of the English School to scholarly debates in International Relations.

[Table 1 here]

In contrast to the success of the idea of international society, the concept of world society has proved to be problematic – as discussed below. But it is the concept of international system – a concept employed outside the English School, most notably by Waltzian neo-realists – that has turned out to be the black sheep of this conceptual family. A more minimal concept than that of international society, international system was said to exist whenever ‘two or more states have

sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave [...] as parts of a whole' (Bull 1977/2002: 9). This definition is consistent with the concept of international system employed by neo-realist and neo-liberal theorists, who attempt to provide an account of the structure of international system in the language of microeconomic theory. This concept of international system would, in turn, come under attack from the scholars leading the backlash against the putatively scientific accounts offered by Keohane and Waltz. Their structural accounts of the international system have been criticised by scholars such as Ashley and Cox (Ashley 1984; Cox 1981) for being rigid, mechanical and even, due to their denial of human agency, incipiently totalitarian.

These criticisms, which draw heavily upon the pre-existing criticisms of Althusserian structural Marxism and Parsonian structural-functionalist sociology, form the basis of a new wave of 'post-positivist' or heterodox scholarship, which places human agency, rather than the structural logic of international system, at the centre of their accounts. These critical approaches are humanistic in the sense that they insist that international relations are the creation of conscious human beings: it is a 'world of our making' (Onuf 1989) and therefore ours to remake if we so wish. Such a perspective is elaborated – in a highly sophisticated, although notably less 'critical' fashion – by Wendt in his *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999). Wendt attempts to substitute Waltz's account of the invariant structural logic of international system for an account of the various ways in which international relations can be constructed under various 'cultures of anarchy'. In developing this account, Wendt draws on Bull's notion of international society, but makes a stronger claim that international society is not just governed but *constituted* by its norms, rules and intersubjectively shared beliefs.

In turn, constructivism is embraced by those working within the tradition of the English School as an appropriate theoretical foundation for research into the historical development of international society and its constituent norms (Hurrell 2007; Reus-Smit 1999). However, the result of this conceptual engagement between constructivism and the English School has been the

decreasing concern of the latter with the concept of international system. Indeed, Jackson (2000) argues that the English School's attraction lies in the superiority of the concept of international society over that of international system – as the notion of international system displaces focus from human interactions that comprise international relations. He insists that there is 'no "system" or "structure" of states *as such*' (Jackson 2000: 33); there is no independently existing political reality beyond the intentions and beliefs and goals of human agents involved in international politics. Thus, Jackson advocates a humanistic approach in the vein of 'classical' International Relations scholarship, which would restore human values and agency to the centre of analysis.

Perhaps the most significant effort to rethink the tripartite schema of international system, international society and world society has been that of Buzan, who has argued that the English School International Relations theory has the potential to offer a coherent general framework for the investigation of international relations (Buzan 2001: 480). Framed as an attempt to bring Wendtian levels of rigour and sophistication to the English School theorising, Buzan's work *From International to World Society?* (2004) constitutes a major contribution to the analysis of the institutional structure and organising principles of what he calls 'second-order society' (2004: xviii), that is, societies that are themselves composed of distinct societies. Buzan makes several important contributions to the coherence of the English School perspective, not least in disentangling the analytic categories of international system, international society and world society from the traditions of normative political thought dubbed Hobbesianism, Groatianism and Kantianism (Buzan 2004: 7).

[Table 2 here]

In developing his analysis of the relationship between these three conceptual pillars of the English School scholarship, Buzan identifies the concept of international system with Waltz's neo-realist account of state behaviour under anarchy. According to Buzan, to speak of international

system is to provide a structural, materialist account of international relations based on a statist ontology and a positivist epistemology (Buzan 2004: 7).

Indeed, it seems that, for Buzan, an account of international system is necessarily a neo-realist account of conflict under anarchy. Having identified the concept of international system with the Waltzian perspective, Buzan accepts the criticisms of such a perspective made by Wendt. Crucially, he accepts Wendt's interpretation of neo-realism as a purely physical or material account of the operation of international relations.¹ Thus, in contrast to international society, which is associated with 'social' interaction, international system is associated with purely physical or mechanical interactions between states. Having made such a distinction, Buzan notes rightly that 'physical interaction without social content is, if not quite impossible, at least rather rare and marginal in human affairs' (Buzan 2004: 99). Almost all interactions between human actors are governed by some social rules and involve some form of social negotiation of roles; indeed, we have to look towards science-fiction for examples of truly asocial interaction between social groups (Buzan 2004: 100). Wendt's constructivism is, therefore, adopted by Buzan as a suitable social ontology for a general framework for the investigation of international relations.

As a result, Buzan makes the suggestion that we should dissolve the distinction between international systems and international societies in favour of an analysis of the spectrum of different kinds of international society (Buzan 2004: 101). Once again, Buzan follows Wendt, relegating 'rump material' factors to a subsidiary role in favour of delineating various possible 'cultures of anarchy', within which states might negotiate the relationships with one another in markedly different ways (Buzan 2004: 101; Wendt 1999: 246). In this interpretation, the neo-realist account of a conflict-ridden international system is just one of many forms of international society under which relations amongst states have been constructed in a particular way. Buzan retains the notion of international system only as a residual or limit (Buzan 2004: 109). His account is by no means idiosyncratic in advancing this line of argument; other commentators have argued that 'all but the

most elementary forms of interaction would require rules so that there really is no clear demarcation between Bull's "system" and "society" (Suganami and Linklater 2006: 53).

Buzan himself acknowledges that this line of argument entails the effective abandonment of one of the three pillars of the English School framework (Buzan 2004: 107). But whilst Buzan makes a compelling argument against seeing international system and international society as opposed and mutually exclusive ways of organising interstate relations, issue can be taken with the overly hasty abandonment of the idea of international system in favour of an expanded concept of international society.

Emic and etic perspectives on interstate relations: Constructivism as cultural anthropology of the international sphere

A case can be made in defence of a conceptualisation of international system as a distinct aspect of the same international reality as international society. Indeed, this seems to have been the original intention of Bull and Watson in introducing the conceptual distinction. The same international order may have systemic and societal aspects. However, Bull is not fully consistent on this point and, at certain points in *The Anarchical Society*, he seems to imply that international systems and international societies are mutually exclusive (Bull 1977/2002: 13). Nevertheless, Bull's definition of international system is quite cogent and, significantly, makes no claim that international systems should be considered only as physical systems. As noted above, Bull sees international system as existing where two or more states impact one another's behaviour. As he notes, these interactions might occur via their effect on third parties or 'through the chain of links among states in which both participate' (Bull 1977/2002: 10). Nothing suggests that these interactions need to be purely physical or asocial.

