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Introduction

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Paris in 1919 was a site of remarkable innovations in the reinvention of international order. A wide range of actors set out new ways of thinking about international politics, established innovative institutions and transformed the conduct of international relations. We can count among the most notable innovations not only the long-maligned League of Nations, but also the first international disarmament commission, the foundation of the International Labour Organization, and the setting up of a mandate system which, in theory at least, was intended to curtail imperial sovereignty. Then there was the dramatic expansion of public opinion and popular discourse on war and peace during the Great War, legitimising more popular participation in international politics. The politics of peacemaking called into question the organising principles of international politics. Even as sovereign states and material power remained at the core of international politics, ideas about self-determination and international law now shaped decision-making in unprecedented ways. So significant were the changes in the new international order that power politics no longer provided a source of legitimacy for international policy and could no longer serve as the fundamental logic for the territorial settlements that emerged from great power negotiations. This was a radical departure from the nineteenth-century practices that shaped the peace settlements of 1815, 1856 and 1871.

Despite these innovations, Paris is rarely mentioned in the same conversation as other transformative sites of international order such as

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Westphalia, Vienna, Bretton Woods or Bandung.¹ The reasons for the absence of Paris from the list are not difficult to fathom – a history of bitter ratification debates, disillusioned participants, and a second global war have long cast the Paris peace settlements as failures. Versailles, the palace in which the Peace Treaty of Paris was signed, remains a derogatory term in the disciplinary lexicon of international relations (IR), where peacemaking in 1919 has become synonymous with failure and contrasted with allegedly more successful moments of peacemaking in 1815 and 1945, which are judged truly transformative moments in the history of international order.² More recently, historians have recast the 1920s as a post-war era of reconstruction, highlighting the long-term legacies of peacemaking in 1919 as the ‘Wilsonian moment’, or rescuing from opprobrium its major institutional outcome, the League of Nations.³ Nonetheless, the significance of the Paris peace in the scholarship on international order remains obscure.⁴ It is the work of this volume to underscore the contribution of historians engaging with the distinctive and diverse dimensions of this new international order, not least who got to shape it, and how, while also insisting on the importance of this history for how we understand the fate of the international order through the twentieth century.

THE PROBLEM OF INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Before examining the specific contexts and implications of the Paris peace settlements, let us first turn to the ‘slippery’ concept of international order.⁵ The number of scholarly publications with ‘order’ in their title is

¹ Paul Schoeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Glenda Sluga, *The Invention of International Order: Remaking Europe after Napoleon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

² For nuanced versions of this pervasive narrative see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ There is a vast literature on these topics, much of which is cited in later footnotes.

⁴ In his important work on the construction of international orders after major wars, John Ikenberry sees Paris as a failure in *After Victory*, 117–62.

⁵ Muthiah Alagappa, ‘The Study of International Order’ in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 34, cited in Amitav Acharya, *Constructing Global Order. Agency and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4.

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formidable and seems to increase daily. Yet most of these studies do not define precisely what is meant by ‘order’. International relations scholars Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit remark on the difficulties inherent in providing a clear definition of this fundamental concept.⁶ At a minimum, IR scholars understand international order as characterised by predictable and relatively stable patterns of relations between actors in a given international context. When these relations become unpredictable, when the rules and norms that underpin them are no longer observed, the result is ‘disorder’. But the nature of international political order, the conditions under which it emerges, the way it functions and how it ends, are matters of enduring controversy.

‘Realists’ depart from the assumption of an anarchical international system (the absence of an overarching political authority in world politics). States (including empires) compete with one another in an endless competition for security. Order emerges as the product of power-balancing dynamics between states. The balance of power thus provides an underlying logic which should lead states to act in predictable ways.⁷ For Robert Gilpin, an influential realist theorist, the rules and norms that characterize a given order are a reflection of the distribution of power among its members. The most powerful (usually hegemonic) states create the rules and dictate the prevailing logic of orders in order to protect their interests. The rise and fall of international orders thus reflects the power transitions within the system of states. Orders break down when their chief sponsors no longer possess the material power to enforce them. The result is invariably war and the emergence of a new order fashioned by the victors. The Paris peace settlements, Gilpin argued, were doomed from the outset by the failure to ‘reflect the new realities of the balance of power’.⁸ Ordering, for Gilpin and for IR realism more generally, is a practice of state power.

⁶ Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit (eds.), *Culture and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2020), 25.

⁷ The most influential proponent of this ‘structural realist’ perspective is Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979); see also John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001); Randall L. Schweller, ‘The Problem of International Order Revisited’, *International Security* 26, 1 (2001), 169–73.

⁸ Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 9–49; Robert Gilpin, ‘The Theory of Hegemonic War’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, 4 (1988), 610.

