

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Southeast Asia and the English School of International Relations: A Region-Theory Dialogue.* By Linda Quayle. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Hardcover: 245pp.**

Should Linda Quayle ever feel the need to re-title her fine book, *Southeast Asia and the English School of International Relations*, it might just read, *The English School: Southeast Asia Strikes* (or, more appropriately, *Talks Back!*). The aim of Quayle’s book is to bring the “English School” (ES) of International Relations (IR) — its key assumptions, propositions and insights — to bear on the international relations of Southeast Asia, at best an infrequent occurrence by the author’s estimation. But what the author has also sought to do, an effort comprising nearly half of the book, is to let Southeast Asia — its human and institutional experiences — inform and enhance the ES. It is this second aspect of Quayle’s work that this reviewer finds most intriguing about the book.

Architecturally, the book is divided into two parts. Part I, titled “The society of states in SEA”, deals primarily with the region as an international society of states, while Part II, titled “International society and others”, critiques ES’s largely state-centric approach and explores how its quintessential concept of *international society* — which states shape and are shaped by, according to Barry Buzan — can be “stretched” to incorporate analysis of non-state elements. Quayle argues that ES succeeds where competing theories of IR fail for two key reasons. First, as a “holistic” theory, its inclusivity permits state and non-state actors alike to be brought into the conversation. Second, its critical attention to what Quayle calls “‘in between’ spaces” allows ES to help bridge the chasms around which major battles have been fought and blood spilled — or worse, academic careers demolished — over theory (e.g., Realism versus

Constructivism), levels-of-analysis (e.g., state versus non-state), and ontology (e.g., agency versus structure). In short, ES offers Southeast Asia, in Quayle's wonderful phrase, "big pictures and different thinking spaces" (p. 11). In return, Southeast Asia, or "SEA" as the book calls it, offers ES insights on community, hierarchy and agency (p. 15).

Chapter 1 examines the "conflicting narratives" in Southeast Asia between the persistence and prevalence of power, on the one hand, and the aspiration for regional community on the other. ES is proffered as the theoretical cum analytical solution given its ability to intertwine the themes of power and community. Chapter 2 critiques existing theory-oriented interpretations of Southeast Asia, particularly the Realist-Liberal divide and the (in Quayle's view, disappointingly) one-dimensional, ideological conclusions both camps generate regarding Southeast Asia. Here, ES provides the requisite antidote through its *via media* approach and both "thin" and "thick" concepts of international society. Chapter 3 poses a fascinating question: what can Southeast Asia's brute data say in response to the ES framework, and how can the latter be enhanced by the former? Quayle highlights four areas — liberalization, regional identity, economics and functional cooperation — around which the ES notion of *solidarism* might coalesce. Chapter 4 identifies two problems with existing theoretical literature on non-state actors in the region: one, liberal scholarship's dubious tendency to treat ASEAN-civil society dialogue as a hermetically-sealed domain separated from that of "normal politics"; two, a kind of "discursive fragmentation" has occurred wherein multiple narratives on non-state actors exist independently of each other without being permitted to converge and interact as a coherent whole.

Chapter 5 asks how the ground realities of Southeast Asia's intergovernmental-civil society relations can inform and enhance ES's horizontal framing of international society *qua* anarchical society. Quayle offers an intriguing proposition: a vertical framing of international society *qua* "hierarchical society", a "parallel framework" in addition to that of anarchical society, since the lesson drawn from the Southeast Asia experience is that international society is both anarchical and hierarchical. Chapter 6 builds on the preceding chapter by highlighting three common and composite themes — multiple geographies or "spaces", continued salience of the state and the importance of agency — that serve as the backdrops where the dynamics of hierarchy are played out. Finally, Chapter 7 provides snapshots of individual experiences that have either been

neglected or not wholly captured by extant IR theories including ES — or, for that matter, by the majority of IR-oriented writings on Southeast Asia. For Quayle, their stories are equally crucial since intergovernmental developments in Southeast Asia, often amount to “an *ex post facto* recognition of the realities of life rather than a conscious policy-driven attempt to set the agenda” (p. 177), as the author, quoting Bill Hayton, puts it. Change is equally if not more the result of “people’s day-to-day actions”.

A key criticism of Western-centric IR theory is its proclivity to treat the non-West as little more than a utilitarian source for colour commentary that affirms rather than challenges extant theory. Quayle rightly deserves to be commended for her insistence and persistence in treating Southeast Asia as a veritable interlocutor whose stories deserve to be heard in their own right. As the author notes, the use of theory is essentially an act in storytelling (p. 2). If so, her book is a laudable effort against tales of Southeast Asia, delivered didactically and with all scholarly conceit, that hew closely to conditions and terms defined by the theoretical metanarrative rather than developed meticulously through earnest conversations between region and theory.

Are there risks involved in undertaking region-theory dialogues? In his seminal essay “Why Is There No International Theory?” Martin Wight, regarded by many as one of the founders of ES, memorably observed that concrete human experience is constantly “bursting the bounds” of the language of IR theory. Quayle would doubtless agree with Wight’s insight. But precisely how far, say, can inter-*nation*-al society be stretched to accommodate an increasing array of elements and variables without undermining its conceptual integrity? The *via media* of ES is indeed a wide road, but would any further widening make it less a coherent school or tradition and more a broad church where diverse congregants pay lip service to creeds defined by the lowest common denominator? Arguably, Linda Quayle’s book avoids such a pitfall, but similar efforts by lesser minds would probably not.

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