

1. Introduction

International relations as a university-level topic is usually taught with little historical depth. In an introductory class, your instructor might tell you that the basic rules of international politics were established in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century, or you might hear something about European colonialism in the nineteenth century, and perhaps a word or two about the First World War. Once the class gets going, however, historical references are unlikely to stretch further back than to 1945. It will be as though the world was created less than a hundred years ago.

In addition, international politics, as it is usually taught, is hopelessly Eurocentric. The discipline takes Europe as the standard by which every other part of the world is measured — although “Europe” here also includes the United States and other places where the Europeans settled. The European model is obviously the most important one, your teacher will imply, since this is the model that came to organize international politics everywhere else. The world in which we live today is the world which the Europeans made in their own image.

One of the most important things you learn at university is to question authority, and this includes the authority of your teachers. No matter how smart or well read, your teacher’s perspective will always be only one view among many. There is always another story to tell. In this book, we will tell other stories. Our historical perspective goes back to the first millennium of the Common Era (CE) and our perspective is explicitly non-European. This is a textbook on international politics which takes history seriously and which puts Europe firmly in its place. Europe matters as well of course, but, as it turns out, not all that much — not once we take a historical look at the world as a whole. It is simply not the case that the history of other parts of the world began the day the first European colonizers arrived. The Europeans did not, as a previous generation of scholars used to argue, “awaken” the natives, or “invite them into world history.” Non-Europeans were always plenty awake, thank you very much, and the idea that the history of Europe is equal to the history of the world is just ridiculous. In this book, it is these non-European histories we are going to tell, and we will try to tell them on their own terms, not as they were impacted by, or had an impact on, Europe.

Furthermore, just to be clear, this alternative perspective is not motivated by an attempt to be “politically correct.” The aim is not to set the record straight out of a

concern for balance or respect for people who are marginalized and silenced. These are worthwhile concerns to be sure, but our task is rather more straightforwardly to provide a better account of the kind of knowledge we need in order to understand today's world. History is constantly making itself present and today people and countries outside of Europe are asserting themselves. The world is once again changing and changes, once underway, can be quick and dramatic. Today, Europe and North America play a far less important role in world politics than in the past century, and in the future this role is likely to become less important still. The world is about to flip and our perspective on the past must be revised. The traditional European version of world history is no longer valid.

As you soon will discover, this book is very much an introductory textbook and anyone with a proper background in world history is bound to find the text far too basic. Yet chances are you do not have a proper background in world history, and if that indeed is the case, there is a lot here for you to learn. Think about the text that follows as a form of remedial education. It provides a chance for you to make up for the gaps that exist in your knowledge of things that all educated people should know.

Comparative international systems

A textbook on world history might appear to be a somewhat mad undertaking. A book that discusses "everything that ever happened" would surely have to be just as long as history itself. Yet this is not that book. We are not all that interested in the events, wars, names, and dates of the past. Instead, the aim is to introduce you to a subject that we could call the "comparative study of international systems." Let's think a bit about what such a comparative study might be. A system, first of all — any kind of system — is made up of units that act independently of each other. At the same time, the behavior of one unit in the system always depends on the behavior of all the others. They are part of the same environment and this influences what they do. There is a systemic effect, we could perhaps say, which is exercised not by the units themselves, but by the terms of their interaction.

So what is an international system? Well, it is a system which is made up of political entities — we usually call them "states" — which act independently of each other at the same time as they are forced to consider the actions of all other entities in the system. They act on their own, but also always together with, and in relation to, all the others. The international system provides an environment which determines, in broad outline, what political entities do and what they cannot do. The reason the international system has this effect is that it has a certain logic, and it is this logic, more than anything, that students of international relations study. The logic of the international system is expressed in institutions, rules, and norms. When studying an international system, we study the institutions that have been created, the rules by which the interaction takes place, and the norms that political entities follow.

