

International society

Thus described international systems have a mechanical quality. When we study an international system we are looking at political entities from the outside and only at the relationships of power that obtain between them. But in addition international politics have what we might best refer to as a “social” dimension. An international system is not only a system, that is, but also a society of sorts, and political entities have social relations with each other which resemble those that individual human beings have. This is obvious, if not before, once we start investigating other international systems than the European. In order to make sense of this idea, we need to think some more about what we might mean by a “society.”

Consider what always happens when people interact with each other sufficiently frequently and for a sufficiently long period of time. After a while our actions always come to form some kind of a pattern. What we do leaves a trace, as it were, and as we repeatedly do the same thing, we become increasingly predictable in our behavior. This is how habits are formed, and for society as a whole – when large numbers of people act in a predictable fashion – this is how customs and norms come to develop. Customs and norms are rules that we tacitly follow, often without even being aware of it. What is the case for individuals is true for political entities too. States that interact with each other sufficiently frequently will come to develop a certain pattern to their interaction. They too will leave a trace and form norms and customs. This is not to say that they necessarily must become friends nor that the international system in which they interact necessarily will be peaceful. Indeed, patterns of interaction can form also between states which are each other’s worst nightmares.

These patterns of interaction are the building blocs by which a society is made. A society, that is, does not require the

existence of shared political institutions. A society does not have to be established, or sponsored, by a state. Instead societies happen all the time, quite by themselves, wherever human beings interact. One example are so called "pre-state societies." In the jungles of the Amazon, or in the hills of New Guinea, anthropologists have come across tribes that clearly form well-regulated societies without having any of the institutions that a state can provide. There are no formal legal institutions, for example, yet people nevertheless behave sociably and cooperatively much of the time. *[Read more: The evolution of cooperation]* Anthropological examples such as these are interesting for our purposes since international systems too lack formal legal institutions. After all, you cannot call the police when a neighboring country misbehaves. Yet the fact of the matter is that neighboring countries too behave reasonably cooperatively much of the time, even in fact when it might not be in their own best interest to do so.

Consider the case of diplomacy. In all international systems the members must find a way of relating to each other short of going to war. They must have a way of discussing common concerns, to solve disputes and reach settlements. In response, practices – diplomatic practices – of various kinds come to develop. Thus there may be rules for how negotiations should be carried out, for what constitutes a violation of a treaty, and rituals for how wars should be declared and concluded. Many rules concern the private conduct of the diplomat themselves, how they should be dressed and how they should greet one another *[Read more: An incident at Tower Wharf]* Interestingly for our purposes, these diplomatic practices were not formally decided on by any central authority but instead they came to emerge quite by themselves and only much later were they written up as explicit codes.

Or consider international law. We usually think of law as only pertaining to relations *within* a state. It is only within a

state that laws can be made by a legitimate authority, where laws can be properly policed, and where violators can be punished. For these reasons, we would not expect there to be laws in relations between states. Yet all international systems have laws of some kind or another – even if they no doubt are less effective than domestic law. For example, a country which goes to war in defiance of the stipulations of international law will often get away with it, in particular if the state in question is sufficiently powerful. But this is not to say that international law is useless. Rather remarkably, states often do follow the legal stipulations, and not only when it is in their own interest to do so. International law may even be operating in the heat of a battlefield. [Read more: *Christmas in the trenches*]

Putting these observations together we arrive at a description of international relations as organized *both* by means of the mechanics of power and by the practices of social life. International politics is simultaneously both a system and a society. [Read more: *The English School and anarchical society*]

Power matters to be sure, and so do the relations of power that obtain between political entities, but through the patterns which their interaction form norms are established which go on to organize the interaction. Some of these norms can be surprisingly strong and together they help constitute a powerful sense of a shared identity. In Europe, for most of its history, all rulers were officially Christian and as such members of the *corpus christianum*, the great body of mankind united by the same faith. Likewise in the Muslim caliphates all rulers were members of the same *ummah*, the community of those who submitted themselves to Allah. But social norms are not sufficiently strong to bring about a lasting peace. As we all know, it is certainly possible to fight with people who are very similar to ourselves and with whom we interact closely and on a regular basis. Indeed, sometimes it is far easier to stay on peaceful terms with complete strangers. This is true in international relations as well. Both the *corpus*

christianum and *the ummah* provided their respective international systems with a strong sense of community, yet this did not stop neither Christians nor Muslims from killing their fellow co-religionists. Indeed they have continued to do so to this day.

- [Prev](#)