Empires, systems and states: great transformations in international politics

Introduction

'History is too important to be left to the historians'.[1]

The relationship between history, international history and international relations has never been an easy or a particularly amicable one. To talk of a cold war may be something of an exaggeration, but it does capture something about the way in which the various subjects tended to regard the other for the greater part of the post-war period.[2] Thus practising historians and international historians appeared to have little time for each other, [3] and together had even less for those seeking to establish the new discipline of International Relations. In their eyes 'IR' and its practitioners at best provided an academic gloss on current affairs, or worse still, engaged in an endless series of theoretical speculations about systems in general that told us hardly anything about the real world in particular. Meanwhile, those in International Relations came to look upon their peers in history as producing little more than a series of discrete tales about the past, whose most obvious common features were a failure to provide any serious explanation of why things happened, what generalizations might be drawn from specific events, and how to deduce patterns from a mass of empirical material. There were national variations, of course. In Britain, for example, academic boundaries were never so clearly defined. Indeed, many of the key figures in international relations such as Carr and Toynbee, Butterfield and Wight, were as much historians as they were anything else. Nor did British International Relations undergo the kind of behavioural *perestroika* that was to shape the development of the subject across the Atlantic from the late 1950s and increase the 'great divide' between the social sciences on the one hand—within which International Relations happened to be situated—and the humanities on the other, in which history found itself. The trajectory of International Relations in the United States, however, tended to take it from history altogether. Hence, having begun life as an historically sensitive project under the watchful eye of Morgenthau in the immediate post-war years, American International Relations slowly but surely metamorphosed into something else, that not only seemed to value measurement and models above knowledge of the past but appeared to have no time for 'real' history' either. Why bother, in fact, if according to Waltz all international systems

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[1] Quote from Christopher Thorne, 'International Relations and the Prompting of History', *Review of International Studies*, 9 (1983), p. 123.

[2] Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, 'International History and IR: opportunities for dialogue', *International Affairs,* 76: 4 (2000), pp. 741–54.

[3] Gordon Craig, 'The Historian and the Study of International Relations', *American Historical Review*, 88 (1983), p. 2.

were governed by the same law of anarchy? In this way a distance of some proportions opened up that expressed itself in terms of the department one belonged to, the colleagues one spoke to, the journals one wrote for, the conferences one attended, and even the type of books one read.

Fortunately, this estrangement was never total and there were always individuals in the different camps prepared to draw upon the work of those in other disciplines.[4] Even a conservative subject like history was never completely resistant to all forms of theory or intellectual experimentation, and a number of the more innovative scholars made increasing and impressive use of conceptual tools from outside of the subject—so much so that when one leading American historian called in 1980 for greater attention to be paid to what was going on in other fields, he came across as 'someone earnestly advocating the reinvention of the wheel'.[5] Nor, to be fair, were all students of International Relations completely indifferent to history. Indeed, some of IR's more important hypotheses—hegemonic stability theory and the notion of a democratic peace to name but two—could only have been developed in the first place by reference to the past. The past also made its presence felt with the ending of the Cold War: in part because one rather influential commentator at the time argued that it was now coming to an 'end',[6] but more importantly because of what was happening in Central Europe and the Balkans. Here 'history' began to assert itself with a vengeance as nations and peoples began to rediscover or reinvent an identity that had been previously been submerged under the blanket of official communism. In the majority of cases this simply led to the rewriting of school textbooks. Tragically, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, history returned in the form of ethnic cleansing and new (and not-so-new) racist mythologies designed to justify nation-building in states whose individual histories had previously been subsumed under one grand progressive narrative.

The recent 'turn' in International Relations to history in general, and what might be called 'grand history' in particular, was no accident therefore. It might even be argued that International Relations is actually *re*turning to a theoretically sensitive international history that had earlier informed the work of so many of the founding fathers of the discipline. Certainly, there are many trends in the social sciences that point towards a more fruitful dialogue between history, sociology, anthropology and international relations. Most obviously, as demonstrated by the various contributions to this Special Issue, the intellectual *zeitgeist* is one that privileges a cross-fertilization of ideas and approaches. To this, one might add the growing recognition that there are common concerns that require concerted co-operation among intellectuals from different backgrounds.[7] Today, almost no subject is immune from debates about globalization, and the threats (and possibilities) generated by late-modern forces of production and destruction. Closer to home, certain developments

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[4] Paul W. Schroeder, 'History and International Relations Theory: Not Use or Abuse, but Fit or Misfit', *International Security,* 22:1 (1997), pp. 64–74.

[5] Patrick Finney, 'Still Marking Time? Text, Discourse and Truth in International History', *Review of International Studies*, 27:3, July 2001, pp. 291–308.

[6] On Francis Fukuyama see Chris Brown, 'History Ends, Worlds Collide', in Michael Cox, Ken Booth, and Tim Dunne (eds.), *The Interregnum: Controversies in World Politics, 1989–1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 41–58.

