

# **The *Longue Durée* of International Environmental Norm Change: Global Environmental Politics Meets the English School of International Relations**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to introduce English School (ES) theory to the study of global environmental politics (GEP). The ES is an established theoretical tradition in the discipline of international relations (IR) but is not widely known, let alone used, in GEP. My aim is to overcome this state of neglect and suggest ways in which ES theory can enrich the study of international environmental affairs. I argue that ES theory makes at least two major contributions to the study of global environmental politics: first, it helps counterbalance the presentist focus in GEP scholarship, shifting our attention toward long-term historical patterns of normative change, and second, by distinguishing between different levels of international change, it opens up an analytical focus on environmentalism as a part of the international normative structure. In doing so, ES theory directs our attention to the interaction and mutual shaping between environmentalism and other fundamental norms of international society.

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GEP scholars have long bemoaned the IR discipline's lack of attention to environmental issues, most notably climate change (Green and Hale 2017; Sending et al. 2019). The ES has not escaped such criticism (Buzan 2004, 186; Linklater and Suganami 2006, 2). Given the scale and urgency of many environmental problems, the IR discipline's neglect of GEP is indeed troubling. Similarly concerning, however, is the reverse problem of GEP scholars' lack of engagement with the full range of theoretical and conceptual developments in IR. GEP scholarship has, of course, drawn on a diversity of disciplinary approaches, not just from IR but also from comparative politics, political economy, and geography. What it lacks is a more deliberate effort to relate empirical findings and theoretical concerns back to debates in the IR discipline. Such cross-fertilization could involve more systemic comparisons of the structures and dynamics of global environmental affairs with those of other domains (e.g., human rights, global health); more sustained inquiries into how ecological and social systems interact to create international order and disorder; and theoretical reflections on the changing agency of state and nonstate actors, the enmeshing of global environmental governance with great power politics, and the pluralization of the post-Western international system.

This article demonstrates how closer engagement between environmental and ES scholarship can provide such opportunities for intellectual exchange between GEP and IR. It builds on a recently published book (Falkner 2021) that uses the vantage point of ES theory

to explore the long history of environmental stewardship as a fundamental international norm and how its rise since the nineteenth century has played into long-term normative transformations in international society. While the book provides a more comprehensive account of ES theory and develops a historically rooted interpretation of the rise of global environmentalism, this article focuses on eliciting key insights into the usefulness of ES theory for GEP scholarship more generally.

The article is structured as follows. The first section introduces ES theory and its emerging focus on international environmental affairs. The second section demonstrates how ES theory's focus on historical patterns of environmental norm change helps overcome the presentist focus of GEP. The third section elaborates how the ES conceptual vocabulary of primary and secondary institutions sets up the study of deep normative change in GEP and of the interaction between the primary institution of environmental stewardship and other established, fundamental norms of international society. The conclusions offer a brief summary of the argument.

### **Beyond Neglect: The English School and Global Environmental Politics**

The ES grew out of a diverse group of scholars in postwar Britain who developed a sociological perspective on IR, in contrast to the then dominant mechanistic understanding of interstate relations (Dunne 1998). Its conceptual center of gravity was the idea of an international society, with social norms, rules, and practices assumed to be governing state behavior. This set it apart from “rationalist” IR (e.g., realism), focused on the concept of an international system, and a “revolutionist” tradition (e.g., critical theory) emphasizing the latent reality of a world society (Wight 1991). By the late 1990s, a new generation of ES scholars, now operating globally, had begun to turn the ES into a comprehensive theoretical approach that could address the historical, spatial, and normative dimensions of different social structures and patterns in international affairs. International society remained its intellectual rallying cry, but it now sought to integrate the triad of IR master concepts (international system, international society, world society) and defined the interplay between different types of actors and interaction logics, thereby providing the basis for grand theorizing in IR (Buzan 2014).