Another IR approach goes beyond realism to explore the role of shared expectations, rules and institutions in regulating international politics. ‘Liberal institutionalists’ incorporate non-state as well as state actors into their conception of order. This approach attaches great importance to the fact that states often cooperate to mitigate the effects of anarchy. Many of the rules and norms that shape state behaviour promote collaboration rather than conformation. States sometimes go further to create institutions, the most common of which are diplomacy, international law and international organisations, that enable or facilitate consultation and provide structures for cooperation in a given international order. Power remains central to the institutionalist approach. The most powerful states have the most say in shaping institutions and making and altering the rules and laws that give the international order in question its specific character and logic. Members choose to adhere to the rules to benefit from the stability and security on offer and to avoid the costs of non-adherence. And when the most powerful members of the order are no longer willing or able to enforce its rules and laws, the result is virtually always collapse and usually war. Crucially, and in contrast to the realist vision, the operating assumption is that liberal democratic states are more inclined towards restraint and institutionalised cooperation in the interests of peace and stability. Woodrow Wilson’s efforts at the Paris Peace Conference remain a touchstone in much of the institutionalist literature as the first attempt to place democracy and self-determination at the heart of international practices. This first iteration of ‘Wilsonianism’ is characterised as the necessary antecedent to the post-1945 ‘rules-based’ international order.⁹

The ‘English School’ of IR similarly attributes great importance to rules and institutions – especially diplomacy – in regulating state behaviour and shaping international order. English School scholars conceptualise order as constituting an ‘international society’ that is exclusive and therefore

⁹ Ikenberry, *After Victory*; see also G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crisis of Global Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Tim Dunne and Trine Flockhart, *Liberal World Orders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Matthias Schulz, *Normen und Praxis: Das Europäische Konzert der Grossmächte als Sicherheitsstrat, 1815–1860* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009); for work that does justice to women theorists of order and international relations, see F. M. Stawell, *The Growth of International Thought* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1929) and Sarah Dunstan, Patricia Owens, Katharina Rietzler and Kimberly Hutchings (eds.), *Women’s International Thought: Towards a New Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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defined as much by the actors that are ‘inside’ and those that are ‘outside’ the order in question. A minimum level of shared values and understandings is required for an ‘international society’ to constitute order. The Paris peace settlements, according to this school, failed to create a durable international society. The result was a dysfunctional order.¹⁰ Sharp distinctions are drawn between the historical existence of ‘international’ orders and the much more formidable challenge of creating a ‘world’ or ‘global’ order (where the survival and prospects of humanity as a whole are the prime motivation for ordering).¹¹

Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya explore concepts of order across both centuries and civilisations. In a comparative study of Chinese, Indian and Islamic international thought, Buzan and Acharya note that contemporary theorising about international politics within these civilisations draws on cultural traditions that go back hundreds and even thousands of years.¹² A key distinction between thinking about order in these three cases and ‘western’ theories of IR is that ‘hierarchy’ is much more important than ‘anarchy’. This is attributed, in part, to the fact that all three civilisations for much of their existence developed as empires with limited regular contact with other polities of similar size and power (and thus limited knowledge of the world beyond their frontiers).¹³

The result, particularly in the Chinese case, is an intellectual tradition more amenable to ‘relational’ theories of order that emphasise the extent to which actors are to an important extent constituted by their relations with other actors in a given political realm.¹⁴ At the same time, Buzan and

¹⁰ Classic accounts include Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (London: Leicester University Press, 1978), 200–2; Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Clark, *Legitimacy*; Phillips and Reus-Smit, *Culture and Order*.

¹¹ Bull, *Anarchical Society*, 8–22 and Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹² Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese and Islamic Civilisations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 113–59.

¹⁴ However, as Rebecca Adler-Nissen (among others) argues, the problem may lie with the ‘substantivist’ assumption underpinning most IR theorising that the core object of study must be the individual actor (empires, states, etc.) rather than the relations between actors: Rebecca Adler-Nissen, ‘Relationalism: Why Diplomats Find International Relations Theory Strange’ in Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot and Iver Neumann (eds.), *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 284–308. This is a view with which many diplomatic historians would sympathise.

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Acharya also identify ‘structural similarities of pursuing survival, wealth and power’ when Islamic, Chinese and Indian civilisations encountered actors that posed a challenge to their imperial interests.¹⁵ This suggests that competition and conflict are inevitable features of international politics across time, space and civilisational divides.