If we contrast Bull's definition of international system with his definition of international society, the distinction Bull is trying to draw becomes clear. International society exists 'when a group of states, conscious of certain *common* interests and *common* values, form a society in the

sense that they conceive themselves as bound by a *common* set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of *common* institutions’ (Bull 1977/2002: 13, emphasis added). The concept of international society, as Bull uses it, does not refer to any or all social interactions between states, but only to those interactions in which states conceive of themselves as mutual participants in a common set of social practices and rules. This requires not just the social negotiation of roles, but also a degree of public agreement on these roles. This category of *societal* interaction is distinct from those uncoordinated patterns of interaction that Bull categorises as comprising international system. While international society refers to the intersubjectively agreed (or, indeed, contested) aspects of international politics, the concept of international system allows us to highlight the way in which social interactions have consequences ‘outside the will of the community concerned’ (Watson 1992: 311). Such processes are not ‘mechanical’ (ibid.) in that they are literally asocial and physical, but in that they are a consequence, but not the intended outcome, of social interaction amongst actors. Systemic processes may occur even in an international society dense with rules and shared normative commitments.

As Little notes, Bull and Watson employ the distinction to help make sense of a ‘complex international reality’ (Little 2000: 405) and Watson regards it as being of central importance to this goal (Watson 1992: 4). Because the English School is able to distinguish between systemic and societal processes in international relations, it possesses potentially greater analytical leverage. The distinction between systemic and societal aspects of a given international order might, therefore, be used to shed light on the different kinds of processes at work simultaneously in international relations. Analysing such processes within an international system does not require us to suppose that the international order is entirely asocial or anomic. Rather, as Little suggests, it allows us to engage in a comparative and/or counterfactual analysis of what the international order might be like if certain societal norms were absent or different (Little 2000: 405).

Little has suggested previously that researchers within the English School adopt different methodologies for studying systemic and societal factors in international relations, proposing a

positivist methodology to study the former and a hermeneutic methodology to study the latter (Little 2000: 408). However, the term 'positivist' is a loaded and ill-defined term in debates within International Relations theory, and it is prone to frequent misuse (Jackson 2011: 3–10). Thus, the distinction between hermeneutic and positivist research methodologies does not seem very helpful for thinking about how to investigate systemic and societal aspects of the international order. Instead, borrowing from linguistics and anthropology, referring to *etic* and *emic* research strategies may be more appropriate. These terms are used, not to demarcate physical and social factors, but to acknowledge that social phenomena can be understood from two basic points of view: 'from the perspective of the participants themselves, and from the perspective of the observers' (Harris 1980: 31). In *etic* research, researchers account for a social phenomenon using categories and concepts external to the actors involved in that phenomenon. In contrast, in *emic* research, the goal is to translate faithfully the self-understanding of the participants within a social practice. The test for such an account is whether or not it would be recognised as 'real, meaningful, or appropriate' by the participants themselves (Harris 1980: 32).

For advocates of an exclusively *emic* approach to social-scientific research, *etic* categories applied externally by observers are, at best, a mere a stepping stone towards an *emic* account of a social phenomenon. Such a faithful insider's account is exhaustive of what can be said about a particular phenomenon. In the philosophy of social science, this position has been associated with the Wittgensteinian perspective advanced by Winch (1958). The Cambridge School of political theory, with its focus on the historical context of political texts, constitutes an influential contemporary research programme in this vein (Skinner 2002). Within International Relations, Hutchings (1999) and Frost (1996) both take the position that the primary goal of International Relations scholarship should be to achieve an insider's perspective on the many norm-governed interactions that constitute international relations. Within the English School itself, Jackson can be understood as attempting to illuminate the 'normative dialogue of international society' (Jackson 2000: 1), drawing out and clarifying the values and prudential norms that animate the actual

practice of international relations. For Hurrell, a central goal of the English School is to clarify how intersubjective beliefs ‘have been gathered into intelligible patterns, traditions, or ideologies’ (Hurrell 2007: 17) in the historical development of international society.

Wendt, too, allies himself with this vein of research when he calls for International Relations scholars to be more like cultural anthropologists (Wendt 1999: 190). This prescription is motivated by the constructivist insistence that International Relations, as we know it, is constituted by a set of *shared* beliefs (Wendt 1999: 158). The fact that ‘the vast majority of states today see themselves as part of a “society of states”’ (Wendt 1999: 242) makes it possible for Wendt to make a plausible case for an investigation into the intersubjectively shared beliefs, rules and practices that govern that society. As two major commentators on the English School note, “‘international society’ is not a concept external to the practice of states’ (Suganami and Linklater 2006: 53). As Bull’s original definition of international society makes clear, it is the fact that states hold certain common values and submit to certain common rules that makes it meaningful to speak of international society. Thus, the concept of international society can be considered valid by the standards of emic research methodology because it is a concept recognised and acknowledged by those who participate in the social practices of international relations. Correspondingly, an emic research strategy is appropriate for studying international relations precisely because, within international relations, there exists a set of practices constituted by a set of public rules to which states and other actors give their shared endorsement.

The account of the emic aspect of the English School research given above does bear similarities with Little’s description of a hermeneutic approach to the study of international society (Little 2000: 408). Nevertheless, the distinction between etic and emic is not identical to the well-known distinction drawn by Hollis and Smith between the goal of explaining and the goal of understanding international relations. Hollis and Smith insist that, in social sciences, there are two quite distinct stories to tell about a given social phenomena (Hollis and Smith 1991: 214): a story that attempts to provide causal explanation and a story that employs hermeneutic methods to

achieve interpretative understanding. In contrast, both etic and emic research methodologies may be utilised to provide either causal explanations or non-causal interpretations of phenomena. What distinguishes these approaches is not concern with causation, but rather whether or not external concepts are applied to the social phenomenon in question. For example, psychoanalytical approaches may be categorised as hermeneutic/interpretive in their attempts to interpret the meaning of dreams, myths and cultural phenomena. In doing so, psychoanalytic theorists apply a set of external, universal categories to their subject matter. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, which aims to identify the universal structural relationships underlying cultural phenomena, is an etic hermeneutic enterprise (Lévi-Strauss 1993).