[7] This idea underpinned the previous *Review of International Studies* Special Issue: Ken Booth, Tim Dunne, and Michael Cox (eds.), *How Might We Live? Global Ethics in the New Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

in International Relations hold out the promise of greater engagement with history, sociology, philosophy and comparative politics. The various voices in the Third Debate[8] have brought to the fore the importance of concepts long familiar to other social sciences, such as identity, agency and inter-subjectivity. At the other end of the theoretical spectrum, neo-classical realism is returning to the kind of systematic engagement with history that marked the wave of realist writings in the 1930s and 1940s.

What can International Relations bring to these debates about the formation and transformation of empires, systems and states? Realism has long been out 'on loan' to historical sociologists, many of whom have accepted its key assumptions of the state as actor, the primacy of military security, and the constraints imposed by the structure of self-help generated by the anarchical system.[9] It is this last factor that remains realism's most important contribution to grand history. Irrespective of what goes on inside leaders' minds, or what is held to be right, there are—it is argued— systemic pressures that can and do intervene between intentions and outcomes. Whether these structures are identified with anarchy or modernity, they form part of a 'discourse of eternity'[10] that separates communities into a world of territorial states. Other theoretical approaches also offer significant intellectual resources for understanding patterns of institutional variation in different international systems. The French Annales school, for example, has made one particular kind of contribution through its analysis of the complex ways in which material culture shaped the development of Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.[11] Martin Wight's 'embryonic sociology of states systems' is another notion rich in potential too,[12] and though neglected for some time, is beginning to be tapped by modern scholars.[13] Wight is especially useful in bringing to our understanding of grand history a series of conceptual distinctions that enable us to differentiate between suzerainty, hegemony, empire and a 'states system', and whether or not the latter presupposes a common culture and always ends in empire? [14] Then of course there are those two giants of historical sociology—Weber and Marx—who perhaps asked the biggest question of all: under what conditions, and for what reasons, did the structures of economic and political modernity take root in only one part of the world and not others? For this was, as Karl Polanyi observed,[15] the greatest transformation of all, which not only led to the creation of the state as we know it

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[8] For an elaboration of the different positions in the Third Debate see Steve Smith, 'Positivism and Beyond', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11–44.

[9] This is not to suggest that they have not added to this model, only that they find this a convenient starting point. For a good overview of the relationship between historical sociology and IR, see Stephen Hobden, 'Theorising the International System: Perspectives from Historical Sociology,' *Review of International Studies,* 25:2 (1999), pp. 257–71.

[10] This is R.B.J.Walker's phrase. See his essay 'International Relations and the Concept of the Political', in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

[11] See Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation materielle, economie et capitalisme, XVe–XVIIIe siecle*, 3 vols (Paris: Armand Collin, 1979).

[12] An argument made by Andrew Linklater, 'The Sociology of States-Systems', unpublished paper, British International Studies Association Conference, Bradford, 18–20 December, 2000.

[13] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[14] See Wight's essay 'De systematibus civitatum' in Andrew Linklater (ed.), *International Relations: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, vol. IV (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1253–73.

[15] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1944).

(the most successful unit according to Charles Tilly for waging war against competitors),[16] but propelled Western Europe outwards in a dynamic, and often ruthless, fashion that uprooted other civilizations from the Americas to Asia, and as a result established for the first time in history that which had never existed before: a truly global international system dominated by empires of differing levels of development, varying degrees of influence and complex forms of rule.

Historically, the rise of the modern state has been intimately associated with the concept of sovereignty, and it has been commonplace to date its beginnings to the Peace of Westphalia which ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648. As an influential international lawyer noted three hundred years later, Westphalia was the 'majestic portal' which led 'from the old world into the new world'.[17] Other standard accounts are rarely as absolute in positing a world-historical turning point, but they do, nevertheless, lend support to the view that the Westphalian settlement constituted a defining moment in the history of European international relations. In his influential work, Stephen Krasner has sought to debunk what he sees as this myth of '1648',[18] and in his contribution here continues his assault on a theoretical and historical assumption that has unfortunately become one of those foundational 'truths' of which traditional international relations appears to be especially fond.[19] While his critique is in part aimed at the conventional interpretation of Westphalia, it ranges more widely to include the entire edifice of the 'sovereign state model', by which he means 'a system of authority based on territory, mutual recognition, autonomy, and control'. In practice sovereignty has been compromised in several ways according to Krasner, but primarily through conventions, contract and coercion. Conventions refer to agreements, such as human rights accords that governments sign up to even though this means their policies are subjected to external scrutiny. Contracts are agreements whereby two or more states permit a constraint on their autonomy in return for perceived gains. And coercion includes a range of measures such as economic sanctions, military intervention and settlements imposed on vanquished states after major conflicts. As Krasner observes, 'every major peace settlement from Westphalia to Dayton has involved violations of the Westphalian sovereign state model'.

