

Is Contemporary International Society Founded on a Common Culture or Civilisation?

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, DEC 3 2007

Scholars of the 'English School', such as Hedley Bull, argue that states exist not in an anarchic system guided purely by power-politics, but rather in an 'international society' formed as a result of certain global norms; namely shared interests, values, rules and institutions. For the majority of English School thinkers, some form of common culture is a necessary prerequisite for these elements, and is therefore crucial for the creation and cohesion of international societies. Wight argued that a 'states-system will not come into being without a degree of cultural unity among its members' (1977: 33), and Bull pronounced that 'the prospects for international society are bound up with the prospects of the cosmopolitan culture' (1984b: 304).

A definition of culture however, is problematic. If one does not assume that they are fixed, but rather are ever-changing and often re-interpreted, then the division between culture and the existing socio-economic and political landscape becomes blurred. As a working definition, culture can be broadly understood as patterns of behaviour which are associated with particular communities or populations. However, as Rengger points out, 'it is an inevitably loose concept that defies rigour and precision' (1992: 84).

In this essay I will refer to historic and contemporary situations which raise questions for the assumption that a common culture underpins international society. Firstly, I will critically assess the notion that a western cultural hegemony has resulted in unity; instead proposing that there has been a backlash towards a perceived western-led attempt to homogenise world culture in its own image. Secondly, I will question whether the universal existence of the nation state can be seen to provide the foundations for a common moral vocabulary. I will suggest that the power of the nation-state has been eroded, and conflict is often a result of clashing civilisations, each with their own cultural identity. Finally, I will devote most attention to addressing the contemporary argument that the global covenant, a procedural and prudential diplomatic consensus, allows unity even when there is cultural diversity. I will address issues in contemporary politics which call into question the existence of a strong global covenant. Specifically, I will

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suggest that neither procedures nor prudence are restraining the world's most powerful actors in today's world.

I will conclude that there is an absence of a common culture to secure the global-norms, leaving the English School approach with numerous issues to address if it is to stand as a useful starting point for looking at International Relations.

Western Cultural Hegemony and the Global Backlash:

Prior to the inclusion of the Ottoman Empire into the European states-system in 1856, European international society had been 'a culturally homogenous community' (O'Hagen, 2005: 214). Modern international society has no such obvious cultural unity, but many theorists argue that a common culture is emerging as a consequence of westernisation and the dominance of a western cosmopolitan ethic.

Theodore Von Laue argues that the global 'revolution of westernisation' has formed a new 'framework of human existence' (1987: 361). Others who have explicitly made the case for contemporary western cultural dominance include, perhaps most famously, Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 article 'The End of History?'.

Nicholas Rengger has observed that academics such as Beitz, Linklater and Hoffman see the world through a 'predominantly' western lens when they argue that a cosmopolitan culture is emerging around a discourse of ethics and emancipatory theory; something which is substantively seen in the UN's 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'. Rengger concludes that they are describing the 'triumph of western culture' in 'contemporary world politics' (1992: 91).

English School thinkers Bull and Watson argued that western values have now been 'embraced by the non-European majority' (1984: 435), and Buzan declares that many western values are 'unquestionably' universal, before going on to make the point that western principles such as democracy are being pushed by the 'vanguardist' US in the Arab world today (2004: 223-224).

However, numerous academics (Bozeman, 1984; Huntington, 1993; Shapcott, 1994; Jackson 2001) note a potentially problematic absence of underlying cultural unity to support an International Society. There are states in East Asia and the Arab world which dispute some of the essential global-norms commonly accepted in the West (Norris and Inglehart, 2002; Mazrui, 2004), and whilst Islamist terrorists (to name but one example) may not represent the majority from their community, they still pose a fundamental challenge to Western values. Academics

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such as Alderson and Hurrell have claimed that emerging tensions have 'threatened to undermine the consensus crucial to the cohesion of international society' (2000: 13). Furthermore, Bull himself acknowledged that this challenge to western values is not spontaneous, but a result of 'intimate contact with modernity' and a direct response to the 'homogenisation of world culture' (in Alderson and Hurrell 2000: 55). Far from the 'preservation and extension of cosmopolitan culture', which Bull called for (1977: 317), there has been a backlash against a perceived Western-led attempt to homogenise civilisation in an image of itself.

