1 Making Sense of the International

Introduction

Most students of international relations quite naturally assume that their inquiries are confined to an international domain distinct from its component parts as well as from other domains of inquiry. Although scholars have disputed the precise nature and composition of this domain, its existence has long been taken for granted to the point of being naturalized.[1] But when and how did such an international domain emerge, and how has its existence become so widely taken for granted?

This book tells a story how such an international realm has been conceptualized into existence and does so in sharp contrast to existing accounts. Although many accounts of the origin of the international realm have been proposed during the past decades, and although scholars have disagreed about *when* such a realm first emerged, they have been in broad agreement that it did so only by superseding imperial forms of rule which had previously been dominant in and out of Europe. Hence if we are to believe these accounts, the world was imperial before it became international. To start with the standard textbook example: to those who have located the origin of the international system to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a system of sovereign states then replaced the Holy Roman Empire as the main loci of political authority in Europe.[2] To those who

[1] Throughout this book, I will use the term "international realm" as a deliberately vague shorthand to encompass the specifications of that realm in terms of a system, society, or community.

[2] The literature is extensive. Classical statements include Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Peace and Power* (New York: Knopf, 1948), 210; Leo Gross, "The Peace of Westphalia, 1648–1948." *American Journal of International Law* 42 no. 1 (1948): 20–41; John Herz, "Rise and Demise of the Territorial State." *World Politics* 9 no. 4 (1957): 473–493. For an analysis, see Sebastian Schmidt, "To Order the Minds of Scholars: The Discourse of the Peace of Westphalia in International Relations Literature." *International Studies Quarterly* 55 no. 3 (2011): 601–623.

have traced its emergence to the Vienna settlement of 1815, a modern international system rose out of the failed French quest for empire during the French Revolutionary Wars, its subsequent spread being the result of successful claims to independence in the Americas and elsewhere.[3] To still others, a recognizably modern international system emerged during the long nineteenth century with the rise and spread of the nation-state, culminating at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.[4] Finally, according to those who argue that a genuinely global international system emerged only after the end of the Second World War, it did so as a consequence of the universalization of the right to self-determination and the process of decolonization that soon followed.[5]

The historical accuracy of the above narratives has been intensely contested in recent years. According to what has become a standard objection, the Peace of Westphalia did not bring an international system of sovereign states into being. Although it granted independence to the United Provinces and conferred new territorial rights to German princes, it did not produce any recognizably modern system of sovereign states, since practices of territorial demarcation and international recognition were still unknown at that point in time. Hence the Westphalian origin of modern international relations is

[3] See, for example, Francis Harry Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, (eds.) *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); David Armitage et al. "Interchange: Nationalism and Internationalism in the Era of the Civil War." *Journal of American History* 98 no. 2 (2011): 455–489.

[4] See, for example, Rodney Bruce Hall, *National Collective Identity: Social Constructs and International Systems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914. Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Eric D. Weitz, "From the Vienna to the Paris system: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions." *The American Historical Review* 113 no. 5 (2008): 1313–1343; Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation. History, Modernity, and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World. A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[5] See, for example, Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jan C. Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

but a myth, however important to disciplinary identity.[6] Against those who take Vienna 1815 as the benchmark date, it has been objected that even if the Napoleonic wars marked the end of imperial aspirations in Europe, European imperial expansion on other continents continued unabated.[7] By the same token, those who have located the emergence of a modern international system to the long nineteenth century have been met with the objection that this system did little but further entrench imperial relations between Europe and the non-European world as a result of its exclusion of colonial peoples and its unequal inclusion of peripheral polities.[8] Finally, those

[6] See, for example, Stephen D. Krasner, "Westphalia and All That." in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane (eds.) *Ideas and Foreign Policy*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 235–64; Andreas Osiander, "Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian myth." *International Organization* 55 no. 2 (2001): 251–287; Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003); Stéphane Beaulac, *The Power of Language in the Making of International Law: The Word Sovereignty in Bodin and Vattel and the Myth of Westphalia* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2004); Derek Croxton, *Westphalia: The Last Christian Peace* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2013); Benjamin De Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, "The Big Bangs of IR: The Myths that Your Teachers Still Tell You About 1648 and 1919." *Millennium* 39 no. 3 (2011): 735–758; John M. Hobson, and Jason C. Sharman, "The Enduring Place of Hierarchy in World Politics: Tracing the Social Logics of Hierarchy and Political Change." *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 1 (2005): 63–98.