A recent book by Daniel Nexon and Alexander Cooley offers a more schematic framework for thinking about order that distinguishes between the architecture of a given order (the rules, norms and values it is designed to defend and project) and its infrastructure (the practices and relationships that are the lifeblood of the order). Institutions in this conception constitute the sinews of the order and provide sites for contestation as well as cooperation between states and non-state actors. Rather than being either manifestations of the existing distribution of power (realism) or frameworks to enable and promote cooperation (liberal institutionalism), orders are conceptualised as dynamic arenas where actors deploy various forms of power in pursuit of their aims. The establishment of the League of Nations was an important innovation, but the absence of the United States from the League and other fundamental flaws, argued Nexon and Cooley, meant that the Paris peace settlements proved a mere *interregnum* between two global wars rather than a durable international order.¹⁶

Scholars of international law take a different approach. Many are inclined to view law as a necessary precondition for international political order. According to one account, the study of international law is ‘the scientific study of the emergence of order out of chaos’.¹⁷ The tendency to understand international law as a core element of peaceful and stable political relations can be traced back to Yuan Dynasty China. The early modern development of legal theory by figures such as Gentili, Grotius and de Vattel laid the foundations for the emergence of international law as a distinct profession and academic discipline in the latter half of the

¹⁵ Buzan and Acharya, *Re-imagining International Relations*, 115.

¹⁶ Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unravelling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 31–41. For a set of reflections on international order see David Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse, ‘Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization’, *International Organization* 75 (Spring 2021), 248–50.

¹⁷ Stephen C. Neff, *Justice among Nations: A History of International Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); see also Benedict Kingsbury, ‘The International Legal Order’ in M. Tushnet and P. Cane (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Legal Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 271–97.

nineteenth century.¹⁸ Even those legal experts who acknowledge that law is but one of several ways to approach the problem of international order tend nonetheless to describe it as ‘a means of governing relations between sovereign states’. ‘Constituting order’ remains the core function of international law.¹⁹ The influential jurist and scholar Hermann Mosler argued that ‘legal force’ is the core binding element in international order. ‘[T]he public order of the international community’, according to Mosler, ‘consists of principles and rules the enforcement of which is of such vital importance that any unilateral action or agreement which contravenes these principles can have no legal force.’²⁰

International lawyers differ from one another, however, over big questions such as the sources and nature of international law. Is international law essentially a manifestation of the shared interests of the political actors in a given order? Or does it owe its authority to principles of justice and rights that exist independently of those interests and are applicable ‘regardless of time and space’?²¹ There are interesting parallels between these debates and those in IR theory. As in IR theory, anarchy is a core structuring concept in international law. International lawyers generally agree that the defining dilemma for law in the international system is the lack of a ‘higher guarantor’ of the rule of law in the international realm (as opposed to the domestic context).²²

‘Realist’ international lawyers argue that the use of law to legitimate empire was inevitable because law depends for its legitimacy and authority on power dynamics in the international realm and in particular the willingness of leading states to enforce it. International law is therefore an instrument for order, but not necessarily for justice. ‘Formalists’, on the other hand, argue that international law is exercised most effectively

¹⁸ Shin Kawashima, ‘China’ in Bardo Fassbender and Anne Peters (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 452–77; Kingsbury, ‘The International Legal Order’; Louis Renault, *Introduction à l’étude du droit international* (Paris: L. Larose, 1879); Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Anne Orford, ‘Constituting Order’ in James Crawford and Martti Koskenniemi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 271–89.

²⁰ Hermann Mosler, *The International Society as a Legal Community* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Sijthoff & Noordhoff, 1980), 32.

²¹ Martti Koskenniemi, ‘International Law in the World of Ideas’ in Crawford and Koskenniemi (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to International Law*, 53.

²² Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12–59.

through the power and authority of international institutions. According to this school of interpretation, in order to be legitimate, law must be as a source of justice as well as order. Realists offer a ‘thin’ conception of law and order in which international law at best can only ever be a mitigator of anarchy. Formalists, conversely, advocate a ‘thick’ conception in which international law rests on an authoritative regime that exists beyond the state.

Over the past three decades scholars have underlined the ways liberal theories of international law provided justification for imperial expansion and colonial subjugation. Non-white peoples were excluded from the ‘law of nations’ in order to provide a cover of legal legitimacy for practices of empire and exploitation. This work has illuminated the ways in which liberal legal practices embedded structural asymmetries in the international political order of the ‘long’ nineteenth century that continue to shape international politics into the twenty-first century.²³

Historians have devoted more attention to the origins and ends of international orders as well as their evolution over time. Yet most historical studies of order agree that the ends of major wars represent the most important moments. James Sheehan observes that the means used to win such wars determine the orders that emerge in their aftermath.²⁴ Yet historians disagree on the nature and character of international orders. Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman point to a widespread belief during the eighteenth century that the distribution of power gave political orders a self-regulating character that did not require design. Drawing on the natural sciences, thinkers saw institutions such as the market and balance of power as having a ‘natural dynamic equilibrium’.²⁵ Adam Tooze similarly considers that international orders are fashioned

²³ Quoted in Jennifer Pitts, ‘Law of Nations, World of Empires: The Politics of Law’s Conceptual Frames’ in A. Brett, M. Donaldson and M. Koskeniemi (eds.), *History, Politics, Law: Thinking through the International* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 206; see also Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and IR scholar Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12–59.

