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## 50

# Beyond the States System?

Hedley Bull

If an alternative form of universal political order were to emerge that did not merely constitute a change from one phase or condition of the states system to another, but led beyond the states system, it would have to involve the demise of one or another of the latter's essential attributes: sovereign states, interaction among them, such that they form a system; and a degree of acceptance of common rules and institutions, in respect of which they form a society.

### A System But Not a Society

It is conceivable that a form of universal political organisation might arise which would possess the first and the second of these attributes but not the third. We may imagine, that is to say, that there might exist a plurality of sovereign states, forming a system, which did not, however, constitute an international society. Such a state of affairs would represent the demise of the states system, which [...] is an international society as well as an international system. There would be states, and interaction among them on a global basis, but the element of acceptance of common interests or values, and, on the basis of them, of common rules and institutions, would have disappeared. There would be communications and negotiations among these states, but no commitment to a network of diplomatic institutions; agreements, but no acceptance of a structure of international legal obligation; violent encounters among them that were limited by the capacity of the belligerents to make war, but not by their will to observe restraints as to when, how and by whom it was conducted; balances of power that arose fortuitously, but not balances that were the product of conscious attempts to preserve them; powers that were greater than others, but no agreed conception of a great power in the sense of a power with special rights and duties.

Whether or not the states system, at some point in the future, has ceased to be an international society, it might well be difficult to determine. There may be acceptance of common rules and institutions by some states, but not by others: how many states have to have contracted out of international society before we can say that it has ceased to exist? Some rules and institutions may continue to find acceptance, but others not: which rules and institutions are essential? Acceptance of rules and institutions may be difficult to determine: does it lie in verbal assent to these rules, in behaviour that conforms strictly to them, or in willingness to defer to them even while evading them? Granted these difficulties [...] there is ample historical precedent for an international system that is not an international society [...].

An international system that is not an international society might nevertheless contain some elements of order. Particular states might be able to achieve a degree of domestic order, despite the absence of rules and institutions in their relations with one another. Some degree of international order might also be sustained by fortuitous balances of power or relationships of mutual nuclear deterrence, by great power spheres of preponderance unilaterally imposed, by limitations in war that were the consequence of self-restraint or limitations of capacity. But an international system of this kind would be disorderly in the extreme, and would in fact exemplify the Hobbesian state of nature.

### States But Not a System

It is also conceivable that a form of universal political organisation might emerge which possessed the first of the essential attributes that have been mentioned but not the second. We may imagine that there are still sovereign states, but that they are not in contact or interaction with each other, or at all events do not interact sufficiently to cause them to behave as component parts of a system. States might be linked to each other so as to form systems of states in particular regions, but there would not be any global system of states. Throughout the world as a whole there might be mutual awareness among states, and even contact and interaction on a limited scale, but it would no longer be the case that states in all parts of the world were a vital factor in one another's calculations.

It might be difficult to determine how much decline in the global interaction of states would have to have taken place before we could say that they had ceased to form a system. If there is a high degree of interaction throughout the world at the economic and social levels, but not at the strategic level, can we say that there is a global system? Does a global states system cease to exist merely because there are some societies that are excluded from it? Even today in the jungles of Brazil or in the highlands of Papua/New Guinea there are societies scarcely touched by what we nevertheless call the global states system.

Once again, there is ample historical precedent for an alternative to the states system of this kind: [...] it was not before the nineteenth century that there arose any states system that was global in dimension. Does such an alternative represent a superior path to world order?

It has often been maintained that it does. A series of isolated or semi-isolated states or other kinds of community might each achieve a tolerable form of social order within its own confines, and a form of world order would exist that was simply the sum of the order that derived from each of these communities. At the same time the classic sources of disorder that arise in a situation of interaction between states would be avoided because interaction itself would be avoided or kept to a minimum.

This was the substance of Rousseau's vision of a world of small self-sufficient states, each achieving order within its own confines through the operation of the general will of its community, and achieving order in their relations with one another by minimising contact.<sup>1</sup> It also entered into the prescription that Washington laid down for the United States in his Farewell Address: 'The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign relations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little *political* connection as possible.'<sup>2</sup> This for Washington was a maxim only for the United

States, which was in a position of actual physical isolation from the powers that might threaten her. Cobden later transformed it into a general prescription for all states in his dictum: 'As little intercourse as possible betwixt the governments, as much connection as possible between the nations of the world.'<sup>3</sup>

