

Power, Pluralism, and History: Norms in International Societies

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Abstract : On the question of norms in international politics, scholars are divided over whether norms are a tool for power politics or a genuine reflection of an emergent international society. The line is drawn between rationalism and idealism, but this dialectical relationship needs to be broken down if we hope to come to a comprehensive understanding of how norms play out in international society. The concept of an elusive international society is a simplification of a more pluralistic, cosmopolitan, and diverse collection of international societies. The English School effectively overcomes realist-idealist dichotomies and provides a pluralistic, comprehensive explanation and description of international societies through its application to two distinct areas: human rights as well as security and war. We argue that international norms have always been present in human rights, war, and international security, forming international societies that can be complimentary or oppositional, beneficial or problematic. Power politics are present, but they can only be regarded as partially explanatory of the role of norms in international politics, which must also include history, international law, the media, NGOs, and others to fully represent the normative influences in international societies. A side-by-side comparison of international norms of war/security and human rights show how much international societies converge. World War II was a turning point in terms of international law, these forces of international society have deeper historical roots. Norms of human rights and war/security are often norms of restraint, guiding appropriate treatment of individuals. This can at times give primacy to the individual over the sovereign state. However, state power politics and hegemony are still intact. It cannot be said that there is an emergent international society—international societies are part of broader historical backdrops. Furthermore, states and, more generally, power politics, are important components in international societies, but international norms are far from mere tools of power politics. They define a more diverse, complicated, and ever-present conception of international societies.

Keywords : English school, international societies, norms, pluralism

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