[7] See, for example, Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jeremy Adelman, "An Age of Imperial Revolutions." *The American Historical Review* 113 no. 2 (2008): 319–340; Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order. The British Empire and the Origins of International Law 1800–1850* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2016); Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International. Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2018); Gabriel Paquette, *The European Seaborne Empires: From the Thirty Years War to the Age of Revolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[8] See, for example, Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, colonialism and order in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Arnulf Becker Lorca, *Mestizo International Law. A Global Intellectual History 1842–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

who have argued that a truly global international system had to wait until the right of self-determination had been enshrined in international law and decolonization had been completed have been met with the objection that this merely perpetuated existing inequalities between North and South, albeit now of a more informal and indirect kind than before.[9] On all of these accounts, however, becoming international presupposes a simultaneous transition from a world of empires to a world of states, leaving scholars to disagree about *when* this happened, *how* this happened, and with *what* consequences, but not *that* this has happened. Also, apart from assuming that the world of empires and the world of states can be arranged in a neat historical succession, these accounts have focused on the formation of the component parts of the international realm rather than on the emergence of that realm itself. From this point of view, the international realm emerged as a result of the rise of the sovereign state and is therefore understood to be epiphenomenal in relation to the modern state. This in turn implies that the historical validity of the above accounts depends on the ways in which the sovereign state has been conceptualized, so that the more detailed requirements that have been packed into definitions of the corresponding concept, the later an international system seems to have appeared on the scene, as well as conversely.[10]

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the above accounts of the making of an international realm have been criticized for being state-centric and for neglecting the role of non-state actors in the expansion of that realm into other continents. Since European states were initially unable to project their power far enough necessary to assert dominance over non-European polities, they outsourced imperial expansion by delegating sovereign prerogatives to a range of intermediaries. Foremost of

[9] See, for example, Quỳnh N Phạm and Robbie Shilliam, (eds.) *Meanings of Bandung: Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesiah, (eds.) *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[10] See Julia Costa Lopez, Benjamin De Carvalho, Andrew Latham, Ayşe Zarakol, Jens Bartelson, and Minda Holm, "In the Beginning There Was No Word (for it): Terms, concepts, and early sovereignty." *International Studies Review* 20 no. 3 (2018): 489–519.

these were trading companies and company states which would wage war on and conduct diplomacy with local rulers at the behest of their respective states, all while being allowed to profit from transcontinental trade and the exploitation of natural resources in the meantime. Hence the expansion of the international realm took place against the backdrop of cultural diversity and ongoing hybridization and did not result in any imposition of the state form on colonial polities until relatively late.[11]

The story I will tell in this book is different. First, I believe that trying to locate the historical origin of the international realm is a futile exercise that merely risks reifying that realm into an abstract thing and to perpetuate various historical myths of its origin in order to legitimize unequal relations of power within it. By contrast, this book is an inquiry into how the international realm has been *conceptualized into existence* and how such conceptualizations have taken hold of our political imagination. Pursuing this line of inquiry, I will focus on how relations between polities have been understood by different authors across a variety of cultural and historical contexts from the sixteenth century to the present day. To clear the ground for this kind of inquiry, I will critically engage what I call the *transitionist* view, according to which the emergence of an international realm is assumed to be coeval with a transition from a world of empires to a world of states, thereby rendering the international realm coextensive with the world of states while confining the world of empires to a premodern past. In contrast to this view, I will try to substantiate an *emergentist* account of the international realm by describing how it has emerged as a consequence of sustained efforts to make sense of relations between polities from the onset of European imperial expansion to the end of decolonization, arguing that the international realm is better understood as a continuation of the imperial world by

[11] See, for example, Andrew Phillips and Jason C. Sharman. *International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jason C. Sharman, *Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Kevin Blachford, "Revisiting the Expansion Thesis: International Society and the Role of the Dutch East India Company as a Merchant Empire." *European Journal of International Relations* 26 no. 4 (2020): 1230–1248; Jason C. Sharman and Andrew Phillips, *Outsourcing Empire: How Company-States Made the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