Yet, there are many international systems, and not all of them are organized in the same fashion. That is, different international systems have different institutions,

rules, and norms. These differences are the subject matter of a comparative study of international systems. And yet, it is no longer possible to make such comparisons using contemporary data. The reason is that, today, there is only one international system. This is the system that originated in Europe around the sixteenth century and spread to the rest of the world as a result of European colonialism in the nineteenth century. As a result, we find that the different international systems that previously existed were destroyed. Today, the rules of international politics are European rules, and the norms and institutions are European norms and institutions. The entire world has been recreated in Europe's image, and there is consequently nothing with which this system can be compared.

This is why a comparative study of international systems must be a historical study. There have been many international systems in the past, we will discover, some of them existed simultaneously and more or less independently of each other. Going back no further than to the middle of the nineteenth century, we find distinctly non-European ways of organizing international politics, and the non-European examples multiply the further back we go in time. These systems had other kinds of institutions, and they often followed other rules and norms. As a result, we find that these political entities and their members acted differently and for different reasons. Reading about them allows us to take leave of our present world and visit some very distant, different, and sometimes quite strange places. The kind of international politics that your teachers have taught you thus far, it turns out, is only one possible kind of international politics. In this book, we will introduce you to others.

More concretely, we will discuss six different regions of the world: China and East Asia, India, the Muslim caliphates, the Mongol khanates, Africa, and the Americas. There is no separate chapter on Persia, although the Persian influences on India and on the Muslim world will be discussed; there is nothing on Australia, and apart from a brief discussion of Hawaii, we will not deal with the Pacific islands; Southeast Asia will be mentioned, but mainly in the context of Indian cultural influences. The final chapter deals with European expansion and colonialism, but there is no separate chapter on Europe as such.

Institutions, rules, and norms

Before we proceed to discuss the rest of the world, let's say a few words about the institutions, rules, and norms which characterize the one international system in which we all now live. This is a system that takes the state as its basic unit. The state is the subject of international politics, as it were. It is states that do things — go to war, conclude peace treaties, engage in foreign trade. From around the seventeenth century onward, states have been thought of as "sovereign." A sovereign state is a state which exercises supreme authority within a given territory. A sovereign state determines its own affairs in accordance with its own interests and aspirations, or rather, in the sixteenth century, in accordance with the interests and aspirations of its ruler.

Sovereignty is a basic institution of the European international system, we can conclude, and as such it implies a number of social practices and administrative arrangements. There are borders to be identified and protected, border crossings to be guarded, passports to be issued, flags to be flown and national anthems to be sung. These practices and arrangements are, in turn, associated with various rules and norms. One rule says that all states are equal to each other. All states are the same kinds of entities, doing the same kinds of things, and they all have the same status as members of the same system. They are functionally equal, that is, despite the fact that some obviously are far larger, richer and more powerful than others. As far as the norms of the system are concerned, one example is the norm which says that sovereignty must be respected. States should not interfere in each other's domestic affairs. All states have a right to self-determination.

In an international system of this kind, there is no common authority. And this, it soon becomes clear, is a problem as each state looks after itself, and no one looks after, or takes any responsibility for, the system as a whole. The term which scholars of international relations use for this condition is "anarchy." The European international system is an anarchical international system. In an anarchical international system, states are permanently insecure and war is a constant threat. Since they cannot trust their neighbors to behave peacefully towards them, each state must be prepared to defend itself, with weapons if needs be. Yet this, in turn, makes the neighbors feel more insecure, and they must arm themselves as well. States that fail to respond to this logic — states that trust in the goodwill of their neighbors — are punished for their naivety. In the end, the search for security makes everyone more insecure. And every so often the threat of war is replaced by actual cases of warfare. Not surprisingly, since its inception, the European international system has been extraordinarily violent. In the twentieth century alone, almost 100 million people died in European wars.

