The English School’s contribution to the study of international relations is often seen as a set of descriptively rich concepts that may be employed within a variety of theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, few scholars think that this conceptual vocabulary is adequate. Some take the extreme view that the problems with it are so serious that we should use a different set of concepts, such as ‘global society’ or ‘global civil society’, to replace familiar English School ideas such as ‘international society’. But that is a very sweeping judgment and one that threatens to overlook the value of, among others, the historical insights of the English School. A much more common approach is to begin with the conceptual apparatus provided by the school, expanding or redefining some of its central terms. This has been done from a variety of social theoretical perspectives. A prominent recent example is Alexander Wendt’s refashioning of Martin Wight’s ‘three traditions’ of ‘international theory’ into an account of three different kinds of ‘international social structure’, depending on whether the predominant form of interaction involves enmity (Hobbesian), rivalry (Lockean) or friendship (Kantian). More recently still, Barry Buzan has tried to build the English School’s tripartite distinction between international system, international society and world society into a more robust taxonomy, embracing, for example, a distinction between global and regional international societies, and firming up the school’s rather ambiguous idea of world society, in order to create a framework that will allow us to monitor structural changes in international relations particularly with a view to charting processes of globalization.

My goal in this chapter is not to assess these various ways of developing the English School’s concepts, each of which may well have merit on its own terms. Rather it is to explore the resources that the school offers for an interpretive sociology of international relations and to ask how we might want to reconstruct some of their core concepts in order to develop such an approach. This appears to be an especially appropriate line of enquiry because the English School’s methodological orientation, although notoriously difficult to pin down, has often been seen as an approximation to
verstehen, and their concepts have frequently been described as ‘ideal types’ in a broadly Weberian sense. But there have been very limited attempts to develop a systematic analysis of how Max Weber’s methodological ideas might be employed in our field. My intention is therefore first to explain what a Weberian ‘ideal type’ is (since it is emphatically not just any kind of conceptual abstraction) and how concepts so constructed should be used to interpret the meaning and significance of social phenomena.

This effort should not be understood in any purely descriptive sense, as, for example, Buzan’s classification of international system, international society and world society as different forms of international interaction. As will become clear from the discussion of Weber’s method, in order to employ these essentially descriptive terms, they need to be related to values, and the pivotal English School concept in this respect is the idea of order and also, although to a less developed extent, justice. The school always saw the establishment of order in world politics as involving the realisation of certain values, and it was this that allowed them to make judgments about the cultural significance of international phenomena, such as the existence (or decline) of a society of states. That, in a nutshell, is what gives much of the English School’s work its character as a distinctive interpretation of international relations, rather than a general theory of how international actors behave, or simply a narrative history of what they have done in the past. Once the general methodological principles involved in this approach to interpretive sociology have been identified, we can then use them to assess and build upon the work of the English School.

The second half of the chapter is therefore primarily concerned with three questions. How did the English School define the concept of order in world politics? How did they interpret actual international phenomena, especially the existence of an ‘international society’, in relationship to its core values? And, how does their approach compare with Weber’s methodological principles for interpretive sociology? In it, I will contrast the very well-known definition of international order given by Hedley Bull in The Anarchical Society with that which appears in Martin Wight’s essay on ‘Western Values in International Relations’. I will then suggest some alternative ways in which order may also be understood.

Weber’s method for interpretive sociology

According to Weber, ‘knowledge of the cultural significance of concrete historical events and patterns is exclusively and solely the final end which, among other means, concept-construction and the criticism of constructs also seek to serve’. This succinct formulation, which lays bare the interpretive ambitions of his enquiry, captures two of the essential methodological principles that inform his approach. First, at least within the field of the social sciences, we are always ultimately concerned with ‘cultural