

Another Revolt Against the West?

Written by Jason Ralph

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JASON RALPH, MAY 13 2013

In his contribution to Part III of the English School 1985 classic *The Expansion of International Society*, Hedley Bull describes what he called “the revolt against the West”.^[i] At the turn of the twentieth century, Bull argued, European and Western powers “expressed a sense of self-assurance, both about the durability of their position in international society and its moral purpose.”^[ii] That, however, did not survive the First World War. From that point on a revolt against western dominance unfolded in “five phases or themes,” which Bull identified as an anti-colonial revolution and the struggle for equal sovereignty, racial equality, economic justice and cultural liberation. This was brought about by five factors. There was, Bull argued, a “psychological awakening” in the non-Western world, “a weakening of the will on the part of the Western powers to maintain their position of dominance, or to at least accept the costs necessary to do so,” the rise of new powers such as the Soviet Union, “a more general equilibrium of power” and “a transformation of the legal and moral climate of international relations” which was influenced by the majorities of votes held by Third World states.

It is tempting to read this narrative into an analysis of contemporary international society. The coordination of positions by the BRICS – Brazil Russia, India, China and South Africa – represents some kind of psychological awakening; a post-Iraq, post-Great Recession United States suggests a weakening of the West’s willingness to maintain its position of dominance; and the rise of China promises the return of a general balance of power. These parallels need to be qualified. Christopher Layne’s argument that this time predictions of American decline are real is for instance contested, and so is the idea that “BRICS” is anything more than an acronym that conveniently frames the photo opportunities of non-western leaders.^[iii] There is, however, something in Bull’s analysis that offers an interesting angle on contemporary international society. Bull noted in 1985 for instance how the grouping together of Third World states had transformed their subject status and helped to change the legal and moral climate across international society.

The equal rights of non-Western states to sovereignty, the rights of non-Western peoples to self-determination, the rights of non-white races to equal treatment, non-Western peoples to economic justice, and non-Western cultures to dignity and autonomy – these are today clearly spelt out in conventions having the force of law.^[iv]

Central to this was the ability of these states “to call upon the prestige of numbers, not merely of states but of persons, accruing to the states claiming to represent a majority of the world’s population.”^[v] Implicit in this formulation is the argument that the norms and laws that characterise international society are responsive to legitimacy claims that are based on a democratic ethos of representativeness.

This is relevant today because it draws attention to the exclusionary hierarchies contained in contemporary international society and how they cannot be legitimised by “the prestige of numbers.” The exclusion of India – the world’s largest democracy – from permanent UN Security Council status is testament to that. It also sheds light on that aspect of the BRICS agenda which seeks to hold western governments to account before the international mandates of institutions like the UN Security Council and to reform those institutions so that they are more representative. Their reaction to the Libyan intervention and the Brazilian call for a “Responsibility while Protecting” can be partially understood in this context.

When English School scholarship highlights “the prestige of numbers”, and the normative power of

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representativeness, it does not necessarily mean it is a voice advocating reform. Its understanding of international society has always placed democratic values like representativeness and accountability in a normative framework where international order, and the power to guarantee it, is also valued. In this sense the exclusionary hierarchies of the UN Security Council, as well as less representative forms of hegemony like American empire, might be valued if they effectively provide public goods like order. This is especially so if they can encourage “followership”. Recent English School scholarship captures this debate extremely well. Andrew Hurrell, for instance, juxtaposes “effectiveness” alongside “representation”, noting that

“those who reject calls for a reform and expansion of the permanent membership of the Security Council often rest their arguments on the importance of effectiveness. Yes, reform might promote representation, but at what cost? If a Council of 25 or 26 is even less able to act effectively than the current arrangement, then how has this increased the legitimacy of the organization?”^[vi]

Ian Clark, too, notes how the Security Council often requires American support to be effective, which invariably requires granting the US the kind of latitude that risks delegitimizing the Council in the eyes of other states. He adds that expanding the Council on “symbolic” rather than “material” grounds runs the risk of widening the gulf between its representative legitimacy, and its efficacy-based legitimacy, all the more so if any expansion of permanent membership were in some way explicitly intended to constrain the influence of the United States.^[vii]

An “efficacy-based” conception of legitimacy may, in other words, confer “special rights and responsibilities on the state with the resources to lead” in ways that counteract “the prestige of numbers”.^[viii] This is the kind of “middle-way” thinking that characterises much of the English School thinking. For the BRICS, they may be able to combine efficacy-based arguments with a plea to representativeness in order to promote their voice in international decision-making. But for others, any argument that prioritises efficacy over representation is bound to be seen as proof of the English School’s conservative image.

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[i] Hedley Bull, “The Revolt against the West” *The Expansion of International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 217-228.

[ii] Bull, “The Revolt”, 219.

[iii] Christopher Layne, “This Time it’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56:1 (2012), 203-13. See also debate between Layne, William Wohlforth and Stephen G. Brooks in Michael Cox and Doug Stokes (eds), *US Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 409-30.

[iv] Bull, “The Revolt”, 227.

[v] Bull, “The Revolt”, 227.

[vi] Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order. Power, Values and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87.

[vii] Ian Clark, *Hegemony in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153-4. See also Ian Clark and Christian Reus-Smit, “Liberal internationalism, the practice of special responsibilities and evolving politics of the security council,” *International Politics* 50:1 (2013), 38-56.

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[viii] Clark, *Hegemony*, 175.

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