Krasner's essay convincingly shows how international relations has become a prisoner of its own simplistic understandings of how sovereignty has been exercised in practice. At one level, this is an attack on the common sense of realism; but beneath the surface of his analysis, it is clear that Krasner does not want to jettison realism so much as reconstitute it on the basis of a sophisticated rationalist account of who gets what and how on a global scale. Like Weber he believes that social action is both instrumental and rational. This does not prevent state leaders from acting in accordance with agreed rules or normative expectations, but only providing that these are consistent with their calculation of the national interest. The key point

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[16] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

[17] Leo Gross, 'The Peace of Westphalia 1648–1948', *American Journal of International Law*, 42 (1948), p. 28.

[18] Stephen D. Krasner, 'Westphalia and All That,' in Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[19] Daniel Philpott, for example, argues that while 'Westphalia was not a consummate fissure, it was still as clear as historical faults come'. See Daniel Philpott, 'Westphalia, Authority, and International Society', in Robert Jackson (ed.), *Sovereignty at the Millennium* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 157.

for realists is that agreed rules and conventions are routinely violated. In other words, international norms have very little constraining effect on the actions of states. Consistent with the tradition of political realism, Krasner believes that 'organised hypocrisy' prevails because of the structure of anarchy. Echoing Waltz's famous aphorism about how anarchy causes war, Krasner argues that 'compromising the sovereign state model is always available as a policy option because there is no authority structure to prevent it'. States, particularly great powers, can violate even the most established rules of international society such as non-use of force and non-intervention in the affairs of another state. The possibilities for hypocrisy in the international sphere are multiplied by the fact that there are many rules and these are often contradictory. State leaders are therefore able to 'pick and choose among different rules'.[20]

More than any other contemporary realist, Krasner has taken on the constructivist argument that rhetoric constrains actions. It is quite possible, he argues, for states to compromise their sovereignty by signing up to international agreements on human rights standards in the knowledge that these will not be implemented in the domestic realm. They can read out a cognitive script at the UN General Assembly proclaiming the importance of universal rights, while allowing officers of their state to routinely torture citizens suspected of ideological or religious 'crimes'. In Krasner's rather damning words, 'actors say one thing and do another'.

Yongjin Zhang's essay on Chinese international relations challenges many of the realist assumptions underpinning Krasner's argument. Consistent with the framing themes of the volume, Zhang maintains that much of what passes for the history of relations between independent communities is highly Eurocentric. Despite fleeting accounts of China's encounter with the West,[21] mainstream international relations has not engaged seriously with ancient and imperial China. This, he argues, is a matter of regret because China represents a fundamental challenge to much of the received wisdom of Anglo-American IR. Most obviously, the Chinese system was especially interesting in that it evolved independently of European influence—or at least did until the nineteenth century. The imprint of modernity in Europe, forged by science, production and trade, left barely a mark on the Sinocentric world until the Opium Wars. This point was cruelly made by the Emperor Ch'ien-lung in 1793 to Lord Macartney who had been dispatched by George III with the aim of expanding trade relations. Such a request was not intelligible to the Chinese Emperor: not only had they no need for British products, the idea of conducting trade relations based on equality with a country ignorant of China's culture and rituals was anathema. The Emperor's advice to the King was that he 'should simply act in perpetual obedience so as to ensure that your country may share the blessings of peace'.[22]

The history of Chinese international relations is also significant because at different times it resembled a multi-states system, an empire, and a sovereign state. Zhang dates the emergence of a multi-state system from 770 BC until the

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[20] Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 6.
[21] Notably the essay by Gerrit Gong on 'China's Entry into International Society', in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
[22] Onuma Yasuaki, 'When was the Law of International Society Born? An Inquiry of the History of International Law from an Intercivilizational Perspective', *Journal of the History of International Law*, 2:1 (2000), pp. 1–66, at pp. 28–9.

establishment of 'the first universal empire by the Qin in 221 BC'. During this time 'some of the institutional practices' that characterized the modern European international system 'were already present and functioning in the system of states in Ancient China'. Yet it is the '*Pax Sinica*' that perhaps holds the greatest interest for scholars. This is the label Zhang gives for the imperial Chinese world order that lasted for over two millennia, longer than any other institutional arrangement for organizing international relations.[23] Central to the empire was the 'tribute system' of trade relations which was based on a hierarchy 'with the Chinese emperor sitting at the apex of this order' with a mandate to rule '*Tianzia* (all-under-the heaven)'.[24] Following Reus-Smit's constructivist account of successive European international societies, Zhang claims that we cannot understand Sinocentrism without uncovering its moral purpose and guiding constitutional principles. Tributes thus were not just a form of economic exploitation, but also reflected an elaborate system of obligation informed by Confucian values. But this system could not endure in an age of European expansion, and as Zhang goes on to show, imperial collapse (and with it the disintegration of a distinctly Chinese world order with its own rationale and institutions) quickly followed under the assaults launched by the Europeans. The cherished principles and norms that had hitherto organized their world were rendered irrelevant, and China began another long march which concluded initially in revolution in 1949, and then after decades of Maoist isolation in a tentative—and as yet incomplete—effort to rejoin global international society.