Yet despite acknowledging that a backlash against western culture poses a problem for the international society argument, there is little agreement within the English School as to how states should react to this challenge. In stark contrast to Bull's view, Jackson argues that rather than requiring an extension of western 'cosmopolitan culture'; global-norms need to be 'distanced if not divorced' from western values (2001, 47-48). Ali Mazrui takes the middle-ground, proposing that if the principles of the West and Islam are to converge then 'the power of the new American Empire' must be 'circumscribed', western values must 'become less libertarian' and Islam must also 'reconcile itself to modernity' (2004: 793).

The English School has not only failed to show that a dominant western culture underpins international society; it has also failed to provide a convincing response as to how states should deal with the backlash against western cultural influences.

The Decline of the Nation-State and the Emergence of Cultural Fault-Lines:

Whilst acknowledging that the world is home to multiple cultures, some theorists have argued that the globally accepted Western model of the sovereign-state can be cited as a binding factor in the international society. However, a number of academics have noted a gradual erosion of the nation-state, and some have gone on to argue that conflict is now a result of clashing civilisations, each with their own cultural values.

Since the emergence of the Westphalian System in seventeenth century Europe, the nation-state has become one of the West's 'most successful... cultural exports' (Brown, 1988: 345). Bull and Watson observed that the universal nature of the state can be considered one of the 'most striking features of the global international society' (1984: 433). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that it has been offered as a possible unifying factor underpinning international society. Bull believed it to be 'the principle expression... of human unity or solidarity' (1977: 295) whilst Brown argues that a 'common moral vocabulary' can be developed around the centrality of the state. Brown concludes that it is 'one of the relatively few features' that does not leave the 'modern world' divided, unlike the

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'apparently uncomplicated' but nonetheless 'ambiguous' rhetoric which underpin statements such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1988: 343-345).

However, many academics, including Brown himself, have noted that the traditional idea of the nation-state is under threat. It is being undermined in its continent of conception through the emergence of the European Union; its power is being diluted as multi-national corporations and non-governmental organisations increase their influence; and its monopoly on violence is being directly challenged by international terrorists (Brown, 2001: 55; Willetts, 2001: 364; Sakakibara, 1995). Former French Ambassador to the EU, and now UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Marie Guehenno (1995), has declared that the nation-state has been left so powerless in a globalised world that democracy is obsolete and an imperial system is necessary to replace it. Yet if the nation-state is no longer strong enough to provide the foundation of a 'common moral vocabulary', what forms the basis for cultural identity in contemporary international politics?

Huntington (1993; 1996), Sakakibara (1995) and Mahbubani (1992) propose that separate civilisations with their own cultures and their own understandings of global values have a central role in the world today. Whilst Bull was concerned with the impact of culture because of its implications for a possible normative consensus, Huntington controversially argues that cultural diversity itself is the cause of international conflict.

Although the case can be made that common cultures are facilitating regional integration and the formation of Western, Asian, Islamic and Sinic international societies, as the reluctance surrounding Turkey's admission to the European Union demonstrates, this is not something which tends to unite states across cultural boundaries. Instead, as the major cultural groupings emerge and become more pronounced they are becoming the source of the 'principal conflicts of global politics' (Huntington, 1993). Specifically, three civilisations are identified as likely to generate wars; the West, seen as in decline; the Sinic, seen as an emerging power; and the Islamic world, which Huntington argues is unstable and inherently violent (1996: 81-121, 255). The result, we are told, is that 'fault-lines' will materialise along the borders of these civilisations, and they will 'increasingly' be the sites of conflict. Civilisations, Huntington concludes, 'are the ultimate human tribes, and the clash of civilisations is tribal conflict on a global scale' (1996: 207).