This is where a comparative study of international systems can make a contribution. Other, non-European international systems, as mentioned above, have distinct institutions, rules, and norms. They are all different from each other, but also different from the European system. For one thing, non-European international systems have often contained other political actors than states, and in many of them, empires have played a prominent role. Moreover, territory has often been defined quite differently. Where land is endlessly abundant, such as on the steppes of Central Asia or in much of Africa, possessing a particular piece of it has not been a crucial concern. As a result, borders have a different meaning. Where the borders should be drawn between two countries may matter far less than the relationship which both of them have toward a powerful state in the center of the system. The maps of some international systems look like subway maps — they tell you how to get from one place to the other, but they do not tell you much about the features of the land you are passing through.

In such an international system, sovereignty is not going to be a commonly invoked notion. Or rather, sovereignty is not an absolute value as much as a variable. Some political entities are fully independent while others are far less so. Here, different political entities are not functionally equal to each other; moreover, there is no absolute

norm of non-interference and self-determination. The system is not anarchical in the same way as the European system. In fact, many non-European international systems have been quite hierarchical and held together by means of a common culture and a shared set of values, often under the auspices of a state with imperial ambitions. As a result, it has often been possible to ensure a measure of prosperity and peace. Yet one should not romanticize. Wars have been common, and horrendously destructive, outside of Europe too.

If we return to Europe with these lessons in mind, we will discover that the European international system suddenly looks quite different. From our new, non-European point of view, we are able to see a number of things that we previously failed to notice. In the European system too, it turns out, there are not only states but many other political entities, and here also empires have often played a prominent role. In general, sovereignty is not the absolute principle which it has been taken to be and the functional equality of states is not always respected. The European international system, when we look at it carefully, is actually quite hierarchical. Indeed, Europe is also united around a common culture and a set of shared values, and despite the wars, there have been times of prosperity and peace. In this way, by looking at it from a non-European point of view — by relativizing it — we can learn more about Europe too.

Stateless societies

Even from an alternative perspective, however, there will be many things that we still cannot see. Every perspective allows us to notice some things while making us blind to others. For example, we still take it for granted that states are the proper subject of history. We assume that world history is equal to the history of the state. Yet there are good reasons to question this assumption. Before we proceed to compare different international systems, let's say a few words about what this book fails to discuss.

Today the world is completely divided up between political entities. All territory belongs to one state or another and no land belongs to more than one state. States are mutually exclusive and together exhaustive of political space. Yet this has not always been the case. It was only as a result of the introduction of farming some 12,000 years ago that the first states appeared. Before that, during some 95 percent of human history, we were hunters and gatherers who moved around in response to the seasonal variations in the availability of food. Since these hunters and gatherers were constantly on the move, it was difficult for political authorities to exercise control over them. As a result, hunters and gatherers lived in "stateless" societies. Moreover, since they constructed only temporary buildings, there are few ruins for archaeologists to investigate. As a result, a history of a society of hunters and gatherers is difficult to write — hunters and gatherers "have no history."

Farmers are far easier to subdue and exploit. They live in a particular place and cultivate a given piece of land. After the harvest, the tax collectors dispatched by the king show up and demand their due. This was how the first states were established in the valleys of great rivers — Euphrates and Tigris, the Nile and a few others — around

three thousand years Before Common Era (BCE). The transition to agriculture and the rise of the state, we have often been told, constituted a great improvement on the nomadic condition of statelessness. It was only then that human beings could acquire a culture and that human history, properly speaking, began. However, it is questionable whether the shift to agriculture really constituted an improvement. Hunters and gatherers seem to have enjoyed a more varied diet than farmers, and they were less exposed to contagious diseases. In addition, stateless societies were far more egalitarian than state-dominated societies. There are still hunters and gatherers in the world today, but they are not many. [Read more: People of the forest at p. 140.](#)

There are other kinds of nomadic people who make a living by moving around. Pastoralists are one example, and they have been just as difficult for states to control. Pastoralists are people who keep animals such as sheep, cows, horses, and reindeer. Their animals graze the land, and when they run out of food in one place, their owners move in order to find new pastures. As a result, pastoralists are difficult to tax and they have little respect for borders. The interior of the Eurasian continent and the savannas of Africa have been good places for pastoralists. Here, farming has been impossible to pursue since there is little rain and not many rivers. What there is, however, is an abundance of grassland. Relying on their fast horses, the pastoralists raid the sedentary communities of farmers and laid their hands on all kinds of things that life on the steppe cannot provide. Such “barbarian invasions” are a theme in both Chinese and Indian history. Indeed, invasions by peoples of the steppes have been important in European history as well. [Read more: The Mongol invasion of Europe at p. 109.](#)