Clearly, then, etic research methodology does not correspond readily to what Little calls positivism (Little 2000: 404). Etic research methodology is defined by the use of concepts external to the social phenomena being analysed, not by a commitment to a general account of how to evaluate rival knowledge claims. Quite distinct epistemological positions, such as the positions that Jackson terms critical realism and analyticism (Jackson 2010: 37), are compatible with either etic or emic approaches. What unites etic research programmes are their attempts to conduct a comparative analysis of social phenomena across time and space, working towards the development of frameworks of analysis employing a set of common analytical categories. Adopting such an approach enables scholars to move beyond the subjective and intersubjective world views of participants in a practice to search for patterns, regularities and structural relationships that may be outside the individual and/or collective awareness of participants.² Therefore, etic research produces accounts of social phenomena that participants might not recognise or might even disagree with. Such an approach specialises in uncovering systemic relationships that participants may be unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge (Harris 1980: 33). Indeed, a great deal of avowedly anti-positivist critical social-scientific research – the stated goal of which is to demystify and unveil the gap between representation and reality – might be categorised accurately as substantially etic in character.³

Emic research may likewise aim at interpretive understanding or it may seek to provide causal explanations of social phenomena. Proponents of emic explanation maintain that a grasp of the rules guiding participants in a certain practice not only grants us understanding of that practice, as held by some interpretivists such as Winch, but allows us to explain the actions of individual agents and account for the causal properties of social entities and structures. This is the position taken by Wendt, who rejects the notion that social science must be limited to the goal of interpretive understanding (Wendt 1999: 47–49).⁴ In Wendt's account, states are agents whose actions are explicable in terms of a set of rules that constitute international relations.⁵ Their actions and interactions with one another give rise to a set of intersubjective beliefs that constitute a 'culture of anarchy' (Wendt 1999: 246). The character of a culture of anarchy and its causal power to influence state action are determined by the specifics of the intersubjectively shared action-guiding norms that constitute it. Just as an investigation into the structure of DNA can help us explain cellular biochemistry, an investigation into the beliefs and norms comprising a culture of anarchy helps us explain the operation of international relations (Wendt 1999: 373–74). Wendt's research programme is an emic attempt to elucidate the intersubjectively shared action-guiding beliefs native to a given international order in order to explain the characteristic features of that order.

This is a perfectly legitimate strategy for International Relations research and highly appropriate for the study of societal processes within the international order. Constructivist and English School scholarship has demonstrated that aspects of the international order can be analysed in terms of sets of constitutive norms. But we need not adopt an exclusively emic approach; etic and emic explanatory strategies may both be employed in a productive division of labour to make sense of different aspects of social reality. An etic approach may be particularly useful for the purposes of examining systemic processes within the international order.⁶

From international society back to international system: Organisational materialism and the unintended emergence of large-scale social structures

It should be clear that the notion of international system does not imply an asocial theory of international relations in which actors only interact by physically crashing into one another. Rather, it rests on the plausible assumption that social interactions between actors have consequences that frequently escape the subjective awareness of those actors themselves. Clarifying the intersubjective self-understandings of participants in a social practice will not shed much light on such processes. Even if actors become collectively aware of the systemic processes that arise from their actions it does not necessarily follow that those processes will come under their control, as the precise mechanisms that result in systemic outcomes, such as the rate of inflation, may remain opaque to the actors involved. An exclusively emic approach, therefore, is plausible only if one believes that the intersubjective understanding of participants provides an exhaustive account of every social practice. An etic approach employing external conceptual categories is better placed to make sense of such systemic processes by drawing on a toolbox of mechanisms developed through comparative research (Elster 2007).

The temptation to underplay the role of systemic factors might be attributed to the eagerness of Wendt and other ideational constructivists to identify shared ideas and beliefs as constitutive of the social world. Scholars from a rival sociological tradition, neo-Weberianism or 'organisational materialism', have long taken issue with the tendency to explain all social phenomena in terms of conscious beliefs in the minds of individual subjects. According to Tilly, social relationships are indeed negotiated amongst actors, as constructivists insist (Tilly 2001: 360). But these ongoing transactions between individuals concatenate into networks and 'crystallise' into durable patterns that individual actors may have little awareness of and little capacity to transform (Tilly 1984: 33). The result is what has been referred to as 'spontaneous order', emerging unintended from innumerable social interactions as individuals follow their feet in response to impersonal pressures and inducements. This gives rise to regular patterns of interaction amongst individual actors, and 'when we discover that some of these interactions recur in approximately the same form, we can reasonably begin to speak of social structure' (Tilly 1984: 27). As Denmark notes, however, the

linkage between agent-level and system-level processes is problematic (Denemark 1999: 68). Macro-level structures do not dominate micro-level interactions; in contrast to micro-determinists such as rational-choice theorists, Tilly presents actors as improvisers rather than 'structural dupes', whilst macro-level patterns are difficult to trace back to their micro-foundations.⁷ The process of translation between these two levels requires careful study employing the methods of historical sociology.

One claim of neo-Weberian historical sociology is that consciously held beliefs are not necessarily central to maintaining the structures that organise social life. For Mann, ideas in the form of conscious beliefs are only one of four sources of social power and they only have a decisive influence intermittently, as they are usually intertwined with other, more quotidian forms of social organisation (Mann 1986: 526). Tilly finds that ideational flux accompanied structural continuity of organised patterns of inequality in the historical episodes that he studies (Tilly 1998: 121, 2001: 367). Neo-Weberian scholarship draws a distinction between diffuse, semantically rich belief systems and the organisational structures that emerge from innumerable social transactions. The concatenation of individual social interactions into social structures is substantively different from the public, collective process of negotiation over the validity of intersubjectively acknowledged norms and values. Wendtian constructivism elides this distinction and, in doing so, leaves little room for systemic factors. Instead, it puts overwhelming emphasis on agency and on cultural structure in the form of intersubjectively shared beliefs.

