



## *On Cultural Diversity*

The rise of non-Western great powers, the spread of transnational religiously justified insurgencies, and the resurgence of ethno-nationalism raise fundamental questions about the effects of cultural diversity on international order. Yet current debate – among academics, popular commentators, and policymakers alike – rests on flawed understandings of culture and inaccurate assumptions about how historically cultural diversity has shaped the evolution of international orders. In this path-breaking book, Christian Reus-Smit details how the major theories of international relations have consistently misunderstood the nature and effects of culture, returning time and again to a conception long abandoned in specialist fields: the idea of cultures as coherent, bounded, and constitutive. Drawing on theoretical insights from anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology, and informed by new histories of diverse historical orders, this book presents a new theoretical account of the relationship between cultural diversity and international order: an account with far-reaching implications for how we understand contemporary transformations.

CHRISTIAN REUS-SMIT is Professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland and a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. Among his previous books, he is the author of *Individual Rights and the Making of the International System* (2013), *American Power and World Order* (2004), and *The Moral Purpose of the State* (1999); coauthor of *Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power* (2012); and editor of *The Politics of International Law* (2004).

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# On Cultural Diversity

International Theory in a World  
of Difference

CHRISTIAN REUS-SMIT  
*University of Queensland*



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*For my parents  
Janet and Karel*

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## *Preface*

The question of how culture conditions international relations has stalked my work from the outset, but until now I have shied away from confronting it directly. As a graduate student at Cornell University I toyed with several dissertation topics that engaged questions of global community, but after an intense but brief interest in claims to justice in the emerging climate change regime, I set out to explain why historical societies of states – which scholars thought exhibited very similar political dynamics – nonetheless developed very different fundamental institutions. This was eventually published as *The Moral Purpose of the State*, and while culture appeared in the subtitle, it appeared in the standard constructivist guise: as social norms, in this case deep and structural. This was in part a methodological strategy: it gave me discrete cultural variables to process trace. But it was also safe: it was a way to study culture without ever confronting its nature and complexity. In the years since that project I have worked on hegemony, international law, special responsibilities, legitimacy, and individual rights, always stressing how social meanings and practices shape international politics. It was not until current debates about the rise of non-Western great powers, the resurgence of the politics of religion, the return of xenophobic nationalisms, and the implications of all of these for the future of the modern international order that I was finally ready to address the question of culture squarely. Culture features prominently in these debates, but in an anachronistic form, radically at odds with what anthropologists, cultural studies scholars, and sociologists have been telling us about culture for at least three decades. And as international relations (IR) scholars parry their way through these debates, their propositions about culture and international order appear largely untouched by a new wave of historical research that highlights the heterogeneous cultural contexts in which diverse international orders have evolved. This book, and the trilogy of which it is a

part, builds on these neglected insights to rethink the relationship between cultural diversity and international order.

I dedicate the book to my parents, Janet and Karel, whose unusual choices for their young family sparked the interests that animate this study. In the early 1970s they bucked the trend and moved us from Melbourne's outer suburbs to inner city Fitzroy, buying a dilapidated Victorian terrace in a once grand avenue, then home to a mix of Greek and Italian migrants and itinerant 'Anglo' labourers. They sent me and the elder of my two sisters, Saskia, to a radical experimental high school in the neighbouring suburb of Brunswick, where the anarchic offspring of successive waves of postwar migration ran a merry circle around a courageous group of young educational innovators. The notorious 'White Australia Policy' had been abandoned a decade earlier, and the government was busy instituting a new policy of multiculturalism, shifting Australia from an overtly racist way of ordering cultural difference to a more pluralist, if equally structured, one. In late 1975 my parents set off on another adventure, loading us in a Peugeot 504 Familiale wagon and taking us on a road trip – from Paris to India. For fifteen months we followed the hippie trail from Europe, around the Mediterranean, through Iran and Pakistan, and down to Madurai in the south of India, ticking off as many of the world's great archaeological sites as we could.

This journey had a profound effect on me. It sparked my lifelong fascination with world politics and left me determined to study politics and history at university. More than this, it added a global layer to my inner-city appreciation of the beauty, complexity, and ubiquity of cultural diversity. As we traversed a large swath of Eurasia, the colours, contours, and textures of culture changed, but we didn't step from one hermetically sealed cultural unit to another and we crossed no civilizational border posts. Culture had a topography but no territoriality.

I have been fortunate over the years to collaborate with outstanding scholars from across IR's varied theoretical spectrum, from critical theorists to rational choice scholars. I turned to this group for feedback on the project, and I thank these friends for their penetrating and enormously helpful comments: Emanuel Adler, Michael Barnett, Maria Birnbaum, Roland Bleiker, Ian Clark, Tim Dunne, Robyn Eckersley, Evelyn Goh, Ian Hall, Emma Hutchison, John Ikenberry, Peter Katzenstein, Andrew Phillips, Heather Rae, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Duncan Snidal, Maja Spanu, Andrea Warnecke, Nicholas Wheeler,

and William Wohlforth. As with my previous projects, I have benefited from taking my ideas on the road, and I greatly appreciate the comments I received from audiences at these institutions: the Australian National University, the University of Cambridge, the Goethe University Frankfurt, the London School of Economics, the University of Melbourne, Princeton University, the University of Sydney, the University of Toronto, and the 2016 Oceanic International Studies Conference in Brisbane. I also presented several chapters to the wonderful IR Theory and History group at the University of Queensland, and in addition to those already mentioned, I thank Lorenzo Cello, David Duriesmith, Jacinta O'Hagan, Sarah Percy, and Neil Renic for their immensely helpful comments.