Eisuke Sakakibara (1995) has proposed a similar argument, although without the conclusion that conflict will necessarily be the consequence of people identifying with their civilisations over their state. Sakakibara identifies Western progressivism as the primary source of conflict during the Cold War. He argues that the 're-emergence of civilisation[al] consciousness is directly related to deep disillusionment with the ideology of progressivism'. He deduces that the '21st century will be an age in which multiple civilisations compete, interact [and] coexist'.

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Huntington's thesis in particular has attracted much criticism. The notion that fault-line wars will 'increasingly' set the agenda for the post-cold war environment is specifically attacked by Robert Jackson (2001: 396), who points out that 'history is full of this kind of conflict'. Jackson concludes that 'fault line wars are not new at all', and offers European expansionism during colonial times, conflicts within Christianity, and the Crusades as convincing evidence for his case. However, this observation does little to promote the argument for a culturally under-pinned international society, and if anything, may undermine it further. Jackson's second criticism of Huntington's analysis is that he is unaware of the 'norms of the global covenant'; an issue I will address in the final section.

Far from being the solid expression of unity Bull claimed, the centrality of the nation-state is being eroded. The concept that multiple civilisations form the basis of cultural identities, and that these civilisations often cause conflict, has not been convincingly addressed by English School thinkers.

The Global Covenant and American Hegemony:

In 1984 Bull observed that when considering the role of 'common culture in international society' one can distinguish between 'the common stock of ideas and values possessed by official representatives of states' and the 'intellectual and moral culture that determines the attitudes towards the states system of the societies that compose it'. (1984b: 304-305). The concept of a culture unique to the diplomatic elite has been revised and revived by Robert Jackson in his work, 'The Global Covenant'. Jackson too believes that statespeople have a significant role to play in underpinning international society. Unlike Bull however (1984b: 305), he does not suggest that the 'global' nature of international society means that diplomats have to 'share deeper assumptions regarding social morality or political culture' (2000: 24). Instead, he argues that statespeople must merely engage with the 'normative dialogue of world politics' which they are required to 'observe in their foreign policies and international activities'. This dialogue, Jackson declares, already embodies a 'common code of conduct', allowing the global covenant to exist 'despite the absence of a common culture or civilisation' to support it (2001: 23-24).

The 'common code of conduct' is formed, Jackson argues, from 'international procedure' and 'international prudence'. The basic procedural norms include '(1) sovereign equality...; (2) refraining from the threat or use of force; (3) inviolability of frontiers; (4) territorial integrity of states; (5) peaceful settlement of disputes; (6) non intervention in internal affairs [and] (7) respect for human rights' (2001: 16-17). International procedures essentially describe the basic principles which guide every-day international politics. However, procedures still leave statespeople with decisions and dilemmas, meaning prudence is necessary to restrict the use of power. Prudence is therefore the ultimate virtue of a statesperson (Jackson, 2001: 20). For Jackson, 'international relations fundamentally involves a

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conversation or dialogue'; the universal adoption of western diplomatic practices has made such a dialogue a necessity, and from this materialise the norms of the 'global covenant' (2000: 30).

Jackson's work has already attracted criticism from Lu (2001) for its 'inaccurate sociological conception of insulated political communities' and from Copeland (2003: 430) for adding little to the IR debate aside from encouraging 'states to co-exist through the mutual recognition of sovereignty'. I will address contemporary issues in world politics that suggest that neither 'international procedure' nor 'international prudence' is restricting the world's most powerful states.

Jackson argues that the norms of state-sovereignty and non-intervention are more sacred than respect for human rights, because if broken, they are the more likely to cause conflict between the great powers. By this reading, many of the most important procedural norms are embodied within the Westphalian System.

However, the recent activities of the USA as a hegemonic state calls into question the influence of procedural norms. President Bush's post-September 11th policy of pre-emptive strikes 'threatens to a degree the sovereign rights of every state on the planet and poses serious war dangers to all peoples in the world' (Falk, 2002: 333). Bellamy declares that the 'seeming inability of internationally agreed norms and rules to constrain the worlds most powerful actors' may pose a fundamental problem for the English School (2004: 1). The increasing willingness of powerful states to resort to force, without necessarily gaining (or even seeking) international backing, brings the relevance of Jackson's procedural norms into question.