Influenced by Wendt's exclusive focus on ideational factors, Buzan distinguishes between thicker international societies, maintained through intersubjective agreement on a set of norms, and thinner international societies, maintained through individual calculation (Buzan 2004: 132–33). In either case, this implies that everything we need to know about the social world is located within the minds of individuals, whether in the form of conscious commitment to a set of norms and/or the beliefs of self-regarding individual agents. This would imply that social phenomena in international relations are wholly transparent to an emic approach, that there are actions that do not have

unintended chains of consequences beyond the awareness of their authors. In such an account, the role of structure and the consequences of the fact that individuals ‘don’t know what they do does’ (Foucault quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 187) drop out of the picture.

This is indicative of the perspective that Tilly (2008: 6–7) calls holism, which focuses on the properties of bounded social wholes. This perspective, associated with Durkheim, has influenced a number of key theorists of International Relations. Waltz draws on Durkheim’s concepts to argue that the structure of anarchical international system, understood as an enclosed social system, produces uniformity amongst units (Waltz 1979: 104–105, 196–97). With Albert, Buzan has explored Durkheim’s concept of functional differentiation within a bounded social system as it might apply to international relations (Buzan and Albert 2010). Wendt focuses on two levels of analysis defined in terms of bounded wholes in his theory: states, which possess corporate personhood, and international society, constituted by a specific ‘culture of anarchy’. Drawing on Durkheim explicitly, Wendt argues that international society forms a cultural/ideational structure comprising the ‘collective knowledge’ of a set of states (Wendt 1999: 159). This cultural structure is reproduced and/or altered by the agency of states-as-persons (Wendt 1993, 2004).

However, as Tilly argues, this form of cultural holism results in an account that attempts to explain all social phenomena in terms of mental events (Tilly 1984: 25). Such an approach tends to make the dubious step of furnishing supposed wholes, such as states and international societies, with a collective mentality that arises from the individual mental states of their constituent members.⁸ From a neo-Weberian perspective, such a holist approach overly simplifies the process of translation between micro and macro levels. Moreover, it attributes too great a degree of coherence to social ‘units’, such as the state, none of which have ever attained true unity (Sassen 2007: 398). Networks of social relationships are rarely contained by boundaries; they are messy and overlapping. As Hollis and Smith note, what this article has termed an emic approach is most appropriate for self-contained social settings in which action can be understood – and explained – in terms of a set of constitutive rules (Hollis and Smith 1990: 180–81). But social phenomena of any

significant scale cannot be understood as singular, uniform social settings – so much as a series of social settings connected by chains of social interaction. On the basis of a similar set of considerations, DeLanda argues that we should conceive of the social world in terms of assemblages, sets of overlapping social settings, within which actors and institutions are linked contingently to one another. According to DeLanda, the specific way in which components are linked to one another, the ‘relations of exteriority’, is as important for the properties and dynamic of an assemblage as the character of the individual components (DeLanda 2006: 10–11).

This organisational-materialist or ‘relational realist’ social ontology may seem somewhat remote from the traditional English School conception of international society and international system. However, a similar conception of the systemic aspect of international relations is expressed very succinctly by Bull, who emphasises the way in which states within international system frequently interact with each other through a ‘chain of links’ (Bull 1977/2002: 10) that they themselves may not be aware of. None of the individual links in the chain are asocial; they involve transactions between actors, but the overall pattern of these interactions is unintended. This contrasts with his account of the societal aspects of international relations, which emphasises the existence of a common awareness amongst states of a shared set of interests, values and institutions. Key to the English School perspective is an emphasis on those moments in international history when the great powers consciously seek to revise these basic norms (*Grundnormen*). Maintaining the distinction between systemic and societal processes does not involve the invocation of nebulous ‘social forces’, rightly criticised by Jackson (2000: 30), but rather distinguishing between the operation and consequences of social construction at two different scales in international relations: the micro-level socially negotiated transactions and the macro-level negotiation of public norms.

This distinction enables researchers in this tradition to evaluate the significance of two different types of mechanisms within a given international order. For example, drawing on Bull’s distinction between a contrived (societal) and a fortuitous (systemic) balance of power, Little (2007) is able to examine distinct associational and adversarial mechanisms that might maintain the

balance of power within international relations. In a collaborative study, Little builds on this conceptual enquiry with a historical investigation into the maintenance and collapse of balanced distributions of power in world history (Kaufman et al. 2007). This project adopts etic research methodology through its attempt to apply the external concept of the balance of power to past international orders in which ‘the balance of power’ did not exist as a recognised concept and was not consciously practiced as an institution. The survey indicates that neo-realism is incorrect in claiming that equilibrium is a systemic tendency within all interstate systems. Rather, systemic tendencies towards imperial expansion and subsequent contraction may have been more common across various historical international orders. This suggests that the emergence of a balance-of-power arrangement within a particular international order may be the result of associational, societal factors arising from a unique set of social norms within a specific international society. The operation of the balance of power in the European international order might, therefore, be studied as a unique social institution through emic methods, with etic methods employed to identify the systemic tendencies and counter-tendencies that have shaped the operation of this institution.

Maintaining a distinction between systemic and societal processes thus allows us to avoid collapsing two quite different sets of mechanisms into one another – preserving the English School approach as a *via media* between absolutist perspectives. It should be clear, however, that this account is not to be taken to suggest that all international systems are intrinsically ‘realist’ in character, unless they are tamed by the primary institutions of international society, and that systematic factors are necessarily ‘adversarial’. International systems may be configured and constructed differently, depending on how chains and networks of different interactions between actors aggregate. As a series of liberal thinkers from Hume and Smith to Hayek and onwards have argued, decentralised spontaneous mutually advantageous interactions between actors motivated by self-interest may eventually give rise to a spontaneous structure, the market economy, that works for public benefit.⁹ In this account, decentralised cooperation amongst actors pre-dated the public codification of liberal principles through law. The actors involved in these innumerable transactions

were self-regarding and lacked awareness that their actions would eventually result in the emergence of a set of public norms which actors would affirm consciously. Furthermore, this example also demonstrates how actual social phenomena, such as market economies, are best conceived of as assemblages composed of messy configurations of societal institutions, such as firms, courts and actual marketplaces, connected to each other through chains of interactions that concatenate into impersonal systemic structures.