If China offers a stark example of a non-European civilization that successfully resisted the West for several centuries before being ruthlessly 'socialized' by its military and economic superiors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Carolyn Warner's essay on the rise of the state system in Africa reminds us of many of the negative consequences that follow from adopting too narrow and singular an understanding of relations between communities. As many contributors to this volume note, there are multiple meanings of what counts as a 'state'. Yet as Warner suggests, it is not uncommon for scholars in international relations to adopt a restrictive model of statehood before searching in vain for evidence of this institutional form outside of Europe. Hence, even if an African state had exclusive authority with territorially delimited borders, it would not have been granted the status of sovereign membership of the international system, not for juridical reasons, but for racial and cultural ones. As a famous English international lawyer wrote at the moment of Europe's greatest power, legal concepts like sovereignty 'cannot be supposed to be understood or recognized by countries differently civilized'.[25]

Early state formation in Africa had very little to do with endogenous factors. This obvious point leads to the observation that the dominant European powers which

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[23] A claim made by Adda B. Bozeman in *Politics and Culture in International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 134.

[24] Martin Wight refers to Ancient China as an example of a suzerain state-system (state in the singular) to signify the existence of more or less permanent relations 'while one among them asserts unique claims which the others formally or tacitly accept'. See Wight's essay 'De systematibus civitatum', in Andrew Linklater (ed.), *International Relations: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, vol. IV (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1253–73, at p. 1255.

[25] W .E. Hall, quoted in Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-states: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 61.

controlled Africa after the Berlin Conference (1884–5) were empires *as well* as states. In relations with other European powers they recognized an equality of rights and duties, while relations with the non-European world were conducted on the basis of exclusion and dispossession. Colonial rule, Warner reminds us, had the effect of stunting the growth of African economies and enacting closure upon indigenous ideas about community. Why was it that decolonization did not open up new possibilities for an African system that was not based on the separation of peoples into sovereign states? Following Spruyt's analysis of the rise of the territorial state in Europe, Warner offers the explanation that states are more efficient producers of power and wealth. There are strong pressures for socialization in the international system. States would rather deal with quasi-states, those entities that do not possess effective control over their territory, than no state at all.[26] This should not be taken to imply that the sovereign state was the only significant actor in African international relations. Clans, warlords, private economic actors, and transnational institutions and regimes, all possessed interaction capacity on a regional level. This leads Warner to conclude that, just as prior to colonialism 'Africa was host to a wide variety of political forms; in the centuries after, it may continue to do so'.

If the practices of pre-modern China and Africa before colonialism offer us important and fresh ways of thinking of states and state practices in a less Eurocentric fashion, classical Greece still remains the most favoured point of intellectual departure for Western scholars of international relations. Ancient Greece, in effect, has acted as both lesson-provider and teacher for many generations of students; and perhaps nobody has influenced scholars and policymakers more than Thucydides whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* has long served as the bible for modern realism. With its stress on power and the competitive character of international politics, his study (whose influence he predicted would last 'for ever') has clearly had the impact it has not just because it provided a fascinating analysis of the pattern of interaction between the various city-states of Hellas between the eighth and fourth centuries, but because this pattern seemed to resurface again and again in other places at other moments in historical times. This point is made with great force by Nancy Kokaz in her contribution. As she points out, Thucydides' *History* was that quintessential study of the past which always managed to say something relevant about the international condition in general. Indeed, many continue to find the antecedents of the modern states-system in Europe in the pattern of relations so brilliantly dissected by the Greek historian. Robert Gilpin, for example, believes that international politics in the late twentieth century could still be characterized as it was by Thucydides, that is as the struggle for survival conducted and fought by independent political units under conditions where there was no overriding authority.

But as Kokaz reminds us, neither Thucydides, nor the world he tried to describe, can so easily be subsumed within the modern realist canon. Most obviously, the international system he dissected was not composed of independent sovereign states by the time of the Peloponnesian War, but was suffused by formal and informal relations of supremacy and subjugation. In that connection, his volume covered a very interesting period where hegemonic and imperial ties had profusely permeated what used to be an independent states-system. Furthermore, his complex discussion

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[26] See Robert Jackson's discussion of the meaning of quasi-states in Jackson, *Quasi-states,* pp. 21–6.

of the city-states and institutions has to be placed within a broader context of 'meaning' that pervaded the ancient Greek international system. This is not to deny the importance of power or suggest that war was not an ever-present possibility. But if the image of the 'state of war' is used to invoke the idea of a world constantly in conflict, then this is a most misleading reading of what was actually going on in Ancient Greece. Force and violence were undoubtedly one part of Greek 'reality'. However, as Kokaz notes, 'security' was not achieved in the Greek international system merely by the accumulation of the weapons of war, but also by (and through) the existence of various normative institutions and practices that helped regulate the pursuit of power. Anarchy in its pure form simply did not exist.[27]