²⁴ Sheehan, ‘Five Postwar Orders, 1763–1945’ in Ute Planert and James Retallack (eds.), *Decades of Reconstruction: Postwar Societies, State-Building and International Relations from the Seven Years’ War to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 350; see also Andreas Osiander, *The States System of Europe, 1640–1990: Peace-Making and Conditions of International Stability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 14.

²⁵ Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 126–27, 246–47.

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fundamentally by the distribution of military and economic power. Dismissing the concept of ‘collective design’, Tooze insists instead that international orders are fashioned by ‘cruder calculations of power and material constraints’. Tooze argues that ‘the remaking of global order’ after 1918 reflected a ‘new order of power’.²⁶

These interpretations are in line with the thesis of Paul Kennedy, that the evolution of international order reflects the rise and fall of great powers. Kennedy argued that the population size and economic base of member powers constitute the structure of a given order. He further submits that the decline of major powers and change in the international order is accelerated by ‘imperial overstretch’ – the tendency of great powers to assume ever more ambitious strategic commitments that eventually become too great for their economic base to support. The decline of a major power leads to instability, war and the overthrow of the existing order. The mismatch between the claims of a liberal world order and underlying realities of power was particularly acute after 1919. Kennedy emphasised the ‘fragile’ structures of post-1919 politics, including colonial nationalists’ challenge to empire, the residual potential of German power, changing commercial and trade structures, and America’s retreat from an active role in regulating the European balance of power.²⁷ Former policy-maker and theorist of *realpolitik* Henry Kissinger offers a similar view but attaches more importance to rules and norms. Kissinger contends that all ‘systems of order’ are based on two constituent elements. The first is ‘a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action’ and the second is ‘a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down’.²⁸ For Kissinger, power underpins order.

Some historians attribute greater importance to ideas and beliefs and are more alive to the way international orders are imagined, negotiated and constructed. Among the most influential is Paul Schroeder, who attributes decisive agency to political and policy elites in the creation and evolution of political orders. Schroeder’s conception of order emphasises the fundamental role of ‘shared understandings, assumptions, learned skills and responses, rules, norms and procedures etc., which agents

²⁶ Adam Tooze, ‘Everything You Know about Global Order Is Wrong’, *Foreign Policy*, 30 January 2019; Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order* (London: Penguin, 2015), 6; Sheehan, ‘Five Postwar Orders’, 351.

²⁷ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Vintage, 1989), 355–75.

²⁸ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (London: Penguin, 2015), 7–8.

acquire and use in pursuing their individual aims within the framework of a shared practice'.²⁹ Interestingly, Schroeder also embraced a systemic perspective that assumed wars happen not because of the blunders or miscalculations of individual policy-makers or states, but rather because of the nature of the international order itself. While political actors have agency in the shaping of a given order, it is the character of the order they create together that makes conflict more or less likely. Schroeder was unequivocal in proposing that an order based on multilateral institutions and restraint is preferable to an adversarial one based on the balance of power. 'Any government', he observed, 'is restrained better and more safely by friends and allies than by opponents or enemies.'³⁰

Schroeder's framework for understanding international order has been enormously influential. Recent studies by Patrick Cohrs and Peter Jackson have drawn on Schroeder to understand efforts to construct a 'trans-Atlantic order' after 1918.³¹ Other historians have attached great importance to the ideological content of international orders. For Arno Mayer, the post-1917 order was characterised above all by the confrontation between Bolshevik advocacy of international revolution, on the one hand, and the liberal capitalist response, on the other.³² Or Rosenboim, meanwhile, interrogates the conceptual underpinnings of liberal visions of order. Still others focus on liberal visions of imperial order founded on race.³³

²⁹ Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, xii.

³⁰ Paul W. Schroeder, 'Containment Nineteenth Century Style: How Russia Was Restrained' in *Systems, Stability and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), 130. For illuminating discussions of Schroeder's framework see Hamish Scott, 'Paul Schroeder's International System: The View from Vienna', and Jack Levy, 'The Theoretical Foundations of Paul W. Schroeder's International System', both in *International History Review* 16, 4 (1994), 663–80 and 715–44.

³¹ Patrick Cohrs, *The New Atlantic Order: The Transformation of International Politics, 1860–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Peter Jackson, 'La conception transatlantique de sécurité du gouvernement Clemenceau à la Conférence de Paix de Paris 1919', *Histoire, économie & société* 38, 4 (2019), 65–87.

³² Arno Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959).

³³ Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Competing Visions of World Order, Global Moment and Movements 1880s–1930s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007); Duncan Bell, *Re-Ordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); John H. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory,*