Abandoning the distinction between system and society in favour of purely emic methodology would, therefore, entail the abandonment of the analysis of processes in international relations that are not directly attributable to direct agency and/or the shared intersubjective beliefs of states. A better option might be to follow Buzan's approach when he suggests tentatively a possible distinction between international community, conceived of as a shared identity or 'we-feeling', and international society, understood in terms of participation in common institutions (Buzan 2004: 111–17). In doing so, he does not seek to assimilate one into the other, but rather emphasises the relationship between but the two whilst warning against making hasty assumptions about the lines of causality between them (*ibid.*, 128). This is consistent with the earlier position advocated by Buzan and Little, according to which system and society 'always operate simultaneously, in a continuous coexistence and interplay' (Buzan and Little 2001: 36). The rationale for maintaining such a position remains strong.

From international system to world system: Etic perspectives on global interhuman interactions

If we retain the distinction between international system and international society, understood as aspects of the same international order best studied through etic and emic approaches respectively, then a prospective solution to the 'world society problem' presents itself – or rather, an existing but underdeveloped solution. Buzan notes that Bull suggests that there exists a 'world political system' which corresponds to world society as the international system corresponds to international society

(Bull 1977/2002: 266).¹⁰ As Buzan points out, the distinction that Bull makes between system and society suggests a four- rather than three-part scheme (Buzan 2004: 38). World system and world society would thus refer to two aspects of what Buzan now refers to as the ‘interhuman’ level of social activity, whilst international system and international society would refer to second-order interaction between distinct polities (Buzan and Gonzalez-Peleaz 2009: 26). Buzan recognises that such a step would satisfy a certain ‘structural logic’ (Buzan 2004: 70) and that the extent of world society is currently so minimal that Bull’s concept of world system might be better-suited to describe the current extent of global social interactions (Buzan 2004: 69). However, ultimately, Buzan rejects the idea of world system due to his rejection of the distinction between international system and international society (Buzan 2004: 101). After dissolving this distinction, there is no longer any demand in terms of symmetry and consistency to adopt the concept of world system as the physical counterpart of world society (Buzan 2004: 107).

[Table 3 here]

However, as argued above, the distinction between system and society is not a distinction between physical and social interaction – it is a distinction between chains and networks of structured social interaction on the one hand and participation by actors in common social institutions on the other. Yet, most certainly, Bull does not represent his concept of ‘world political system’ in purely physical terms, describing it instead as a ‘network of interaction’ (Bull 1977/2002: 266), the ‘degree of interaction linking all parts of the human community to one another’ (ibid., 269) and ‘the totality of global social interaction’ (ibid.). He introduces the concept both in acknowledgement of the rise of complex interdependence and in recognition of the fact that ‘the state system has always been part of a wider system of interaction in which groups other than the state are related to each other’ (ibid., 268).

Bull's concept of the 'world political system' is enlightening, not least because it addresses a potential criticism of the retention of the concept of international system from Wendtian constructivists. The concept of international system, as presented here, might be taken to suggest that states have an existence which is prior to that of international society and that international society's rules are merely regulative. This would return the English School perspective to a neo-realist 'jigsaw' model according to which the 'pieces' (states) are separate and distinct, slotted together to make the overall 'picture' (the international system).

Putting the concept of world system on an equal footing with international system, international society and world society allows us to circumvent this problem. The open-ended networks of interaction that Bull refers to can be understood as undergirding both individual states and international system. According to the neo-Weberian perspective, states are not 'units' but rather assemblages formed by ongoing social interactions between actors. Chains of social transactions, 'some quite localized, and some worldwide in scale' (Tilly 1984: 24), form a global web of interaction. However, in contrast to Bull, this approach does not limit its analysis to a single sector, such as economics or politics; rather, it sees different organisational sources of social power as overlapping and social institutions as 'promiscuous' in function (Mann 1986: 28).

These networks of interaction precede contemporary global economic integration and the formation of nation-states themselves. According to the strongest version of this perspective, presented by Mann (1986; 1993), there are no 'societies': 'we can never find a single bounded society in geographical or social space' (Mann 1986: 1). There are only more and less dense patches of human social interaction within an open-ended worldwide network. Indeed, it is something of a historical novelty that states have been able to corral social networks into boundaries delimited by borders to the extent that they have (Mann 1993, 1997), a process which Mann refers to as 'caging' (Mann 1986: 39–47). This perspective highlights how much work states must do in order to contain social interactions and 'yoke' social action to collective goals (Jackson and Nexon 1999: 313). The historical novelty and relative success of nation-state projects makes the contemporary international

system worthy of study in its own right, as a historically specific social configuration in the historical development of the overall pattern of human social organisation.

Regarding individual states, international system and international society as percolating out of an open, global web of social interactions is a step that has, thus far, been resisted by English School scholars despite their engagement with neo-Weberian theorists. Buzan acknowledges Mann's criticisms of the concept of society as a bounded unit (Buzan 2004: 70), but chooses to retain this concept despite its difficulties (Buzan 2004: 109).¹¹ But adopting the concept of world system as co-equal with international system, international society and world society would help International Relations theory achieve the goal which Buzan and Little identify as one of its tasks: providing an overarching framework for understanding human social organisation at the macro level (Buzan and Little 2001: 22).¹²

The international order from a bird's eye view: Contemporary international society in the context of historical world systems

It is ironic to note that, although Buzan would later reject the idea of world system, he and Little have earlier pointed to the transdisciplinary success of Wallerstein's world-systems theory as an example of what International Relations theory ought to aspire to. As Buzan and Little note, Wallerstein's stress on 'world systems' as units of analysis allows him to transcend some of the artificial boundaries between disciplines and the analysis of supposedly distinct sectors of social life (Buzan and Little 2001: 22). Indeed, they attribute the influence of Wallerstein's approach to the conceptual framework of the capitalist world system that he employs rather than to the specifics of the middle-range arguments he puts forward (Buzan and Little 2001: 23).

However, Wallerstein's perspective (1974) does differ substantially from the neo-Weberian framework introduced above. Although he agrees that *individual* societies are not bounded wholes, Wallerstein is a holist in Tilly's terminology because he conceptualises the capitalist world system itself as a functionally integrated unit¹³ – a structured totality, to use Marxist terminology.

Combined with his emphasis on the primacy of socio-economic factors, this leads him into a form of functionalism that assigns little autonomy to other forms of social organisation such as the state, outside of the 'role' they play in the capitalist world economy.