The ES's social conception of interstate relations has important consequences for our understanding of international change and the rise of new issue areas, such as environmental protection. If states "form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another" (Bull 1977, 13), then lasting international change manifests in the creation of new sets of norms and rules that eventually become embedded in the deep structure of international society: its normative, or constitutional, order. Newly emergent norms and rules affect states' behavior as well as their identity; they redefine what it means to be a legitimate member of international society. At the deepest level of normative change, new norms can give rise to a new moral purpose of the state and the discourses surrounding such purposes (Allan 2018; Reus-Smit 1999). International change understood in this way tends to be slow paced, difficult to achieve, and rare (Holsti 2004). Some fundamental norms (e.g., sovereignty, territoriality) arose together with Westphalian international society and remain as relevant as ever. Others emerged more recently, though not all new norms are universally accepted. Nationalism, for example, began to displace the dynastic principle in the nineteenth century and has become globally established. In contrast, human rights and democracy emerged as international norms only in the twentieth century and remain contested (Buzan 2014).

Could environmentalism also be seen as a fundamental norm of international society? The first generation of ES scholars had little to say about the proliferation of international environmental policy making after the first United Nations (UN) environment conference in 1972. This was not surprising. After all, environmental issues barely featured in the study of IR when the foundational texts of the early ES were produced. Bull (1977) was the first ES theorist to address the rise of environmental politics, but this did not lead to a productive encounter with emerging GEP scholarship. If anything, Bull closed off any serious engagement between ES and GEP by framing environmentalism as a profound challenge to the state-centric international society that he sought to defend (Falkner 2017). The situation began to change from the 1990s onward, with the arrival of a second generation of ES scholars. Hurrell (Hurrell and Kingsbury 1992) developed a sustained interest in environmental matters around the time when the 1992 Rio Earth Summit signaled the consolidation of the international environmental agenda. Jackson (1996, 2000) identified a normative shift in international society toward what he labeled "environmental

stewardship,” a “responsibility for the global commons” (Jackson 2000, 176). Buzan (2004, 233) picked up on this argument and raised the possibility that environmental stewardship “now registers as a master institution” of international society. Falkner (2012) and Falkner and Buzan (2019) empirically traced the emergence of environmental stewardship as a fundamental norm, while Clark (2011), Kopra (2018), and Falkner and Buzan (2022) engaged ES theory in their analyses of green collective hegemony and great power responsibility.

This is not the place to provide a comprehensive review of recent ES scholarship on environmental issues (for a fuller account, see Falkner 2021, chap. 2), but two points are worth noting. First, the ES tradition has firmly moved beyond its previous neglect of environmental issues and provides a distinctive theoretical vantage point from which to interpret the significance of environmentalism for the evolution of international society. Second, as the subsequent discussion demonstrates, GEP researchers can benefit from employing ES perspectives in at least two ways:

1. The ES project of identifying long-term shifts in international normative structures allows us to place the rise of GEP in a wider historical context. It sets the scene for an inquiry into whether the growth of environmental diplomacy and institution building amounts to a long-term transformation in international society.
2. The ES distinction between different institutional levels in international society’s normative structure enables us to refine our understanding of green norm change, to focus on deeper environmental values in an international context, and to explore how these interact with other fundamental values in international society.

### **The *Longue Durée* of International Environmental Change**

Much GEP scholarship is characterized by a presentist focus, not in the sense of a tendency to judge the past by contemporary standards but as a prioritization of current problems over past cases. This presentist orientation reflects a strong interest in developing more effective global responses; after all, one of the subdiscipline’s main roots can be found in “problem-focused, policy-oriented, activism-linked research” (Dauvergne and Clapp 2016, 3). But

problem-oriented presentism, however justified, comes at an intellectual cost. It ends up marginalizing the systematic study of the history of GEP and thereby restricts our ability to learn lessons from the past, it obscures the deeper historical roots of both contemporary problems and political responses in GEP, and it risks overstating the newness of contemporary issues and trends. To be sure, some GEP scholars have maintained an active research interest in the historical roots of global environmental cooperation and past environmental cases (Allan 2018; Bernstein 2001; Gupta et al. 2022; Ivanova 2021; Mitchell et al. 2020), while scholars in critical political economy and sociology have explored the long-term ecological consequences of capitalism (Hornborg et al. 2007; Moore 2003) and the rise of an environmental world society (Hironaka 2014; Meyer et al. 1997). Overall, however, historical research is not recognized as a distinctive approach in GEP, as can be seen from representative handbooks and textbooks (e.g., Betsill et al. 2014; Chasek and Downie 2021; Dauvergne 2013), at a time when historical approaches are developing greater resonance in IR more generally (De Carvalho et al. 2021).