Kokaz's attempt to shift the discussion about Ancient Greece away from a stress on those 'objective' factors favoured by realists towards a more sensitive appreciation of the ways in which norms and informal rules mediated the tendency towards war, is supported in part by Osiander's analysis of 'the minds of the actors' in his reconstruction of medieval Europe.[28] The crux of his argument is that the multitude of diverse actors in *ancien régime* Europe acquired their legitimacy as domains within a single Christian empire. Osiander neatly illustrates this point in his introduction. While life, for the vast majority of peasants, knights and parish priests, carried on independently of the 'semi-mythical figure called the emperor', this did not mean that the discourse of a Christian commonwealth was meaningless. However, to understand the source of this ambiguity we have to immerse ourselves in the legacy of the Roman empire. The emergence of the idea of the *respublica christiana* required a degree of cultural unification produced initially by Hellenization and then Romanization. This, argues Osiander, 'paved the way for the spread of christianity'. By the fourth century, Christianity had become the official and exclusive religion of the Roman empire. Jesus might have intended to give to Caesar what was Caesar's and keep for God what was God's, but in practice this separation became increasingly blurred.[29] The pope was the spiritual head of western christendom and the emperor 'was its highest ranking official'. This presumed unity between pope, emperor and christian rulers was 'an idea that even late medieval thinkers were extremely reluctant to give up' despite the reality of a highly decentralized feudal systems of power relations.

In the second half of his essay, Osiander goes on to consider the intellectual response to the waning power of the Roman emperor. He focuses on a number of writers including the abbot of Admont in Styria, Engelbert and Dante Alighieri. Following Thomas Aquinas, medieval thinkers divided the 'political' into three tiers: households, villages, cities and the '*regnum*' or kingdom, to which Engelbert and Dante added the idea of a 'supreme *communitas,* encompassing the *regna* and coextensive with mankind'. Fourteenth century defenders of the empire saw no contradiction between local princely legitimacy and a universal ideology of Christian

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[27] For further discussion on Thucydides and international relations see the essays in the section 'Thucydides and Tragedy', *Review of International Studies*, 27: 1 (2001).

[28] In this respect, his essay 'Before Sovereignty' applies the same hermeneutic method that he deployed in his earlier study of the European states system. See Andreas Osiander, *The States System of Europe 1640–1990: Peacemaking and the Conditions of International Stability* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[29] Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: Europeans and the Rest of the World from Antiquity to the Present* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 2001), p. 71.

unity. A common theme underlying medieval thought was that the empire was needed to maintain a general peace. Kings themselves, such as Edward II of England and Phillip IV of France, were unwilling to take orders from the emperor, but 'they nevertheless readily shared in a political discourse that emphasized their common christianity'. This in itself did not preclude conflict arising about the meaning of Christianity. But even this took place within a system where there existed a common culture and belief system. Of course, *contra* Wight and Bull, this did not mean that the *ancien régime* constituted a 'society of states'. This would have been definitionally impossible in a medieval Europe which was not composed of well-defined sovereign states as such. On the other hand, there was a distinct conception of 'society', one which existed independently of rulers and did not end at the borders of their dominions. To this extent, it was limited not by the boundaries of anybody's power but defined as a common culture and belief system.

One of Osiander's central claims is that the transition from the mediaeval to the modern was a much more gradual process in Europe than some had once presumed. This then raises the intriguing question: how and why did the medieval system based upon feudalism change and with what political consequences? The discussion thus far has been dominated by mainstream historians, often seeking to support or refute the larger Marxist claim that there was a sharp break at some point in the seventeenth society. However, the discussion is now beginning to receive the attention it deserves from students of international relations.[30] And what this work would seem to show is that it was to take some time before something vaguely resembling a modern state system was to emerge. One of the critical moments in this process was the Treaty of Utrecht. Signed in 1713, this not only brought the Wars of the Spanish Succession to an end, but according to most commentary, opened the way for one of those classical long moments in international relations in which the driving purpose of most states was to maintain that larger thing known as 'the balance of power'. This is an idea that James Sofka seeks to challenge. It might well be true that after Utrecht diplomats and policymakers offered what Sofka terms 'obliging references to the balance of power'. Yet at no point did this constrain the different states or stop them seeking to extend their influence by all means at their disposal, including war. Indeed, behind the polite rhetoric of diplomacy and the acceptance of shared norms about international relations, all of the major states were quite ruthless in their pursuit of political power, territorial gain and commercial advantage. The balance of power about which so much was written at the time—and has been talked about since—was not the purpose of international politics but rather the unintended effect of the inability of any one of the dominant powers to establish a clear position of strength over its various rivals. To this extent the notion of a 'balance of power' was less a norm than a rationalization for a situation which none seriously accepted but few had the capacity to undermine. In the end what constrained the hegemonic ambitions of the major powers was not some recognition that the *status quo* was preferable to war, or that law overrode the interests of states, but that war itself was a mightily expensive business that was just

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[30] For example John Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 131–57, Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

as likely to bankrupt states as enhance their influence. It was of course the exorbitant costs incurred in fighting the Seven Years War between 1756 and 1763 that prepared the ground for American independence in 1776 and the French revolution a decade later.