other means rather than as its historical successor.[12] As I will argue, the emergence of an international realm should be understood as a response to the global space opened up by the cartographical and geographical revolutions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which generated rival claims to universal sovereignty over that space.[13] As Peter Sloterdijk has remarked, "[t]he globe not only became the central medium of the new homogenizing approach to location … in addition, through constant amendments to the maps, it documented the constant offensive of discoveries, conquests, openings and namings with which the advancing Europeans established themselves at sea and on land in the universal outside."[14] Third, and following from this global perspective, I will critically engage the *diffusionist* view according to which the international realm emerged and spread as a consequence of the imposition of European concepts such as sovereignty and nationhood on other peoples, eventually resulting in their inclusion into an international society of formally equal nation-states. As Hedley Bull and Adam Watson once formulated this view, "[t]he global international society of today is in large part the consequence of Europe's impact on the rest of the world over the last few centuries."[15] By contrast, I will emphasize the extent to which non-European peoples were actively involved in the shaping of the international realm by creatively appropriating European concepts and employing these for their own distinctive ideological and political ends.[16] Fourth, and in contrast to the often statist bias of conventional accounts of the international realm discussed above, I will show how the creation of

[12] For the notion of interpolity relations, see Lauren Benton, "Possessing Empire. Iberian Claims and Interpolity Law." in Saliha Belmessous (ed.), *Native Claims. Indigenous Law against Empire, 1500–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19–40; Lauren Benton and Adam Clulow, "Empire and Protection: Making Interpolity Law in the Early Modern World." *Journal of Global History* 12 no. 1 (2017): 74–92.

[13] For the idea that a global realm antedated and conditioned the rise of an international realm, see Jens Bartelson, "The Social Construction of Globality." *International Political Sociology* 4 no. 3 (2010): 219–235.

[14] Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II*. Trans. by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press 2014), 785.

[15] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, "Introduction." in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 1–9, at 1.

[16] See, for example, Marcos Tourinho, "The Co-Constitution of Order." *International Organization* 75 no. 2 (2021): 258–281.

an international realm has meant that this realm has taken on a life of its own, independent of its constituent parts sometimes even to the point of being viewed as constitutive of them.

There are compelling reasons for undertaking this kind of inquiry. First, with the purported starting point of the modern international system migrating ever closer to the present day, scholars of international relations have questioned the coherence and integrity of their entire enterprise and embarked on a search for more historically accurate ways to define their subject matter. Given the obvious difficulty of locating a clean break between imperial forms of rule on the one hand, and an international system of formally equal states on the other, an increasing number of scholars have argued that world politics is better understood in hierarchical rather than in squarely anarchical terms, all while suggesting that these forms of rule have coexisted and reinforced each other throughout early modern and modern history.[17] This renewed focus on hierarchy in world politics has been further reinforced by an increased interest in empire and imperialism among scholars of international relations and historians of political thought. Much of this scholarship suggests that empires and states have never been mutually exclusive forms of political association but has instead emphasized the extent to which empires and states have been co-constitutive and interdependent during the early modern and modern periods. For all their differences, many of these accounts converge on

[17] See, for example, David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); John M. Hobson, "The Twin Self-delusions of IR: Why 'hierarchy' and not 'anarchy' is the core concept of IR." *Millennium* 42 no. 3 (2014): 557–575; Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, "Hierarchies in World Politics." *International Organization* 70 no. 3 (2016): 623–654; Ayşe Zarakol, (ed.) *Hierarchies in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Meghan McConaughey, Paul Musgrave, and Daniel H. Nexon. "Beyond Anarchy: Logics of political organization, hierarchy, and international structure." *International Theory* 10 no. 2 (2018): 181–218; Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, "Hegemonic-order theory: A field-theoretic account." *European Journal of International Relations* 24 no. 3 (2018): 662–686; Paul K. MacDonald, "Embedded Authority: a relational network approach to hierarchy in world politics." *Review of International Studies* 44 no.1 (2018): 128–150; Dani K. Nedal and Daniel H. Nexon, "Anarchy and Authority: International Structure, the Balance of Power, and Hierarchy." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4 no. 2 (2019): 169–189; Lora Anne Viola, *The Closure of the International System: How Institutions Create Political Equalities and Hierarchies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

the assumption that the rise of an international system in Europe was premised on its hierarchical and imperial relations with the rest of the world.[18] Although these accounts have added much nuance and complexity to the understanding how hierarchical and anarchical features of world politics hang together, the implications for our understanding of the emergence of an international realm remain to be investigated. Second, an inquiry into how the international realm has been conceptualized will highlight the contingency of that realm, by showing how the political world might have looked radically different had other roads been taken at critical junctures. Although recent scholarship has broadened the scope of international relations to include polities and world orders outside Europe and prior to the rise of the West, these accounts have found it difficult to explain why the nation-state eventually was able to triumph over its competitors hence making the world international in this narrow sense.[19] While the emergence of an international realm has meant that many alternative forms of political association – real or imagined – fell by the wayside as the nation-state triumphed, there is nothing inevitable about this outcome. Third, and closely related to this point, an intellectual history of the international realm can help us understand the extent to which nationalism has