The point, for our present purposes, is that a study of comparative international systems will misrepresent the past by telling the history of the state, not the history of stateless people. Or rather, when stateless people appear, they will do so only to the extent that they have an impact on states and their sedentary subjects. The incompleteness of this account becomes obvious when we remember that, until recently, much of the world was populated by nomads. It was only in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the first railways were built, that the interior of the great continents came under the effective control of states. It was only then that the government of the United States finally subdued societies of Native Americans and that the Chinese government was able to properly police its borders with Mongolia. States, until recently, were like little islands in a large stateless sea. A comparative study of international systems is a study of these islands.

Walls and bridges

There is probably no prejudice which is as widely shared as the prejudices which sedentary people express towards people who are on the move. And, one might add, for good reason. The nomadic peoples that periodically swept into China, India and Europe looted, killed, and destroyed. One thing they destroyed were the fences that farmers had built around their plots. Fences, to pastoralists, are offensive since they prevent grazing animals from moving around. The nomads besieged cities too and

destroyed city walls. Moreover, they were notorious destroyers of culture. When Genghis Khan entered Bukhara in 1220, he rounded up all the inhabitants in the city's main mosque, informed them that he was a punishment sent by God, and proceeded to kill them all. [Read more: A nomadic state at p. 103.](#)

Likewise when they sacked Baghdad in 1258, the Mongols destroyed libraries, killed scholars, poets, and artists, and put an end to the era which came to be remembered as "the Arab Golden Age."

Yet to call Mongols and other nomadic tribes "barbarian" might be unfair. Better, perhaps, to say that they have a different outlook on life. Compare the close connection between culture and agriculture. "Culture" refers to cultivation, to the "tilling of the land." To cultivate a plant is to care for it and to make it grow. In order to protect what we grow, we drive stakes into the ground and build fences that separate what is ours from that which belongs to others. Private property requires walls, and good walls make for good neighbors. Walls are also needed if we are to create a home for ourselves. On this side of the wall, we are safe and we are together with people like ourselves; on the other side of the wall, we are away from home and we interact mainly with strangers. Cultures, we believe, must be nurtured and protected in the same fashion. A culture is always our culture, it belongs to people like us and to the place where we live. The walls that surround us protect our way of life and allow us to continue to be who we are.

Some international systems have been surrounded by walls, actual as well as metaphorical. As a result, interaction with the rest of the world has been limited; the international system is isolated from external influences, but it is also independent and self-sufficient. Much as a biological species which is confined to a specific ecological niche, the international system evolves in its own fashion. The most striking example is the international systems of the Americas, in which different societies had some contact with each other, but which developed in complete isolation from the rest of the world. [Read more: The Columbian exchange at p. 156.](#)

Foreign trade was, for extensive periods in its history, limited and the leaders of the Chinese Empire also sought to build walls to isolate themselves from the outside world and to keep foreigners out. [Read more: The Great Wall of China does not exist at p. 26.](#) Likewise, Japan was officially closed to foreigners from the years 1600 to 1868. [Read more: A Japanese international system? at p. 36.](#) In fact, before the year 1500, Europe too showed only limited interest in the world beyond its borders.

But there are also international systems that display the opposite logic. These international systems are outward-looking and expansive and seek to connect different parts of the world with each other. The Mongol khanates in the thirteenth century are a striking example, but there are others. In the seventh century, the Arabs expanded rapidly from the Arabian Peninsula, conquering the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. In 732, a hundred years after the death of Muhammad, the Arab armies had reached as far as central France. However an international system can be outward-looking and expansive without being violent. This describes the international systems that have existed around the Indian Ocean.



