Reassessing the Expansion of the International Society

The expansion of the international society as articulated by the English School is, arguably, the only effective and generally accepted grand narrative that prevails in International Relations. Nevertheless, it has come under increasing criticism in recent years for its pronounced Eurocentric bias.[i] There is, of course, a powerful school of thought that argues that such criticisms are inevitable because grand narratives are inherently suspect.[ii] But in recent years, the importance of grand narratives has started to be reasserted.[iii] It is timely, therefore, to reassess this particular grand narrative.

The narrative is very closely associated with the English School, of course, because Bull and Watson, two of its key members edited *The Expansion of International Society* – a seminal text.[iv] But it is important to recognize that Bull himself identified the narrative as the "standard European view", not one distinctive to English School thinking.[v] Moreover, Bull and Watson were also quite open about its Eurocentric character, insisting that "it is not our perspective, but the historical record itself that can be called Eurocentric."[vi]

Bull and Watson fail to identify the constituent elements of a "standard account" but it seems to be along the lines that the contemporary international society originated in Europe where over several centuries a unique society of states evolved. Only in Europe did states exchange diplomatic missions in order to symbolize and ensure a continuity in relations, build up a body of international law to regulate relations and, more specifically, thereby dictate the terms under which war could be conducted, and, moreover, only in Europe did statesmen self-consciously begin to think in terms of a balance of power, with the great powers eventually managing their collective relations in order to preserve the balance.[vii] Elements of these institutions may be found elsewhere but this repertoire of institutions has to be regarded as unique to Europe.

The "standard account" then assumes that this extensively developed international society became the prototype for the contemporary global international society and, on the face of it, what Bull and Watson wanted to do, therefore, was to map in more detail how this European society of sovereign states expanded outwards to become the basis for the contemporary global international society of sovereign states.

In fact, Bull and Watson's perspective is much more complex than the standard account allows and, indeed, Bull insists that the standard account manifests obvious "absurdities", such as the idea that ancient states like China, Egypt, or Persia only became sovereign entities when they joined the European international society.[viii]

Significantly, Bull and Watson also acknowledge that contemporary Third World states challenge the "standard account" because these states have refused to accept that they were only recently admitted into a European international society and speak instead of their "re-admission to a general international society of states and peoples whose independence had been wrongfully denied."[ix]

A close reading of Bull and Watson indicates that their grand narrative does, in practice, substantiate this view of Third World states. Certainly their analysis fails to endorse the "standard account" – at least, in the form that I have outlined. Instead, they insist that Europe did not evolve institutions and then export them. On the contrary, the expansion of Europe and the evolution of its international society are treated as "simultaneous processes, which influenced and affected each other."[x] Although they never systematically explore the full implications of this

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proposition the text does illustrate this interactive process in the analysis of the later stages of European expansion.

To demonstrate this point, it is necessary to identify two distinct and important moves made in the text. The first move involves the recognition that the narrative must start long before traditional assessments of when the European international society came into existence. It opens when we start to identify the territorial growth of Latin Christendom. But this first move also acknowledges that at the same time there existed a range of discrete regional international societies as well as Latin Christendom, which included the Arab-Islamic system, the Indian subcontinent, the Mongol Tartars on the Eurasian steppes, and China. Apart from the steppes, all these regions retained their independent identity into the nineteenth century.

Watson notes that Latin Christendom expanded initially into the peripheries of what came to be known as Europe, and then this colonization process later embraced the Americas, so they too "became an extension of Christendom."[xi]

But even before this point, Christendom was already evolving along a very distinctive track. The other Eurasian international societies are all identified as suzerain state systems.[xii] But throughout Europe's history as a distinct region, although there were recurrent attempts by various states to establish suzerain status, none was ever successful.

From the sixteenth century onwards, the Europeans acquired increasing control over the oceans and seas around the globe but they lacked the ability to penetrate the landmasses in Africa, Eurasia or the Americas (apart from Mexico and Peru). Instead they operated largely on the periphery of all these continents where they "were accepted by the indigenous communities on a basis of equality as useful trading partners."[xiii]

Bull and Watson's first move leads to the conclusion, therefore, that it is possible to identify the emergence of a "loose Eurasian system or quasi-system" within which the European states "sought to deal with Asian states on the basis of moral and legal equality."[xiv]

At the start of the nineteenth century, therefore, the Europeans still acknowledged that they operated in a global arena where groups of states operated according to their own distinctive norms and institutions. Nevertheless, the Europeans were also to some extent integrated into these societies as either equals or subordinates. The ability of the Europeans to engage in trade and diplomacy around the world on the basis of signed agreements, therefore, provides evidence of a nascent global international society beginning to emerge.

Bull and Watson's second move is made during the course of the nineteenth century when they identify a very dramatic transformation in the fundamental features of global international relations. One aspect of this transformation relates to technological advances. These permitted, first, pronounced and widespread falls in freight rates, with "(q)uantum and qualitative leaps forward in international economic relations."[xv]   Second, the development of steam power made it possible for the Europeans to penetrate the interior of Africa and China up their major rivers. Where there were no available rivers, the "speed of rail construction was astonishing."[xvi] Third, quick-firing, long-range firearms developed although Howard argues, fourthly, that improvements in "European medical techniques" were even more crucial for European penetration of Africa and Asia.[xvii]

None of these developments by themselves had to lead to a transformation in international relations. They could simply have led to an intensification of established relations within the nascent global international society. But the impact of these developments was ratcheted up because they were accompanied by some equally remarkable changes in the self-image of the Europeans and Americans. It was this factor that proved crucial in transforming the nature of an evolving global international society.