[18] See, for example, Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, "Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International relations." *Millennium* 31 no. 1 (2002): 109–127; Duncan Bell, (ed.) *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire, 1500–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Lauren Benton, Adam Clulow, and Bain Attwood, (eds.) *Protection and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[19] Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

been crucial to its rise and spread, and hence why nationalism is ready to be reactivated whenever the cohesion of the international realm or its component parts is challenged by inner or outer forces.[20] Finally, a related reason for embarking on this inquiry is to dissolve some of the normative problems that follow naturally when we uncritically accept transitionist accounts of the international realm. When we do this, we will face a false choice between the authoritarianism of empire and the democracy of the nation-state, since the latter presupposes the existence of a bounded and homogenous *demos*, characteristics that most conceptualizations of the former rule out almost by definition. This has given rise to the belief that supranational political authority necessarily must compromise democratic legitimacy and issue in a democratic deficit if left unchecked by constitutional rules or other arrangements.[21] But if there never was any clean break between empires and states other than in the nationalist imaginaries of the twentieth century, then we have no reason to assume that popular sovereignty necessarily must be thus confined but all the more reasons to explore old and new possibilities of widening its scope in a more cosmopolitan or planetary direction.[22]

As the title of this book indicates, this is not another attempt to locate the origin of notion of an international realm to a specific point

[20] See, for example, Jaakko Heiskanen, "Spectra of Sovereignty: Nationalism and International Relations." *International Political Sociology* 13 no. 3 (2019): 315–332; Moran Mandelbaum, *The Nation/State Fantasy. A Psychoanalytical Genealogy of Nationalism* (Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020); Siniša Malešević, *Grounded Nationalisms: A Sociological Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[21] See, for example, Jean L. Cohen, *Globalization and Sovereignty: Rethinking legality, legitimacy, and constitutionalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); James Tully, "Modern Constitutional Democracy and Imperialism." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 46, no. 3 (2008): 461–493; James Tully, "The Unfreedom of the Moderns in Comparison to their ideals of Constitutional Democracy." *The Modern Law Review* 65, no. 2 (2002): 204–228.

[22] For a survey of such possibilities prior to the nineteenth century, see Jens Bartelson, *Visions of World Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For recent attempts in this direction, see Inés Valdez, *Transnational Cosmopolitanism: Kant, Du Bois, and Justice as a Political Craft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *On Borders: Territories, legitimacy, and the rights of place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night. Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

in time, but rather an inquiry into the process of *becoming international*. Here I am indebted to Nietzsche, when he held that while "Heraclitus will always be in the right for saying that being is an empty fiction", most other philosophers "kill and stuff whatever they worship, these gentlemen who idolize concepts – they endanger the life of whatever they worship … Whatever is does not *become*; whatever becomes *is* not."[23] From this point of view, any attempt to locate the origin of the international realm by attributing the origin of its structure or meaning to a specific point in time and place is but a way of turning the international into a conceptual mummy, a stale artifice devoid of dynamism. By contrast, as Michel Foucault once remarked, "[t]he genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin."[24] Instead of trying to locate the origins of things, Foucault proposes that we should focus on the conditions of their emergence, recognizing the fact that "[t]he isolation of different points of emergence does not conform to the successive configurations of an identical meaning; rather, they result from substitutions, displacements, disguised conquests, and systematic reversals."[25] Given my present concerns, I would like to suggest that the international realm is best understood as the cumulated consequences of attempts to make sense of intercourse among different polities by attributing temporality to these processes and structure to their outcomes at different points in time. From this point of view, the story of how the world became international is a story of how the social fact of *internationality* emerged and spread independently of its champions and detractors. Some people breathed life into the international realm because they believed that they stood to benefit from its coming into being. Others were sucked into the same realm despite, and sometimes because of, their resistance and protestations around their pending losses. Yet no one was able to tell how this vortex would affect their own destinies or that of the wider world in which the international realm was embedded. Yet once this process had gained sufficient momentum, becoming international was not an offer you could refuse, but a predicament you were likely to sleepwalk

[23] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Reason." in Philosophy 1–2, in *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. by Richard Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 18–19.
[24] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." in David Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 139–164, at 144.
[25] Ibid., 151.