ES scholarship has been a major driver behind the return of history in IR (Navari and Green 2021). Long concerned with the transformation of international society from its European roots to global dominance via colonialism and decolonization, the ES's original expansion story has more recently been critiqued for its inherent Eurocentrism and replaced by an account of a more decentered process of globalization that pays greater attention to the agency of non-European actors (Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017). Its historical project suggests important ways in which a focus on the *longue durée* of international change can enrich GEP research: first, it would redirect scholarly attention to the historical roots of GEP and situate questions about progress and change in international environmental affairs in a broader historical context, and second, it would pay greater attention to the shadow of history and how historical legacies and path dependence continue to shape contemporary global environmental affairs.

Let me briefly illustrate the benefits of a historically oriented shift in analytical perspective. At a minimum, it would lead to a "rediscovery" of the earlier history of global environmentalism. The 1960s and 1970s are widely seen as the watershed period when modern global environmentalism emerged. There is some justification to this, but it comes at the cost of marginalizing the prehistory of GEP in terms of how we both research and teach

the subject. For example, studies in environmental history have unearthed the deeper historical roots of contemporary forms of global environmental governance: the UN's role in creating global environmental awareness and "planetary consciousness" before 1972 (Selcer 2018), early experiments with international environmental management by the League of Nations (Wöbse 2012), and the first forays into bilateral and regional environmental diplomacy in the late nineteenth century (Dorsey 1998). A reevaluation of this prehistory would bring into view the longer history of (largely failed) international environmental agenda setting, from US president Theodore Roosevelt's proposal for a world conservation conference to the 1913 Berne conservation conference and the creation of the Consultative Commission for the International Protection of Nature (Falkner 2021, 91–97). It would help correct the widespread perception of the "newness" of private transnational initiatives and governance, pointing to the long history of transnational campaigning and networking by scientists and conservationists before the 1970s, as documented in De Bont's (2021) *Nature's Diplomats*. And it would also help challenge the Eurocentricity of global environmental debates, for example, by drawing attention to the pioneering contributions that thinkers in the Global South made to critiques of economic growth (Hickel 2021).

Adopting the *longue durée* also serves a critical purpose, making GEP more historically self-reflective. It foregrounds the often hidden historical legacies that cast a long shadow on contemporary international debates and continue to complicate international environmental cooperation. Structural inequality and racial divides are well established topics in GEP scholarship (Newell 2005; Roberts and Parks 2007), but this research is only loosely connected with work in environmental history, on the colonial roots of environmental knowledge and conservation practice (Anker 2002; Grove 1995) and the colonial context of the first transnational environmental campaigns and treaties (Adam 2014; Prendergast and Adams 2003). GEP would benefit from a more systematic engagement with environmentalism's colonial entanglements of the past and how they reverberate in contemporary claims for global environmental justice.

Taking the *longue durée* perspective seriously also opens opportunities for engagement with historical research into long-term drivers of global environmental change and their interaction with socioeconomic and political structures. Groundbreaking work in environmental history has connected past periods of pronounced climate change (e.g., the

Little Ice Age of the seventeenth century) with mass migration, the dissolution of international order, and the appearance of early capitalism (Blom 2019; Parker 2013). More recently, Peter Frankopan (2023) has demonstrated how profound changes in the natural environment shape the evolution of human societies and world history, from the rise of agricultural states to the intensification of transatlantic slavery. The growing recognition of geological time frames as markers of environmental change has also led some to call for a reframing of “environmental” politics as “Anthropocene” politics (Biermann 2021).

Such moves are partly about “historicizing” GEP, to adjust and expand our collective scholarly memory of the subject we study and teach. They are also about expanding GEP methodologies by taking historical research more seriously. A recent example of archival research enriching institutionalist theorizing is Michael Manulak’s (2022) account of how major UN conferences have served as “temporal focal points” in the creation of profound and lasting institutional innovation. Taking history seriously would also direct our scholarly attention to past cases of global environmental action, with a view to reviewing, and possibly revising, the lessons they hold for the present (see Kelsey’s [2021] revisiting of the 1980s ozone regime).