According to Brownlie, European and American international lawyers precipitated this change. By the middle of the nineteenth century it was agreed that state personality was determined by a collective recognition of statehood, but "recognition was not dependent upon any objective legal criteria."[xviii] Whereas it was assumed that the European and American states – erstwhile members of Christendom – possessed state personality, large numbers of non-

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European political entities that had been treated as sovereign in the past were not now considered eligible to acquire statehood.

The justification for this development is linked to the increasing reference to "modern civilized states" by nineteenth century international lawyers. But Brownlie is quite clear that the change, in practice, "interacted with an increase in European cultural chauvinism and racial theories."[xix] Vincent argues that whereas there was a "relative lack of colour consciousness among Europeans in earlier ages of expansion," in the nineteenth century, Europe was responsible for "racializing the world."[xx]

The potential for a nascent global international society made up of large numbers of the existing political units around the world was essentially killed off. It was argued that to acquire statehood, and be permitted to enter the European international society, political entities had to measure up to a European standard of civilization, despite the fact that, as Bull notes, the European states themselves could not live up to every aspect of this standard.[xxi]

This second move reveals that European expansion and the evolution of the international society were closely interlinked.[xxii] But Bull and Watson argue that it is important not to overplay this line of argument because it has the effect of removing any sense of agency from non- European actors. As Howard notes, the Russian response in an earlier era had been to "imitate" the Europeans because they wished to be able to compete more effectively with the Europeans and they then constituted a vanguard that others could follow.[xxiii] States, like the Ottoman Empire, Japan and the Chinese Empire are shown to have followed the same route during the nineteenth century. Moreover, they also very quickly began to translate European and American international law textbooks and this helped them to assert their rights against the Europeans.[xxiv] On the other hand, there were now also many independent political units that had been acknowledged as equals in an earlier era but were soon to be absorbed into the expanding European empires and successfully prevented, at least for the time being, from participating in the evolving European based international society.

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Richard Little *is a former editor of the Review of International Studies and a former chair of the British International Studies Association. He is now an Emeritus Professor at the University of Bristol and a Fellow of the British Academy. This article is part of e-IR's edited collection, System, Society & the World: Exploring the English School.*

[i] See Turan Kayaoglu, "Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations

Theory," *International Studies Review* 12:2 (2010), 193-217 and Joel Quirk, Shogo Suzuki and Yongjin Zhang, *Before the Rise of the West: International Orders in the Early Modern Europe* (London, Routledge, 2013).

[ii] See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. Geoff Nennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

[iii] See Andrew Linklater, "Grand Narratives and International Relations," *Global Change, Peace and Security* 21:1 (2009), 3-17 and David Armitage "What's the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée," *History of European Ideas* 38:4 (2012), 493-507.

[iv] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984)

[v] Hedley Bull, "The Emergence of a Universal International Society," in Bull and Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society*, 123.

[vi] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, "Introduction" in *Expansion of International Society,* 2.

[vii] The list reflects the five institutions that constitute an international society in Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

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[viii] Hedley Bull, "The Emergence of a Universal International Society," in Bull and Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society*, 123.

[ix] Bull and Watson "Introduction," *Expansion of International Society,* 8.

[x] Bull and Watson "Introduction," *Expansion of International Society,* 6.

[xi] Adam Watson, "European International Society and Its Expansion" in Bull and Watson (eds), *Expansion of International Society*. As Bartlett shows, Latin Christendom virtually doubled in size between 930 and 1350. See Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350* (London: Penguin Books, 1994). But what Watson fails to note is that the other regions he identifies were following a very similar route, see David A. Ringrose, *Expansion and Global Interaction 1200-1700* (New York: Longman, 2001).

[xii] See Martin Wight *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977).

[xiii] Michael Howard, "The Military Factor in European Expansion," in Bull and Watson *Expansion of International Society*, 34.

[xiv] Bull and Watson, "Introduction," *Expansion of International Society,* 5.

[xv] Patrick O'Brien, "Europe in the World Economy," in Bull and Watson (eds), *Expansion of International Society*, 50.

[xvi] Howard, "The Military Factor in European Expansion," in Bull and Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society*, 39.

[xvii] Howard, "The Military Factor in European Expansion," in Bull and Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society*, 38.

[xviii] Ian Brownlie, "The Expansion of International Society: The Consequences for International Law" in Bull and Watson (eds), *Expansion of International Society,* 362.

[xix] Brownlie, "The Expansion of International Society" in Bull and Watson (eds), *Expansion of International Society*, 362

[xx] R.J.Vincent, "Racial Equality" in Bull and Watson (eds), *Expansion of International Society*, 241.

[xxi] Hedley Bull, "The Emergence of a Universal International Society" in Bull and Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society*, 125.

[xxii] This point has been greatly expanded in recent literature. See Anthony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jordon Branch, "'Colonial reflection' and Territoriality: The Peripheral Origins of Sovereign Statehood," *European Journal of International Relations* 18:2 (2012), 277-297; and Lacy Pejcinovic *War in International Society* (London: Routledge, 2013)

[xxiii] Michael Howard, "The Military Factor in European Expansion" in Bull and Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society*, 36.

[xxiv] Gerrit W. Gong, "China's Entry into International Society" in Bull and Watson (eds), *Expansion of International Society*, 180-81.; Hidemi Suganami, "Japan's Entry in International Society" in Bull and Watson (eds), *Expansion of International Society* 195; Bull, 'The Emergence of a Universal International Society' in *Expansion of International Society*, 121.

About the author:

Richard Little is a former editor of the *Review of International Studies* and a former chair of the British International Studies Association. He is now an Emeritus Professor at the University of Bristol and a Fellow of the British Academy.