

# Reassessing 'The Expansion of International Society'

Written by Richard Little

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RICHARD LITTLE, JAN 28 2016

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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 putatively pronounced Eurocentric bias.[1] There is, of course, a powerful school of thought that argues that such criticisms are inevitable because grand narratives are inherently suspect.[2] Indeed, according to Andrew Linklater, there is now 'a consensus' across the social sciences that regards any attempt to develop a grand or meta-narrative as profoundly regressive, although he also acknowledges that in recent years the importance of grand narratives has started to be reasserted.[3] It is timely, therefore, to reassess this particular grand narrative.

The narrative is very closely associated with the English School because Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, two of its key members, edited *The Expansion of International Society* – a seminal text that provides a detailed and extensive examination of how the modern international society emerged and evolved.[4] According to Brunello Vigizzi, the book is the English School's 'most organic and coherent achievement.'[5] But it is important to recognise that Bull himself identified the expansion narrative as the 'standard European view', not one distinctive to English School thinking.[6] 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'.[7]

Bull and Watson, however, fail to identify succinctly the constituent elements of this 'standard account', although it seems to follow the line 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 symbolise and ensure a continuity in relations, build up a body of international law to regulate relations among states 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.[8] Elements of these key 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 expanded outwards to become the basis for the contemporary global international society of sovereign states.

In fact, the picture that emerges from the large number of chapters that appear in Bull and Watson's text 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 and Persia only became sovereign entities when they joined the European international society.[9] It is also relevant to note that initially the first generation of English

# Reassessing 'The Expansion of International Society'

Written by Richard Little

School scholars were primarily interested in examining these earlier historical manifestations of international society formed in various places around the globe in order to establish a better understanding of the contemporary international society.[10] They came to focus on the expansion of international society project only because the task of providing a comparative historical study of international societies appeared to be too ambitious.[11]

Significantly, Bull and Watson also acknowledge that contemporary Third World or Developing World states challenge the 'standard account' of the expansion story 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.'[12] In other words, Bull and Watson were fully aware of the argument that the European international society had at some point distanced itself from a broader international society that the European states had previously been members of. The implications of this argument are examined more fully below.

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 here. 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.'[13] Although they never systematically explore the full implications of this 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 most assessments of when the European international society came into existence. Rather than being a product of the sixteenth or seventeenth century it is necessary to trace developments over more than a thousand years. For most of this time Christendom and then Europe was only a minor player within Eurasia and as contact with other international societies across Eurasia increased so there was no alternative but to accommodate to the rules that governed these other international societies. The details of this long historical period are, however, only lightly sketched in Bull and Watson and most of the text focuses on a second move that makes the point that it was only in the nineteenth century that members of the European international society began to promote their own status and in doing so denigrate members of the other Eurasian international societies. From this perspective then, the contemporary global international society is very much a product of the nineteenth century.

It follows that the narrative that emerges in Bull and Watson is very much at odds with traditional thinking in international relations. The best-known date associated with the emergence of the modern international society is 1648 in the wake of the Treaty of Westphalia, although this assessment is now often considered to be a myth and there is growing support from a variety of sources for the idea that the modern international society only emerged in the nineteenth century.[14] But in any event, for Bull and Watson it is necessary to start the story very much earlier than the nineteenth century or even the seventeenth century and they begin by examining the territorial growth of Latin Christendom. With this first move there is also the acknowledgement that at that time there existed a range of discrete regional international societies that included the Arab-Islamic system, the Indian subcontinent, the Mongol Tartars on the Eurasian steppes, and China. Apart from the Eurasian steppes, all these regional international societies retained their independent identity into the nineteenth century, although by the end of that century they had all collapsed and the member states had been co-opted into an emerging global international society dominated by Europeans.[15]

Watson notes that Latin Christendom expanded initially into the peripheries of what came to be known as Europe, and then this colonisation process later embraced the Americas, so they too 'became an extension of Christendom.'[16] But what Watson fails to note is that at the same time the other international societies he identifies were following a very similar route of expansion.[17] It was only in the nineteenth century that it became apparent that Europeans had developed the potential capacity to influence in a very significant way all areas of the globe.

Long before the era of European overseas expansion, however, Christendom had already extended its borders very substantially. As Bartlett shows, Latin Christendom virtually doubled in size between 930 and 1350.[18] So the

# Reassessing 'The Expansion of International Society'

Written by Richard Little

process of European empire building began within Europe and only later did the process extend overseas. But from an English School perspective it is also important to recognise that the process of European expansion evolved along a very distinctive track. The other Eurasian international societies are all identified as suzerain state systems, with the component states subordinate to a suzerain or hegemonic state. By contrast, throughout Europe's history as a distinct region there was always a plurality of competing states, and despite recurrent attempts by a number of these states to establish a hegemonic or suzerain status across Christendom, none was ever successful.