The picture that Sofka paints of eighteenth century international relations therefore is one that realists will most readily embrace. Informed by a set of economic ideas in the form of mercantilism which saw trade in zero sum terms—'our trade will only improve by the total extinction of theirs' remarked one British merchant—and driven by a constant fear that at least one of the powers (France) aimed for nothing less than total domination over its rivals, the system was a highly volatile one marked by the periodic bouts of war and punctuated by moments of peace, before further conflict erupted once again.The fact that France did not achieve its hegemonic ambitions did not mean that it had abandoned them. Momentarily contained by a coalition of rivals led by France's main imperial rival, Great Britain, it returned to the international ring after 1789 with capabilities enormously enhanced by the revolution in the shape of an ideological mission, a rationalized administrative structure and a capacity to mobilize the people in a cause that they were now prepared to support. But we should be careful not to confuse things here. The revolution did not lead to the transformation of international relations from a balance of power to a hegemonic model according to Sofka. Instead, it made French primacy feasible for the first time by increasing its ability to wage war successfully, which it did with some élan and success until bitter defeat on the battle-field at Waterloo. Only at this point did the 'world war' between France and Britain finally come to an end leaving the way open for a century-long *Pax Britannica.*[31]

The collapse of Napoleonic ambitions and the creation of an international system whose immediate rationale was to prevent the domination of Europe by any single power is the starting-point of Hudson Meadwell's discussion of the nineteenth century. But it was not just the danger of another hegemon that preoccupied the *status quo* powers after 1815: it was also the fear of revolution itself. Indeed, the whole period thereafter he argues had a definite coherence, a dynamic if you like, that stemmed from the diffusion of political innovations associated with the French revolution whose influence was to shape the ways in which states related to each other at least until 1945—and probably beyond.[32] Moreover, if we are looking for turning-points in international relations, says Meadwell, it did not come with 1815 but 1789, and the challenge which republican ideals posed to the norm of monarchical rule in Europe. As Metternich so aptly observed, Europe was not just geographically defined but constituted an ideological and political space in which an aristocratic order continued to prevail. And if this order came under threat in any one country, this threat had to be met because it constituted a menace to the system as a whole. As was made clear at the Congress of Vienna, 'if kingship was in danger anywhere', then 'all rulers had a duty to intervene to uphold it', another interesting example incidentally of where the sovereignty in theory could be, and frequently was, breached in practice.

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[31] See Tom Pocock, *Battle For Empire: The Very First World War 1756–1763* (London: Michael O'Mara Books, 1998).

[32] The theme of 'revolution' in international relations is elaborated in detail in Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999). See the discussion around his book in *Review of International Studies*, 27:4 (2001).

Peace in the nineteenth century therefore did not simply mean the avoidance of war between states, but the regulation of political relations within them spurred on by the fear of radical political and economic change. As Meadwell notes, peace was not 'incidental' but the 'by-product of the desire to avoid revolution'; and in this model where the perceived threat of revolution provoked reaction, and reaction was regarded as the surest way of preventing revolution, democracy was by no means assured. On the contrary, in a Europe where republican democracy was often equated with attacks on the principle of property and the market, democratic forms were far less entrenched by the beginning of the First World War than some later accounts would seem to imply.[33] In fact, before 1914, only three countries in Europe—Switzerland, Portugal and France—were republics, and although this number increased after 1918, many of these collapsed and succumbed to dictatorship in the inter-war period. Ultimately, only one country in the world could claim full republican credentials before the end of World War II: the United States of America. Which raises the obvious question as to whether or not democracy or peace could have ever been established in Europe without American intervention. And if the answer is in the negative, it leads to the interesting (and possibly unpalatable) conclusion that an international system born out of the conflict between revolution and reaction in Europe in one age could only arrive at some form of new equilibrium in another because of the direct support extended to it by the new liberal hegemon rising across the Atlantic.

Logically enough, this leads to the United States and its historic role in international politics, the subject of G. John Ikenberry's article. Blessed by a combination of geography and abundant resources that allowed it full rein to develop more or less unhindered by the threat of other states, by the 1870s the US had already surpassed Britain as the largest and most advanced economy in the world. By the end of the century, of course, it was out-producing nearly all of its main rivals combined as well. Yet whereas the growth of other great powers in history had tended to trigger security dilemma-driven conflict and regional balancing reactions by other states, America's did not. The conundrum is why? Ikenberry offers several explanations: the country's very remoteness, its lack of serious military capacity, its democratic and republican character, and the obvious fact that it had no serious interest in territorial expansion once it had reached the limits of its own frontier by the end of the nineteenth century. The world may have seen many great powers rise up and dominate the international system in the past. But there has only been one great power like America whose power did not seem to threaten others, unless they themselves happened to challenge the power of the United States itself.