Yet violations of the procedural norms established at the Peace of Westphalia do not in themselves signify the end of an international society; such breaches have been frequently seen in the international system. Krasner refers to this as 'organised hypocrisy' and states that it is a 'characteristic of international environments' (2001). Jackson too acknowledges that normative procedure is sometimes violated because 'other moral considerations' have taken precedence; hence his emphasis on the importance of prudence (2000: 20).

The 'fundamentally pluralist' nature of the international environment means that states must consider the consequences of their actions (Jackson, 2000: 42). However, the US now has an almost global monopoly on military power; its rivals do not even try to compete for air, sea or technological supremacy (Easterbrook, 2003). In 1977 Bull worried that if the 'full extent' of the great power's 'special rights and duties' were made 'explicit', it 'would engender more antagonism than the international order could support' (pg 221). The explicit American hegemony and a foreign policy driven by exceptionalism is undermining claims for an international society. Such is US military might that Tim

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Dunne has argued that 'even prudential considerations are not sufficient to compel [the US] to act in ways that support international order' (2003: 305). If one considers the 'primary purpose' of international society to be the 'regulation or elimination of forms of warfare that threaten international order', then Dunne concludes that 'there is good reason for fearing that the element of society is absent from world politics' (2003: 306). The global covenant cannot be said to be underpinning international society when increasingly the world's most powerful actors are unrestrained by procedural and prudential norms.

However, it is not these norm-violations in themselves which are most damaging to Jackson's concept of the 'global covenant'. There have been numerous occasions in international history when norms have been disregarded. What is important for Jackson is that 'when power is used... it has to be justified' (2000: 20). Bull also alludes to this point when he claims that: 'the state which alleges a just cause, even one it does not itself believe in, is at least acknowledging that it owes other states an explanation of its conduct'. (1977: 43). What is so damaging for Jackson's global covenant, is that powerful actors appear to be withdrawing from the normative dialogue altogether.

As Richard Falk observes, America asserted its 'preventative war prerogatives without even seeking the backing of coalition partners, much less a willingness to proceed by the way of the UN' (2001: 333). America's decision to invade Iraq was not limited by a clear lack of legitimacy; Tony Blair, vulnerable to British public opinion, was the driving force behind seeking UN backing (Kampfner, 2003: 263). As an unnamed British official puts it; the US 'did not make much effort' to justify its cause (in Dunne, 2003: 312). George Bush's declaration (in Hurrell, 2002) a week after September 11th that, 'there are no rules' to observe in the international system leaves in doubt not just the efficacy of the global covenant as a means to underpin international society, but its very existence.

Conclusion:

I have argued that international Society is lacking a common culture to underpin it. Firstly, far from emerging as a unifying factor, western cultural hegemony is inciting a backlash against the perceived homogenisation of the world in a western image. English School theorists are inconclusive as to how states should react to this challenge.

Secondly, the centrality of the nation state has been eroded; it cannot be seen to underpin an international society where people often identify primarily with their civilisation or culture. The argument that conflicts are often a result of people identifying strongly with certain civilisations further undermines the concept of an international society.

Finally, a policy of US exceptionalism is undermining Robert Jackson's assertion that a common culture is

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not necessary to secure international society because norms are embedded in the global covenant. Procedural and prudential norms have not been enough to restrain America's preventative military policy. Furthermore, America's resort to unilateral force suggests that the presence of a normative dialogue in international politics may be being undermined by an explicit US hegemony.

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Written by: Adam Groves
Written at: University of Wales, Aberystwyth, International Politics Department
Written for: Dr Will Bain
Date: 2006

About the author:

Adam Groves has an MSc in Global Governance and Diplomacy from Oxford University and a BSc in International Relations from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Adam co-founded the website in November 2007.