Yet, paradoxically, there is no substantial attempt in Bull and Watson to examine the idea of Europe as a distinctive system of empires. Of course, there has been some discussion of empires in the IR literature, particularly in recent years, but virtually no analysis of a society of empires, apart from a very brief discussion in Wight where he talks about secondary states systems made up of empires (or suzerain state systems, in his terminology).[19] But the only examples given disappeared long before the emergence of Christendom. Significantly, there is simply no acknowledgement by Wight, or within the field more generally, that the prevailing international society of states is the product of a society of empires and that this transformation is a very recent development. Nor was there any attempt by the first generation of English School scholars to explore the role that the colonies played in the development of the European international society. Within the English School this is now recognised as a major shortcoming.[20]

Yet from the start, the dominant units in Christendom and the nascent European international society were empires, engaged in a process of colonisation. Because there is no engagement with this development in Bull and Watson, there is no discussion of how the formation of empires played a crucial role in the transformation of the hierarchically structured Christendom through to the anarchically structured international society.[21]

This oversight, however, is not particularly surprising because it is no more than a reflection of the hegemonic dominance of the 'Westphalian myth' that prevailed at that time, not only in the study of international relations, but across the social sciences and humanities. As David Armitage notes,

the rise of nationalist historiography in the nineteenth century had placed the history of the nation-state at the centre of European historical enquiry and distinguished the state from the territorial empires that preceded it, and in turn from the extra-European empires strung across the globe.[22]

The 'myth' presupposes that in 1648 a society of sovereign states emerged in Westphalia and this society eventually extended across the globe. As a consequence, the vital link between empires and states has simply not been observed in international relations. But as Armitage argues, more recently it has started to be acknowledged that empires 'gave birth to states and states stood at the heart of empires. Accordingly the most precocious nation-states of early-modern Europe were the great empire-states: the Spanish monarchy, Portugal, the Dutch Republic, France and England (later Britain).[23] Yet, because nation-states and empires are conventionally treated as opposing political structures, the role of empires in the development of the European international society of states has been either ignored or left perennially ambiguous in most fields of study. Even so, the failure in Bull and Watson to interrogate the relationship between states and empires more closely remains odd, because Heeren's *History of the Political System of Europe and Its Colonies* written at the start of the nineteenth century places the colonies at the heart of the story and this was a book that both Bull and Watson greatly admired.[24] Indeed, Heeren's concept of a states system can be seen as the precursor and source of the English School's concept of an international society.

Prior to the nineteenth century, however, European colonisation remained very circumscribed. Despite the fact that from the sixteenth century onwards, the Europeans acquired increasing control over the oceans and seas around the globe they lacked the ability to penetrate the landmasses in Africa, Eurasia and 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'.[25]

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'.[26] Bull and Watson do not describe this Eurasian system as a full-blown international society but it is certainly depicted as a nascent international society.

# Reassessing 'The Expansion of International Society'

Written by Richard Little

As a consequence, at the start of the nineteenth century 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 relates to developments that took place during the course of the nineteenth century when they identify a dramatic transformation in the fundamental features of global international relations.[27] One aspect of this transformation relates to technological advances. According to O'Brien, these advances permitted, first, pronounced and widespread falls in freight rates, with '(q)uantum and qualitative leaps forward in international economic relations.'[28] Only at this point, according to O'Brien, is it possible to envisage the emergence of a worldwide economic system. 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.'[29] 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.[30]

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 Ian Brownlie, European and American international lawyers helped to precipitate and facilitate 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'.[31] Whereas it was assumed that the European and American states – erstwhile members of Christendom – possessed state personality, large numbers of non-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 civilised 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.'[32] 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'.[33]

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 civilisation, despite the fact that, as Bull notes, the European states themselves could not live up to every aspect of this standard.[34]

This second move reveals that European expansion and the evolution of the international society were closely interlinked.[35] 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.[36] 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.[37] 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.