According to Ikenberry therefore American power has been different or 'exceptional' in its extent, ideology and purpose. It has also been remarkably successful in managing to achieve and maintain a high level of international legitimacy. This was true during World War II; and but for the historical blip that was Vietnam, it was mainly true during the Cold War as well. Even the way in which the Cold War came to an end—with hardly a shot being fired and largely on American terms—only reinforced its position and a belief in the American way of life. Thereafter, and *contra* the predictions made by writers like Paul Kennedy, the US continued to enjoy

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[33] On the limits of democracy in Great Britain before 1914, see Michael Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy, 1815–1914* (London: Fontana, 1984).

robust health. Indeed, far from experiencing decline in the 1990s, American power was to undergo what seemed to many to be a major resurgence. Not only that: instead of a multipolar system emerging, an almost unique form of unipolarity was to take shape in which the United States remained by far and away the most dominant player. As the French Foreign Minister conceded (more in sorrow than anger, one suspects) 'the United States' at the end of the millennium was not just more capable than any other country in the world, but was not even 'comparable in terms of power and influence to anything known in modern history'.[34]

Thus by the beginning of the new century, the United States would appear to be more secure than ever in an expanding democratic-capitalist world that was itself the 'dominant reality in world politics'. Naturally, realists would insist that such a condition could not last for ever; that other 'have not' states would rise up to balance and challenge this unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of one state. Ikenberry, however, doubts this, and though recognizing that American power is not viewed as being benign by everybody, points to the remarkable fact that it continues to be welcome by the majority of elites in most countries around the world today. If empires are coercive systems of domination, the American-centred world order is clearly not an empire. However, if we see empires as inclusive systems of order organized around a dominant state whose role is accepted as being quite indispensable to the functioning of the system as a whole, the United States must be seen as having constructed one of the most effective empires in history—against which there now appears to be neither serious political rival nor obvious ideological alternative.

One of the principal reasons for this new-found self-confidence, not surprisingly, was the enormous upheavals that took place in the world after 1989, when first Soviet power retreated from Eastern Europe, then communism collapsed as a serious economic challenge, and finally the USSR fell apart. But according to William Wohlforth, we should be careful not to judge the Soviet empire (and before it the Russian) by what happened to both. As he points out, Russia and its communist successor proved far more durable than the British and Mongol empires. Moreover, Russia and the Soviet Union were hugely successful as great powers playing major roles in European and world politics in the three centuries after 1700. Significantly though, the source of their respective strength—constant expansion—also turned out in the end to be their most obvious weakness, and the enormous costs of maintaining and policing their various possessions brought the different enterprises down, one in 1917, and another nearly three-quarters of a century later.

Yet if traditional Russia and the USSR revealed a self-defeating propensity to expand, how do we explain this and what implications does this have for any credible Waltzian theory of international relations? Wohlforth is well aware of the extent to which the end of the Cold War has been used to refute the basics of realism. However, as he tries to show here (and as he has done in other places) realism should not be so defensive, for not only does it provide an entirely adequate explanation of why the superpower conflict came to an end, but also furnishes us with an equally valid analysis of Russian and Soviet imperialism. In fact, the problem with neorealism when it comes to assessing the dynamics and contradictions of Russian

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[34] See Michael Cox, 'Whatever Happened to American Decline? International Relations and the New United States Hegemony', *New Political Economy*, 6:3 (2001), pp. 311–40.

expansion, both communist and non-communist, is not that it is wrong but that it is so obviously true. Certainly, the contention that international anarchy generates pervasive insecurity problems that powerfully constrain states and influence their identities and domestic arrangements is a truism for students of Russian and Soviet history. Not only that: Waltz's structural approach to theory, which highlights socialization and selection rather than strict rational choice as the key causal mechanisms, resonates strongly with the empirical literature on Russia. Neorealist theory might not tell us a great deal about the Russian and Soviet past that we did not already know. However, it does provide us with a credible, deductively based explanation of the perennial forces central to an understanding of Russian and Soviet history.

While Wohlforth seeks to understand the demise of the Soviet empire in terms of a more general theory of imperial overstretch, Ian Clark argues in favour of a more norm-based explanation of what happened after 1989. The larger question he addresses, however, is the extent to which the events of that year marked a fundamental 'punctuation point' in world history, and whether future historians of international relations will be adding the date 1989 to the series 1648, 1815, 1919 and 1945. Obviously, just after the Berlin Wall came down, there were few who challenged the idea that the end of the Cold War marked a clear and pronounced break in the history of international relations. But once the dust had settled and analysts had gained some distance from events, it became increasingly evident that much had not changed, and that there remained a number of very familiar landmarks indeed. Thus while the upheavals of 1989 were radical at one level, they were rather conservative at another, leaving much of the post-war order intact. And central to Clark's whole thesis is the argument that far from undermining pre-existing international norms—the three most important being a commitment to market economics, the collectivization of security and a liberal conception of rights—the end of the Cold War only reaffirmed them. These principles had pervaded the post-1945 international order but in the context of the Cold War had operated as principles of exclusion. Now, with 1989, they became agents of admission to international society, justifying the changes that had been made as part of the post-Cold War settlement while legitimizing the reforms to the economic and political structures of the East.