It might, therefore, be claimed that the idea of world system simply has too much conceptual baggage to serve as a useful addition to the English School framework of analysis and the general lexicon of International Relations theory. Nonetheless, adopting the concept of world system may be a theoretical wager with a substantial analytical payoff in that it may help strengthen the bridges between the study of international relations and the historical social sciences. Indeed, many of the key theoretical contributions to scholarship on world history serve to validate the concept of world system, understood not in functionalist terms but rather as the criss-crossing pattern of extended linkages between persons occupying geographically and socially distant social settings.

Braudel's magisterial study on the emergence of modern capitalism demonstrates the value of making a distinction between societal and systemic processes. Differentiating between three levels of temporal analysis – event-time, conjunctural time and world time – Braudel's analysis begins with the household and an economy governed by face-to-face interaction, before moving to the structures and patterns visible on a higher geographical and temporal scale, and finally arriving at the 'perspective of the world' (Braudel 1984: 17–18). Although the small-scale social settings form the foundation of economic life and must be reconstructed in their specificity, at higher levels generalisation using a set of common concepts is possible because certain characteristic forms of social organisation do resemble each other, 'in spite of everything' (Braudel 1983: 133). Braudel draws on both emic and etic methodologies sequentially as he first takes the reader within the bounded social-settings that formed the life-world of historical actors; next, he traces the social interconnections between these settings, and finally, he presents the pattern of relationships revealed by aggregated economic data.

Adopting Braudel's 'perspective of the world', historians and historical sociologists have increasingly drawn on concepts and metaphors of networks, open-ended systems and webs in order

to analyse the inter-linked processes of human social development. Traditional civilisational history has focused on elucidating and bringing to life canonical texts and other semantically rich cultural artefacts. Social history follows a similar emic approach — albeit in a more populist vein — seeking to recover ‘hidden transcripts’ of the experiences of subaltern actors, obscured by elite discourses (Scott 1990). In contrast, those adopting the ‘perspective of the world’ use etic methods: deploying evidence from environmental sciences, analysing properties of human artefacts and technological systems, and focusing not on expressive but rather on quotidian and functional texts, such as fiscal records, from which information can be aggregated in order to trace processes across social and spatial contexts.

One of the most arresting metaphors deployed by scholars working in this field is McNeill and McNeill’s concept of the ‘human web’, the pattern visible from the bird’s eye perspective of world history. This metaphor illustrates elegantly the concept of world system as developed in this paper. Their perspective utilises the rich detail of global environmental and economic history to complement the traditional analysis of civilisational history. This organising narrative begins with an account of how the first webs arose, ‘by a sort of social gravity’ (Christian 2004: 245), as the earliest urban centres began to exert a greater and greater influence over their hinterlands, creating new networks of exchange (ibid., 284). As links emerged amongst cities, connections were established ‘among scores of thousands, and then among millions of persons, who necessarily remained strangers to one another’ (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 41). These emerging webs involved individuals linked by chains of interaction that extended beyond primary communities composed of kith and kin. The thickening linkages between the early webs gave rise to what McNeill and McNeill term the ‘Old World Web’, facilitating the exchange of skills, ideas and commodities between far-flung social groups who may not have had any idea of each other’s existence (ibid.).

At this stage, participants in the Old World Web could not be said to participate in any kind of common world society, as they were linked only by the relay of social transactions. Nonetheless, like Newton’s cradle, changes in one part of the web could have significant impact on others

elsewhere. So, a structure emerged within these sub-global systems: the nodal points were both wealthier and more hierarchical than the peripheries (ibid., 162). In tandem with the development of the Old World Web, pre-eminent cities established empires at the cores of the densest regional webs, but were met with resistance from urban polities seeking to defend the customs and traditions of their own specific social setting. The result was the ‘pendulum’ dynamic identified by Watson, in which second-order societies of the old world swung between hierarchy and autonomy (Watson 1992: 124). In the context of greater inter-connection, however, local custom was eventually displaced by new cosmopolitan systems of thought and ‘portable’ delocalised world religions (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 155). This effected a ‘normative pacification’ within civilisational regions (Mann 1983: 357, 377), allowing for the more rapid spread of ideas and innovations (Christian 2004: 370) but deepening the divisions within the overall web.

The human web remained ‘lumpy and inconsistent’, but during the early second millennium AD maritime links thickened rapidly and the density of connections in the web increased considerably (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 156). Abu-Lughod’s *Before European Hegemony* describes how, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, much of the world became integrated into a common system of economic exchange (Abu-Lughod 1989: 3). This thickening Old World Web remained ‘narrow’, yet stretched the entire extent of Eurasia (ibid., 8), with what McNeill and McNeill call a ‘trunk route’ running from the Red Sea to China via the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 157). Abu-Lughod herself is unwilling to be drawn into debates over whether or not this constituted a system in Wallerstein’s strong holist sense (Abu-Lughod 1989: 9), ‘and yet’, she notes, ‘goods were transferred, prices set, exchange rates agreed upon, contracts entered into, credit – on funds or on goods located elsewhere – extended, partnerships formed, and, obviously, records kept and agreements honoured’ (ibid., 8). Such a transcontinental chain of socially negotiated transactions amongst individuals would qualify as a world system as the concept has been developed in this article.

By the fourteenth century, this ‘complex net of interrelationships’ frayed and went into decline (ibid., 37).¹⁴ But the ‘human web’ was not truly destroyed by the plagues and nomadic migrations of this period. Instead, the topology of the world system continued to fluctuate as Western Europe became increasingly integrated into the web. Economic exchange within Europe had previously been conducted face-to-face, between producers and consumers, within public markets tightly regulated by local norms, but in the thirteenth century merchants began to emerge as intermediaries and more impersonal and extended circuits of exchange emerged (Braudel 1983: 42, 47). According to Spruyt, the rise of medieval towns across Europe as a result of these increased levels of trade resulted in proliferation of new forms of political organisation on the continent as new bargains were struck amongst capital-holders and coercion-wielders (Spruyt 1994, Spruyt 2001). The breakdown of the previous heterarchical order and the resultant process of war-making and coercive state-building within and between the new polities eventually resulted in an anarchic international system composed of structurally similar modern states (Tilly 1992, 1993). In a similar vein, Sgard, Brousseau and Schemel argue that the fragmentary political landscape of the medieval period became more uniform as mobile economic actors desiring protection and uniformity contracted with political sovereigns (Sgard et al. 2008: 10).