This book is the first of three volumes on cultural diversity and international order, and while writing the following chapters, I have also been collaborating with Andrew Phillips on the second volume: an interdisciplinary dialogue between leading theorists of international order and prominent specialists of cultural diversity from anthropology, history, international law, political theory, and sociology. I cannot express how much I have learned from this group, and I commend to others the huge gains that come from embedding your evolving thought within a structured dialogue with others, especially those who come from other disciplines. For their contributions to our collaborative volume, and their less direct but no less important contributions to my thinking in following chapters, I thank Michael Barnett, Ellen Berrey, Maria Birnbaum, Victoria Tin-bor Hui, Andrew Hurrell, John Ikenberry, Arnulf Becker Lorca, James Millward, Anne Norton, Ann Towns, Ann Swidler, and Ayse Zarakol. Andrew and I also thank the Social Trends Institute in Barcelona for generously funding and hosting this group's first workshop on 30 March–1 April 2017. We also greatly appreciate Patrick Herron's and Elif Kalaycioglu's contributions as workshop respondents and participants.

Peter Katzenstein advised me years ago that when embarking on a new research area I should always find a way to teach on it. One way or another I have done this with all of my projects, and in this case it has been through a series of master classes. The first, in October 2016, was with the University of Queensland's masters and PhD students; the second, a year later, was with a small group of our honours students. Both of these classes were teaching at its best – super smart, highly engaged students; a discrete but intense time cloistered together; and a

highly topical issue, curiously neglected in contemporary IR. I thank all of the students who participated in these classes: I learnt an enormous amount from our discussions.

This project would not have been possible without the support I have received from the University of Queensland. Generous funding was provided jointly by the Vice-Chancellor, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS), and the School of Political Science and International Studies (POLSI). I have also been given the time to pursue such an ambitious project, and I express my enormous appreciation to the former Executive Dean, Tim Dunne (now Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Queensland), and the Head of POLSI, Richard Devetak, for backing my curiosities, stoking them with ongoing feedback and debate, and leavening it all with friendship and support. I also thank Peter Harrison, Director of the University of Queensland's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, for welcoming me to the Institute's immensely stimulating community.

Excellent research assistance was provided by Ryan Smith and Eglantine Staunton. Without their enthusiasm for the project, creative detective work, and attention to detail I would still be chasing the wide-ranging literatures that inform the following discussions. I also thank Ryan for his work compiling the Bibliography.

Earlier rehearsals of parts of argument advanced here were published in a number of journals, and I thank their publishers for permission to draw on these works, and their editors and reviewers for their extraordinarily helpful feedback. See 'International Law and the Mediation of Culture', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 28.1 (2014), 1–18; and 'Cultural Diversity and International Order', *International Organization*, 71.4 (2017), 851–885. I also tested the structure of the book in an essay for the Normative Orders Cluster of Excellence at Goethe University, Frankfurt. See 'Seeing Culture in World Politics', in Gunther Hellmann (ed.), *Theorizing Global Order* (Frankfurt: Campus Publishers, 2018), pp. 65–89.

The book's cover features an image by the outstanding Iranian-Australian artist Hoda Afshar. An abiding theme of Hoda's work is the complex processes of cultural negotiation, adaptation, and reconstitution that define the migrant experience. This photograph, titled 'We Didn't Grow Here, We Flew Here', from her 2010 series 'In-Between Spaces', captures the complexity of migrant identities, blending traditional Persian representational forms with contemporary 'Aussie'

cultural symbols and imagery. This is more than simple hybridity: Hoda reveals, in a striking way, the structuring effects of dominant cultural constructions and the persistence of gendered cultural hierarchies in seemingly transformative processes of cultural change. Often art reveals these complexities far better than words, and I thank Hoda for allowing me to use her beautiful, intriguing, and confronting work.

My greatest thanks go to my partner, Heather Rae, and my teenage children, Sam and Lili, for their love and support, as well as their engagement with the ideas and issues explored in these pages. When I was busy skirting the issue of culture, Heather was confronting it head-on in her early work on ethnic cleansing and genocide in international history, *State Identities and the Homogenization of Peoples* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). She showed how these practices were related to processes of state-building: to the construction and legitimation of national political orders. I suggest here that analogous, if less extreme, practices of organizing cultural difference also feature in the construction of international orders, and my journey to this argument has been deeply influenced by my conversations with Heather.

A final word of thanks goes to my Sicilian-born Weimaraner, Manuel, who is everything a faithful canine companion should be: sitting under my desk as I wrote almost every word, and never failing to leap up and follow me as I chased another coffee or stretched my legs. *Grazie mille!*

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