The end of the Cold War therefore changed less than is commonly realized. There is, however, a twist in the tail of Clark's argument: for while the foundations of the Cold War system were constructed upon sovereignty norms such as toleration, non-intervention, and non-use of force, its practices tended to hollow out these normative foundations. This erosion can most obviously be seen in its liberal heartland, where the state no longer enjoys 'exclusive legitimacy' over a range of issues. He links this process to Polanyi's idea of a 'double movement'—the first referring to the completion of the states system through decolonization and the universal extension of sovereign rights and duties to all states, and the second to the process by which the West 'struck back at the very pluralism that the global state system' had 'generated'. And in many ways, the end of the Cold War has been critical to the completion of this transformation, to the degree that we can at last talk, according to Clark, about 'the reinvention of international society'.

Whereas Clark sees the emergence of a more fully developed society of states arising out of the debris left behind by official communism, Arrighi and Silver

outline a more disturbing and less benign scenario. Standing apart from the dominant tradition in international relations which has generally said little about material forces, and even less about the relationship between capitalism as a dynamic system and world politics, they see a major sea change taking place in the historical social system leading to a widespread sense of unease about the future. The collapse of communism might have led to a momentary sense of triumph in the West, but as they point out, its demise has also created enormous 'turbulence' in world politics. Outwardly the new world might appear more united around a common set of values than the old one. However, this cannot hide the fact that we are now living through highly disorderly times where the old signposts mean less and less. All that we know—and indeed can know—is that one era of history has ended and that there is little way of predicting what lies ahead, except more uncertainty.

According to Arrighi and Silver, three closely related observations can be made about the present and future that might help us dissipate some of the global fog that currently surrounds discussion about international relations. The first is that at the end of the twentieth century 'finance capital' is dominant, fuelling both the phenomenon of globalization and accelerating rapid change in the world order. The second is that this change knows no bounds, thus its implications are likely to be far-reaching and permanent. And the third that in spite of all the hyperbole surrounding contemporary discussions about US hegemony, American power is far less secure than many would seem to think. Indeed, observers of the American scene are making one of those classic intellectual errors by mistaking 'autumn for spring', and assuming that the recent resurgence of US power represents the beginning of a new robust era. They are making an even bigger one perhaps by overstating the crisis in East Asia and underestimating the capacity of this particularly important area. Much has been written about the end of the short-lived 'Pacific Century'. But as Arrighi and Silver stress, the region remains one of the most dynamic in the world economy today, and the United States (a debtor nation with a huge trade deficit with the countries along the Pacific Rim) will in the end have to make the necessary adjustments to take account of this material power shift. If it does not do so, and refuses to adjust to the 'rising economic power of the East Asia region' then the transition to a new world order will be destabilizing at best, potentially catastrophic at worst.

In a concluding chapter Robert Jervis provides a wide-ranging discussion of the problems and issues involved in thinking about change and transition over the long-term. As he points out, international politics has varied in important dimensions from one geographical area and historical era to another. But this does not mean we cannot detect some discernible patterns in the way in which policymakers behave, even those far removed from each other in terms of ideology, outlook and culture. Without suggesting that international politics has always been determined by an identical set of laws—the thesis usually associated with Waltzian structural realism —it is still worth 'asking whether some key characteristics' can be isolated through time and across space. While not seeking to deny the obvious fact of difference, Jervis suggests that a 'number of processes and characteristics' such as competition and the need to extract and mobilize resources (aspects of international life that have been central to realist discourse) have been fairly common to nearly all known systems. This does not imply that there has been no change over time; but it does point to the fact that there may be more universal patterns at work in international politics than much recent analysis would seem to imply.

That said, we still have to account for change in general and the specific changes that have brought us into the current era. Three developments seem to be crucial to understanding the contours of the modern world according to Jervis: the termination of the bipolar conflict between the USSR and the USA, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet empire. But this is only to identify factors, not to explain them or account for their complex consequences. Nor does it tell us much about either the structure of the contemporary global order and what is novel about it—if indeed there is anything novel at all. However, one change of a quite profound character is bound to impact on the shape of the emerging international system: the unlikelihood of war between the great powers. This will have enormous consequences. After all, throughout history the most powerful states have fought and prepared to fight each other; and if this dynamic were to be removed, it would be as though the law of gravity had been repealed. What consequences this would have on international politics cannot be easily forecast. However, a great many things are going to change as a result, and perhaps the biggest challenge facing students of world politics in the new century will be to explore what an international system without the threat of major war between great powers is actually going to look like. Winston Churchill exaggerated only a little bit when he said that 'people talked a lot of nonsense when they said nothing was ever settled by war. 'Nothing in history', he continued, 'was ever settled except by war'. That this is no longer true, at least in relations among the great powers in the system, possibly provides the single most striking discontinuity in the history of international relations.