# Reassessing 'The Expansion of International Society'

Written by Richard Little

Although it remains the case that the Europeans, but now more especially the Americans, are still endeavouring to employ their own cultural norms and institutions to define the essential features of the global international society, these endeavours have always been challenged and there is no doubt that the contemporary structure of the global international society is essentially multicultural in orientation. In Bull and Watson there are two chapters that explore this phenomenon and they come to diametrically opposed conclusions. Adda Bozeman argues that the brief historical period when Western norms and institutions prevailed has gone and this poses a fundamental challenge for European and American diplomacy, with Western diplomats having to function as they did before the nineteenth century 'in a world that has no common culture and no overarching political order, and that is no longer prepared to abide by western standards of international conduct'.<sup>[38]</sup> By contrast, Ronald Dore argues that there is a need to distinguish between universal and idiosyncratic values and interests and he is convinced that despite the obvious existence of diversity there are universal values that underpin an emerging world culture.<sup>[39]</sup>

Thirty years after *The Expansion of the International Society* was published, this debate remains as germane as ever. But it is also clear that the debate is more complex than is presented in Bull and Watson. Bozeman's assumes that the Western values that prevailed in the nineteenth century were essentially benign, whereas elsewhere in the book it is made clear that these values promoted the deeply problematic notion of a standard of civilisation that in practice reflected an essentially racist view of the world. By the same token, it is also far from clear that there is a set of universally accepted values in our contemporary world. Nevertheless, it remains the case that a careful reading of Bull and Watson indicates that they established a framework for thinking about international relations that was highly distinctive at the time it was written and retrospectively can be seen to have opened up avenues of thought that remain remarkably prescient and relevant.

## Notes

[1] See Turan Kayaoglu, 'Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory', *International Studies Review* 12:2 (2010), 193-217; and Shogo Suzuki, Yongjin Zhang and Joel Quirk, eds, *Before the Rise of the West*.

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

[3] 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.

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

[5] Brunello Vigezzi, *The British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (1954–1985): The Rediscovery of History*, trans. Ian Harvey (Milan: Edizioni Unicopli, 2005), 86.

[6] Hedley Bull, 'The Emergence of a Universal International Society', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 123.

[7] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, 'Introduction', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 2.

[8] The list reflects the five institutions – diplomacy, international law, war, balance of power and great power management – that constitute an international society in Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

[9] Bull, 'Universal International Society', 123.

[10] See Brunello Vigezzi, *The British Committee on the Theory of International Politics, 1954–1985* (Milan: Edizione Unicopli Srl, 2005); and also Adam Watson, *The Evolution of the International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, [1992] 2009).

## Reassessing 'The Expansion of International Society'

Written by Richard Little

- [11] Adam Watson did go on to develop a comparative historical study of international societies. See Watson, *The Evolution of the International Society*.
- [12] Bull and Watson, 'Introduction', 8.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 6.
- [14] See, in particular, Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- [15] See David Gillard, 'British and Russian Relations with Asian Governments in the Nineteenth Century', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 87.
- [16] Adam Watson, 'European International Society and Its Expansion', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson.
- [17] See David A. Ringrose, *Expansion and Global Interaction 1200–1700* (New York: Longman, 2001).
- [18] Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).
- [19] See Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977).
- [20] See Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- [21] Jeremy Larkins, *From Hierarchy to Anarchy: Territory and Politics Before Westphalia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- [22] David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 15.
- [24] Richard Little, 'The Expansion of the International Society in Heeren's Account of the European States-system', Working Paper No. 07-08, School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, 2008.
- [25] Michael Howard, 'The Military Factor in European Expansion', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 34.
- [26] Bull and Watson, 'Introduction', 5.
- [27] See Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation*, who argue that the field of International Relations has failed to take account of the transformation of international relations in the nineteenth century but accept that in Bull and Watson there is an acknowledgement of this transformation.
- [28] Patrick O'Brien, 'Europe in the World Economy', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 50.
- [29] Howard, 'Military Factor in European Expansion', 39.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 38.

# Reassessing 'The Expansion of International Society'

Written by Richard Little

[31] Ian Brownlie, 'The Expansion of International Society: The Consequences for International Law', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 362.

[32] Ibid.

[33] R.J. Vincent, 'Racial Equality', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 241.

[34] Bull, 'Universal International Society', 125.

[35] 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).

[36] Howard, 'Military Factor in European Expansion', 36.

[37] Gerrit W. Gong, 'China's Entry into International Society', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 180-181; Hidemi Suganami, 'Japan's Entry into International Society', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 195; Bull, 'Universal International Society', 121.

[38] Adda Bozeman, 'The International Order in a Multicultural World', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 406.

[39] Ronald Dore, 'Unity and Diversity in Contemporary World Culture', in *Expansion of International Society*, eds Bull and Watson, 407-424.

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## 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.