A 1763 Chinese map of the world, claiming to be a reproduction of a 1418 map made from Zheng He's voyages.
Photo from www.economist.com. Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zhenghemap.jpg>

Here people have interacted with each other from the earliest times. This is why we find shards of Chinese pottery in archaeological sites in southern Africa and why to this day people throughout Southeast Asia are Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims — all three religions brought to Southeast Asia from India. [Read more: Indianization at p. 58.](#)

This is how civilization spreads. If culture finds its metaphorical basis in agriculture, civilization finds it in exchange. When our society is connected to other societies, we are connected to other people, and we can suddenly compare things and judge them in relation to each other. As a result, we have a choice between better and cheaper options; we can pick the new and the never-before-tried. Such choices broaden our horizons and improve our lives. This is why civilization depends on the unencumbered circulation of goods, people, ideas, faiths, and ways of life. The consequences of such interaction may be unsettling, but they can also be liberating. We no longer have to be confined to, and carry the burden of, our culture, and we no longer have to be who we are. Civilization provides us with a means of escape. Or, differently put, exchange is the enemy of culture. When presented with alternatives, we give up our old ways. We no longer do the things we used to do and we are no longer quite the same people as before. This is how civilization undermines and destroys culture.

Take the example of the Muslims in al-Andalus. [Read more: The Arabs in Spain at p. 81.](#) The Arabs civilized Spain in the ninth century by connecting its cities to the great centers of learning in the Middle East. As a result, the previous Visigoth culture was destroyed. The people of al-Andalus grew to eat lemons, play the lute and compose far better poetry; they used better ploughs and irrigation techniques too, put on deodorants, and used toothpaste to brush their teeth. [Read more: Deodorants and the origins of flamenco at p. 82.](#)

The great library in Córdoba was far larger than any library in Christian Europe and it contained the entire canon of classical Greek texts, saved for posterity by the caliphs of Baghdad. [Read more: The translation movement at p. 79.](#) In the thirteenth century, these books were translated and became available in Latin for the first time. The Europeans were later to refer to this as “the Renaissance.” The Renaissance destroyed the culture of the Middle Ages, but it civilized Europe.

Or, and more controversially, compare the impact which the European expansion has had on the rest of the world. For much of their history, the Europeans were not that interested in other continents, but around the year 1500 — at the time of the rise of the sovereign state — this changed. The Europeans began looking for ways to trade, above all with India and China, and little by little they came to acquire colonies overseas. For a while, at the time of the First World War, the Europeans controlled much of the rest of the world. This expansion had a profound, destructive impact on the cultures of the societies with which they came into contact. All parts of the world were suddenly connected to the same global network of trade, and politically dominated by Europe, so it was no longer possible for people in the rest of the world to live as before and to be what they previously had been. And yet, the benefits are undeniable. Today, in the wake of the cultural devastation brought by the European expansion, people

around the world are far better educated, in a better state of health, and with more opportunities open to them. Cultural devastation is a tragedy, but civilization is a blessing. It is not obvious how to assess these contradictory effects and this is why the history of European expansion is still a controversial topic.

Further reading

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Think about

Comparative international systems

- What is a “system”?
- What do you study if you are studying “comparative international systems”?
- Why must a comparative study of international systems become a historical study?

Norms, rules, institutions

- What is a “sovereign state”?
- What do scholars of international relations mean by “anarchy”?
- What can a study of non-European international systems tell us about Europe?

Stateless societies

- What are “stateless societies”?
- Describe the lifestyle of hunters and gatherers.
- Why was pastoralism until recently a successful form of social and economic organization?

Walls and bridges

- What is “culture”?
- What is “civilization”? How do civilizations spread?
- Why have many societies decided to construct walls around themselves?



Map of Asia from Abraham Ortelius, Theatrum orbis terrarum (Antverpiae: Apud Aegid. Coppennium Diesth, 1570); p. 31, <https://archive.org/details/theatrumorbister00orte>