



Becoming International

When and how did the modern world become an international one? Jens Bartelson, a leading scholar of the history of international thought, provides new answers to this question by analyzing how relations between polities have been conceptualized across different historical contexts from the sixteenth century to the present day. A global intellectual history of the international system, this book challenges the widespread assumption that this system emerged as a result of a transition from empires to states, instead proposing that the international realm is but a continuation of imperial relations by other means. Showing how the international system spread through the creative appropriation of European concepts of nation and state by non-Europeans, Bartelson argues that this system has taken on a life of its own, to the point of becoming an empire in its own right.

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To Caspian

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Preface

The modern world is international insofar as it is characterized by the division of humankind into nation-states. Although there is no shortage of accounts – historical or otherwise – which have tried to understand the process through which the world became international in this sense, most of these have assumed that this took place as a result of a transition from a premodern world of empires and cities. By contrast, this book is an attempt to write an intellectual history of the very *belief* that the world we inhabit is an international one and how such beliefs were translated to facts on the ground. Inquiring into the making and spread of the *social fact* of internationality, this book tries to answer the question of how an international realm was conceptualized into existence and became taken for granted as a given frame of reference for the study of politics.

I have tried this before. In my first book, written some thirty years ago, I assumed that there was a simple and straightforward logic to the rise of the international realm. I assumed that this boiled down to the function of sovereignty, understood as a frame effectively separating what was inside the state from what was outside it, so that the modern state and the international system emerged in tandem. Since then that very frame has been crumbling into dust through encounters with sources that recognized no such separation and instead spoke of distant worlds before anything international and populated by diverse forms of political association. I then began to realize that the coming into being of the international world cannot be understood with reference to its component parts or the functions of sovereignty, but that the international is a *sui generis* category with its own trajectory and meanings, waiting to be excavated from sources many of which have been of marginal concern to historians of international thought. Above all, I began to suspect that existing accounts of the origins of the international system and its cognates were more about legitimizing that system rather than a matter of making good sense of its emergence

from the multiplicity of political forms that antedated the European quest for global preponderance. So this book is another attempt to set the historical record straight and get our ontological commitments right, saving us from the belief that the international world is cast in stone at a moment when it needs to be consigned to history for the sake of human flourishing.

Many people have helped me to bring this project to completion. Thanks to generous funding from The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation for our research program “State-Making and the Origins of Global Order in the Long Nineteenth Century and Beyond,” my colleagues at Lund University and I at Lund University spent six years exploring the rise of the modern state and its consequences for global order. This book is my contribution to this endeavor, and I am greatly indebted to my colleagues in Lund with whom I collaborated closely: Amanda Cheney, Agustín Goenaga, Martin Hall, Johannes Lindvall, Ted Svensson, and Jan Teorell. During these years, Astrid Hedin, Sara Kalm, Juliane Liebsch, Klas Nilsson, and Sindre Gade Viksand provided valuable feedback on individual chapters.

Although the pandemic put an effective brake on any global feedback-fishing, a short visit to London School of Economics and Political Science during a crucial phase of writing turned out to be very productive. Many thanks to Mathias-Koenig Archibugi for inviting me, and to Martin Bayly, Chris Brown, Cornelia Navari, Emma Saint, Peter Wilson, and Rachel Zhou for good company and constructive comments on my work. Similar things happened in Gothenburg, where Bo Rothstein and Ann Towns helped me to identify and resolve tensions in my argument. I am also very much indebted to my friend and colleague Mathias Albert in Bielefeld. Mathias has not only been part of endless and exciting conversations over the years but has also invited me to seminars and workshops from which I have benefited enormously. Special thanks go to Mustafa Aksakal, Barry Buzan, Christian Büger, Julian Go, George Lawson, Iver Neumann, Ole Jacob Sending, and James Stafford for engaging with my work. But as usual, the feedback-fishing tour ended at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, where my dear friends and colleagues Benjamin de Carvalho and Halvard Leira hosted me for a talk when the book had been completed. I am grateful to Kristin Haugevik and Stein Sundstøl Eriksen for their perceptive comments on my presentation. Also, parts of the research for this book have been made possible through

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J.B.
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