To be sure, ES theory is not alone in promoting historical approaches to IR and GEP. Its intellectual project overlaps to a considerable extent with constructivist IR scholarship that explores the constitution of new norms and their diffusion and life cycle in international relations (Acharya 2004; Wiener 2018). However, the ES lends itself particularly to developing a *longue durée* perspective on global environmentalism that prioritizes longer-term historical structures and normative developments within them. Applied to GEP, this creates opportunities for exploring the historical roots of contemporary global environmental norms and institutions, how these norms and institutions have been shaped by material and ideational forces, and how they have evolved within specific international societal structures (from state-centric to transnational) and geographical contexts (global to regional and national). Adopting an ES lens thus goes beyond the standard view of GEP as a functional issue area in international politics; it provides an impetus for theorizing the rise of global environmentalism as a case of broader societal transformation in international and transnational society.



## Global Environmentalism and Deep Normative Change in International Society

How can the rise of global environmentalism be interpreted as (potentially) transformational change in IR? To answer this question, we need to be able to distinguish different types of change in GEP, and it is in this regard that the ES provides a particularly useful conceptual framework.

In one sense, change is ubiquitous in international environmental affairs. International society has created more than 3,000 multilateral and bilateral environmental agreements (Mitchell et al. 2020), and hardly a day passes in the diplomatic calendar without an international meeting discussing new environmental measures. In another sense, however, real change happens only rarely, and far too slowly. The 1972 Stockholm conference is widely considered to have set “patterns of cooperation that would persist for decades” (Manulak 2022, 68), but few other international conferences can claim to have had a similarly transformative effect. After Stockholm, states have added layers upon layers of international environmental rules, but key obstacles to effective environmental protection—weak international institutions, lack of enforcement, insufficient funding—remain unchanged.

As Holsti (2004, 6) notes, the key question is “*how we can distinguish* minor change from fundamental change, trends from transformations, and growth or decline from new forms.” The ES advocates an institutional view: change happens at the level of fundamental or constitutional institutions (Bull 1977, 67; Reus-Smit 1997, 557) that define the underlying normative structure of international society or at the level of issue-specific institutions that regulate interstate relations in a given issue area. Buzan (2004) established a clearer nomenclature for studying international change at these two levels: *primary* institutions are those fundamental norms that define the constitutional order of international society (e.g., sovereignty, diplomacy, war, international law, great power management; see Bull 1977). In contrast to *secondary* institutions, which are deliberately created by states to govern specific issue areas (e.g., treaties, regimes, international organizations), primary institutions are “deep and relatively durable social practices in the sense of being evolved more than designed”; they are “constitutive of both states and international society in that they define not only the basic character of states but also their patterns of legitimate behaviour in

relation to each other, and the criteria for membership in international society” (Buzan 2004, 16–17). Primary institutions emerge slowly and take time to become universally accepted. Once established, they become sticky elements of the international order that are hard to change or replace. Primary institutions are thus a better indicator of fundamental international change (Holsti 2004, 18). Their emergence and strengthening, as much as their weakening, decay, and disappearance, offer important clues into long-term evolutionary patterns in international affairs. The two institutional levels are connected in important ways. Secondary institutions usually reflect the normative principles that underpin international society, but they also provide an important site for contestation that affects how states interpret primary institutions. Primary institutions may be durable but ultimately remain malleable. Persistent change at the level of secondary institutions may thus indicate a more profound reconfiguration of the normative structure of international society.

The predominant focus in GEP has so far been on secondary institutions, especially international regimes and organizations, and on institutional interplay (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009; Elsässer et al. 2022; Suechting and Pettenger 2022). In contrast, change at the level of primary institutions has not received the kind of systematic attention that it deserves. There are notable exceptions (e.g., Allan 2018; Bernstein 2001; Eckersley 2004), but GEP scholarship would benefit from a more sustained effort to study deep-seated processes of normative change. This would add a broader perspective on the forces shaping the long-term evolution of GEP and the conditions for strengthening (or weakening) international environmental action. It would also open up a new analytical perspective on how environmentalism, understood as a fundamental norm of international society, interacts with other elements of the international normative order.