This illustrates the point made above that networks of transactions, not just norms held in common at the international level, play a central role in the constitution of international systems and societies. This perspective illustrates the hinge between action at the interhuman and the ‘inter-state’ levels. Higher-order social formations such as states remain grounded in chains of interpersonal interactions. If the character of these interactions is transformed from the bottom up, or if the extended system of social interactions, of which they are a part, undergoes a major shift, this may produce new sorts of political structures and new relations between them.

In the midst of this reconfiguration of the landscape of political organisation in Europe, the maritime kingdoms of Europe began to reconfigure the organisation of the human web. It is true that the celebrated voyages of this era often succeeded only in ‘discovering’ trade routes already

utilised by Islamic and Asian traders for centuries, that these maritime kingdoms possessed no decisive military advantage against their rivals, and that for many centuries Europe remained an economically peripheral peninsula of Eurasia (Darwin 2007). Nonetheless, the maritime empires in Europe can be considered crucial system-builders through their application of military and economic power over transcontinental distances. The Portuguese, for example, can be credited with the construction of ‘arguably the first truly global network created in history’ (Inglis 2011: 290) through their development of navigational techniques and creation of a transcontinental network of ‘factories’ (fortified trading posts).¹⁵ At the same time, we should remember, as Braudel points out, ‘the victory of the camel-trains across the deserts of Islam was a similar exploit, one achieved by the slow creation of a network of oases and watering-places’ (Braudel 1984: 27). The extension and stitching-together of the various aspects of the human web into a single system of interaction, connecting persons worldwide through a ‘chain of links’, took centuries of coordinated and uncoordinated effort.¹⁶ Although imperial powers such as Britain strived consciously to build a global infrastructure for navigation and to open up new spaces for trade and investment, colonialism was often prosecuted by private actors or agents, over which state principals had only limited control. Therefore, imperial system-building took place at both second-order and interhuman levels.

Following Lenin and Mackinder, we might regard the creation of a worldwide network of coaling stations and the laying of the first Transatlantic telegraph cables as the point at which the human web achieved closure and became a singular world system. However patchy and variegated it still remains, this closure gives rise to the possible emergence of a single world society – a bounded social setting in which interhuman interactions are governed by a set of constitutive public norms. At the sub-global level, the construction and presentation of the nation-state as a ‘unitary normative framework’ (Sassen 2007: 23) comprising an imaginary community of strangers has been undergirded by its success as a container for social relationships and social antagonisms (Mann 1997). ‘Civilisational regions have been much more porous, plural and overlapping than the contemporary nation-state; nonetheless, they have constituted socio-spatial areas in which certain

common norms are acknowledged. World society beyond this has been much more minimal; many actors have not even been aware of the existence of strangers with whom they interact indirectly. Recent scholarship has traced the history of images of world community (Bartelson 2009) and identified the emergence of a conscious awareness of globality amongst European imperial system-builders (Inglis 2011: 295). However, such global frames do not amount to world society in terms of Bull's understanding of society as involving common acknowledgement of a set of institutions and norms. Scholars of the English School have never claimed that world society is not embryonic in nature, if it exists at all. Nonetheless, an analysis of the changing organisation of the world system through history can help us identify the limited spaces bound by intersubjectively acknowledged public norms that have emerged within the overall context of the human web.

One such space might be the capillaries of the world system constituted by long-distance trade routes. For example, the pan-European *lex mercatoria* of the medieval age based on custom amongst merchants remained a better-developed legal framework for the resolution of commercial disputes than national commercial law for many centuries. The major trading centres of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean were tremendously cosmopolitan and hosted face-to-face transactions between merchants belonging to many different communities. The specialisation of such communities, bound together by kinship and common custom, in trading networks has long been a feature of the world system. In a new project, which he embarked upon shortly before his death but was unable to complete, Tilly builds on his account of the historical interplay of capital and coercion with an analysis of 'commitment' in the form of extended trust networks (Tilly 2010). Such networks may be based on religion or ethnicity or, alternatively, on 'person to person enlistment' (Tilly and Hanagan 2010: 251). Tilly's unfinished research project suggests that such trust networks might constitute bounded normative frameworks in their own right, translocal frameworks that have provided alternatives to those of geographical polities such as city-states and nations (ibid., 252–54).

A further type of proto-world society might be located in the shared social settings occupied by the urban elites of regional webs. Their wealth and participation in inter-urban networks of interaction seems to have repeatedly given rise to the emergence of cultures of elite consumption and a common standard of taste (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 50). To be *urbane* is to be sophisticated, cultured and in possession of good taste. Intriguingly, in his analysis of 'transnational practices' – referred to in this article as transactions – Sklair emphasises the role of shifting consumption tastes in the contemporary expansion of global capitalism, as metropolitan elites within the global South attempt to emulate the lifestyles of privileged groups in the North (Sklair 1995: 106). Focusing on the ideational rather than the economic, the Stanford School of sociological research has argued that a common cultural 'script' of public norms and standards is in the process of being consolidated worldwide (Beckfield 2003; Meyer 2007). Those associated with the diffusion of this 'script', those working for international organisations, NGOs and government agencies, are accorded high status and something approaching secular saintliness. The emergence of such societal features at the interhuman level might be connected to new transnational capitalist and administrative classes within the world system, as neo-Gramscian scholars have suggested (van der Pijl 1998). It may also suggest that the emergence of a common translocal urban elite culture is a perennial feature of the development and consolidation of human webs. If such a process is underway, it is of high salience for debates over the constitution of international society, as both the English School theorists and classical realists have suggested that the norms of European diplomacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were founded on a common elite culture (Little 2007: 112).

The overview of certain perspectives within contemporary world history, however brief and schematic, illustrates some of the potential connections between the development of world system on the one hand and the triad of international system, international society and world society on the other. Scholars have identified how, without the intention or awareness of participants, interactions at the interhuman level across individual social settings have given rise to structures and patterns

that have shaped the international order as we know it today. Although most participants in the hitherto existing world systems may not have shared a common awareness of their indirect interaction with millions of others, at the nodes and apexes of these webs of human interaction such awareness does seem to have arisen. At such nodes, we may find bounded social settings, governed by constitutive rules, which might potentially contribute to the emergence of a world society proper. These settings provide potential opportunities for emic research in international relations, complementing etic research into impersonal structural processes within the world system.

Conclusion: From world systems to world society?