How can we conceptualize environmentalism as a fundamental international norm, or a primary institution in ES parlance? As is the case with other primary institutions (e.g., sovereignty, nationalism, balance of power), environmentalism is a complex fundamental norm that consists of core and peripheral elements. At its core is a general ethic of care for the environment, which at the international level gives rise to states’ and international society’s responsibility for protecting the global environment. It is this normative core that gives environmentalism a degree of permanency across time and space, despite the many

different ethical and political positions that make up its ideological tradition. Fundamental norms, like ideologies (Freedon 1996, 79–80), also contain peripheral elements, which are malleable and remain contested. They help relate the normative core to specific historical contexts and make it applicable in different international contexts. Thus, in the early days of international environmental diplomacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the main environmental duty of the state was to prevent transnational environmental harm. This corresponded well with international society's emphasis on sovereignty and territoriality as the cornerstones of international order but provided only a limited rationale for international environmental protection. By the time of the 1972 Stockholm conference, environmentalism had come to be framed more expansively as a responsibility to protect global commons and the common heritage of humankind. As a consequence, the state's environmental duty has gradually expanded to include a wider set of responsibilities. The environmental primary institution that has emerged during the twentieth century establishes states' fundamental duty of environmental care, but it is peripheral concepts, such as "no harm" and "common heritage," that define how states' environmental responsibility is specified at a given point in time.

By expanding the analytical focus in GEP from secondary to primary institutions, we can therefore begin to develop a more systematic account of the normative transformation of international society that the rise of global environmentalism entails. Whether this transformation has succeeded remains a matter for debate, but it raises important questions about how to determine environmentalism's wider impact in international society, the underlying forces that have brought it to the fore in international affairs, and the extent to which other normative elements of international society have been affected. Such a focus would require GEP scholarship to adopt a *longue durée* perspective on international normative change, bringing it in closer contact with environmental history and historical IR. It would encourage a life cycle perspective on environmentalism as an emergent primary institution: its ideational roots and the shifting historical context in which it arose, the evolution of its normative core and variation in its peripheral elements, and the factors that account for its successful establishment and that impede its further progress or cause it to decay. And it would put greater emphasis on the study of institutional interplay—at the level of primary (rather than secondary) institutions. Such a focus would shed light on how the

rise of environmentalism has offered a good fit with some primary institutions, most notably diplomacy and international law, both of which have received a boost from the growth of international environmental policy making. It would also explore the more ambiguous and even conflictual relationship with other primary institutions (sovereignty, the market), even though most of the normative accommodation has occurred on the environmental side. This kind of focus is one that should resonate widely in IR debates on past and present reconfigurations of international order, on the progressive/regressive nature of international change, and on the forces (material, ideational) and agents (states, nonstate actors) that are driving such change.

## **Conclusions**

I have argued that GEP scholarship would benefit from drawing on ES theory for at least two reasons. First, it directs scholarly attention toward historical patterns of international normative change. This would help counterbalance GEP's presentist focus with a more historically grounded perspective on the long-term drivers of international society's engagement with environmental concerns. Second, it would enrich GEP's analytical tool kit by providing it with a conceptual language that distinguishes between different institutional levels at which long-term change can be detected: at the level of secondary institutions (treaties, international organizations), which has been at the center of much GEP scholarship, and at the level of primary institutions (fundamental norms of international society). To be sure, the ES is not alone in advocating such a *longue durée* approach to the evolution of GEP, but its social-structural understanding of international change and order opens up a distinctive perspective on environmentalism's potentially transformative impact on international society and the mutual shaping between the environmental primary institution and other fundamental international norms (e.g., sovereignty, territoriality, international law, market).

ES and GEP scholarships have lived in a state of mutual neglect for far too long. ES scholars have begun to redress this situation, and there are clear benefits for the ES from taking GEP more seriously: the rise of global environmentalism provides an important empirical case for the study of how ideas and actors from outside state-centric contexts

(scientists, activists, transnational networks) can shape the normative agenda and structure of the society of states, how international and transnational societal structures are increasingly interwoven, and to what extent the environmental revolution of the late twentieth century has begun to alter the basis for international legitimacy. GEP has yet to make use of the conceptual language and theoretical innovation to be found in recent ES scholarship. Just like other IR theories, ES theory offers only a partial perspective on the multifaceted and complex reality of GEP. However, it provides a unique vantage point from which we can explore deeper and long-term processes of international normative development and how these influence the rise of global environmentalism. By the same token, this also provides opportunities for GEP scholars to relate their research back to broader debates not just in ES theory but in IR more widely, on the foundations of international legitimacy, the social and transnational roots of international norm change, and the dynamics of order and disorder in international society.

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