This article has sought to demonstrate that systems can be analytically distinguished from societies and that, as a result, the concept of international system should not be abandoned. Bull's original definitions of system and society are not so sociologically naïve as has been supposed. They identify two aspects of all international orders: the aspect of the international order which emerges unintended from innumerable social interactions; and the intersubjective and publically negotiated aspect of the international order. These aspects can best be studied through etic and emic approaches respectively. An exclusively emic approach to explanation in international relations is inappropriate because neither is the international order a wholly bounded social setting governed entirely by a set of constitutive norms, nor are the processes within the international order immediately transparent to and under the control of actors. Therefore, an etic approach employing a set of external analytical categories developed through comparative research is necessary to make sense of systemic processes that go beyond the subjective awareness and control of international actors.

The 'structural logic' of this distinction between system and society recommends the adoption of the concept of world system. Not only would this be theoretically consistent, it would also expand the analytical power of the English School perspective. The set of arguments developed in this paper, however, has relevance beyond the debates specific to the English School tradition. Due

to criticism of strongly functionalist social theories and the backlash against implausible holist accounts of social systems, systemic accounts of international relations have fallen out of favour within the discipline. One result has been the adoption of ideational constructivism, which focuses almost exclusively on societal processes and, therefore, advocates primarily emic methodology, as a general-purpose social ontology for substantive theories of international relations. As has been demonstrated in this article, such a social ontology is not as neutral as it appears and depends for its plausibility on very strong assumptions regarding the primacy of societal processes over systemic processes. As an alternative, this article has advanced the social ontology of ‘organisational materialism’. Whereas previous engagement with this perspective by scholars of international relations has focused primarily on certain substantive middle-range claims, for example regarding warfare and state-formation, this article has demonstrated how a neo-Weberian approach can help make sense of the relationship between the systemic and societal processes that animate international systems, international societies, world systems and world societies.

Due to the employment of similar concepts – such as McNeill and McNeill’s human web – within the fields of world history and historical sociology, the adoption of the concept of world system would enable International Relations theory to draw on the rich empirical resources of other historical social sciences. Employing both etic and emic methodologies, International Relations scholars may be better-able to identify the systemic and societal processes that may be expanding the boundaries of norm-governed social settings and to investigate germinal ‘world societies’ in the wider context of the seamless human web that now spans the planet.

Notes

- ¹ The key stage in Wendt’s argument occurs when he attempts to pull the rug from under the feet of materialist theories by arguing that all socially constructed relationships and structures are ideational in character (Wendt 1999: 93–96). Acceptance of this argument reduces materialist theories such as Marxism and neo-realism to ‘rump materialist’ theories concerned with the

properties of physical artefacts. But Wendt's approach stacks the deck against these approaches by focusing on social ontology rather than on the goals towards which social action is directed.

- ² The discussion presented in this paper focuses primarily on systemic processes that escape the intersubjective awareness of actors because they operate on large socio-spatial and temporal scales. But processes requiring explanation in etic terms may also operate on very small, sub-individual scales. Psychological research on the automaticity of mental processes suggests that the subjective, emic accounts that agents offer as explanation for their actions may be highly misleading (Bargh and Chartrand 1999). Thus, if the mind is opaque to itself, etic explanations may be necessary to supplement and correct emic accounts of even small-scale, face-to-face, norm-governed social interactions. I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for pointing out this set of possibilities.
- ³ For example, the Frankfurt School critical theory might be said to operate according to a methodology which begins with an emic account of a mode of human consciousness, before moving to an immanent critique in terms of the concepts of that mode of consciousness and, finally, to an etic account of how that mode of consciousness mystifies the real social relationships that have given rise to it (Geuss 1981; Linklater 1990; Weber 2005).
- ⁴ Wendt does attempt to distinguish constitutive explanation from causal explanation (Wendt 1999: 77–78). However, within the scientific realist methodology that Wendt adopts, constitution is not separate from causation; the way in which structures and entities are constituted determines their causal powers and propensities (Jackson 2011: 107).
- ⁵ The anthropomorphisation here is intentional. Wendt holds that states can be considered persons with their own beliefs and agency, if not mental states (Wendt 2004).
- ⁶ This is not to say that an etic approach can *only* be used to examine systemic processes; rather, etic approaches are particularly well-suited to do so.
- ⁷ Tilly provides a summary of his position – which, rather unusually, is presented in verse – in a review essay on the work of James C. Scott (Tilly 1991).

- ⁸ Tilly states the point eloquently: ‘Paradoxically, the belief in societies as overarching social structures with their own logic dovetails neatly with the belief in the socially conditioned mental event as the prime link between person and society’ (Tilly 1984: 26).
- ⁹ See Fukuyama (2011) for a contemporary version of this liberal account of the rise of capitalism and the rule of law in the West.
- ¹⁰ Burton (1972: 36) also wants to distinguish between ‘interstate’ relations and the overall ‘cobweb’ of human social interactions. This thought-experiment involves imagining all transnational transactions and links, ‘a mass of cobwebs superimposed on one another, strands converging at some points more than others, and being concentrated between some points more than between others’ (Burton 1972: 43).
- ¹¹ Unfortunately, Buzan does not elaborate on his reasons for resisting both Wallerstein’s view that there is one single world society (the capitalist world system) and Mann’s position that society is a misleading concept.
- ¹² From a similar perspective, Linklater (2009) has suggested that scholars of international relations should set themselves the task of developing macro-historical accounts of human interconnectedness.
- ¹³ ‘World-systems analysis means first of all the substitution of a unit of analysis called the “world-system” for the standard unit of analysis, which was the nation state’ (Wallerstein 2004: 16).
- ¹⁴ Possibly due to the effects of the Black Death, spread by the Mongols and by the Eurasian trade network (Morris 2010: 398–99; McNeill and McNeill 2003: 120). This might represent one significant example of wholly physical interaction between groups of human beings resulting in major social change.
- ¹⁵ The role of Portugal is accorded major significance by theorists of the long-cycle leadership perspective (Devezas and Modelski 2006).

¹⁶ It would be remiss not to acknowledge the obvious and important point that such system-building efforts were often bloody and involved the destruction of other societies and extended interhuman systems.

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About the Author

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Appendix: Tables

Table 1. The traditional English School typology of international orders

International System	International Society	World Society
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Table 2. Buzan's revision of the English School schema

International System (Residual Material Factors)	International Society
—	World Society

Table 3. Bull's tentative schema

International System	International Society
World Political System?	World Society