Cobden believed in non-intervention in the most rigid and absolute sense. He opposed intervention in international conflicts as well as civil ones; for ideological causes (such as liberalism and nationalism on the European continent) of which he approved, as well as for causes of which he disapproved (such as the interventionism of the Holy Alliance); and for reasons of national interest such as the preservation of the balance of power or the protection of commerce. He rejected the distinctions John Stuart Mill drew between intervention in the affairs of civilised countries and intervention in a barbarian country, and between intervention as such and intervention to uphold the principle of non-intervention against a power that had violated it.<sup>4</sup> He even opposed the attempt to influence the affairs of another country by moral suasion, and declined to sanction the formation of any organisation in England for the purpose of interfering in another country, such as the organisations formed to agitate against slavery in the United States. However, in Cobden's vision the promotion of the maximum systematic interaction at the economic and social levels was just as important as the promotion of minimum interaction at the strategic and political levels. Assuming as he did the desirability of universal pursuit by governments of *laissez-faire* policies in relation to the economy, he was able to imagine that the strategic and political isolation of states from one another might coexist with their economic interdependence.<sup>5</sup>

A form of universal political organisation based on the absolute or relative isolation of communities from one another, supposing it to be a possible development, would have certain drawbacks. If systematic interaction among states has in the past involved certain costs (international disorder, the subjection of the weak to the strong, the exploitation by the rich of the poor), so also has it brought certain gains (assistance to the weak and the poor by the strong and the rich, the international division of labour, the intellectual enrichment of countries by each other). The prescription of universal isolationism, even in the limited form Cobden gave it of political and strategic non-interventionism, implies that the opportunities arising from human interaction on a global scale will be lost, as well as that the dangers to which it gives rise will be avoided.

### World Government

It is conceivable also that a form of universal political organisation might arise lacking the first of the above essential attributes, namely sovereign states. One way in which this might occur is through the emergence of a world government.

We may imagine that a world government would come about by conquest, as the result of what John Strachey has called a 'knock-out tournament' among the great powers, and in this case it would be a universal empire based upon the domination of the conquering power,<sup>6</sup> or we may imagine that it would arise as the consequence of a social contract among states, and thus that it would be a universal republic or cosmopolis founded upon some form of consent or consensus. In the latter case it may be imagined that a world government would arise suddenly, perhaps as the result of a crash programme induced by some catastrophe such as global war or ecological breakdown (as envisaged by a succession of futurologists from Kant to Herman Kahn), or

it may be thought of as arising gradually, perhaps through accretion of the powers of the United Nations. It may be seen as coming about as the result of a direct, frontal assault on the political task of bringing states to agree to relinquish their sovereignty, or, as on some 'functionalist' theories, it may be seen as the indirect result of inroads made on the sovereignty of states in non-political areas.

There has never been a government of the world, but there has often been a government supreme over much of what for those subjected to it was the known world. Throughout the history of the modern states system there has been an undercurrent of awareness of the alternative of a universal government, and of argument on behalf of it: either in the form of the backward-looking doctrine calling for a return to Roman unity, or in the form of a forward-looking doctrine that sees a world state as the consequence of inevitable progress. In the twentieth century there has been a revival of world government doctrine in response to the two World Wars.

The classical argument for world government is that order among states is best established by the same means whereby it is established among individual men within the state, that is by a supreme authority. This argument most commonly relates to the goal of minimum order, and especially the avoidance of war, which is said to be an inevitable consequence of the states system. But it is also sometimes advanced in relation to goals of optimum order: it is often argued today, for example, that a world government could best achieve the goal of economic justice for all individual men, or the goal of sound management of the human environment.

The classical argument against world government has been that, while it may achieve order, it is destructive of liberty or freedom: it infringes the liberties of states and nations (as argued by the ideologists of the successful grand alliances that fought against universal monarchy); and also checks the liberties of individuals who, if the world government is tyrannical, cannot seek political asylum under an alternative government.

The case for world government may thus appear to rest on an assumed priority of order over international or human justice or liberty. It may be argued, however, that the states system affords a better prospect than world government of achieving the goal of order also [...].

### A New Mediaevalism

It is also conceivable that sovereign states might disappear and be replaced not by a world government but by a modern and secular equivalent of the kind of universal political organisation that existed in Western Christendom in the Middle Ages. In that system no ruler or state was sovereign in the sense of being supreme over a given territory and a given segment of the Christian population; each had to share authority with vassals beneath, and with the Pope and (in Germany and Italy) the Holy Roman Emperor above. The universal political order of Western Christendom represents an alternative to the system of states which does not yet embody universal government.

All authority in mediaeval Christendom was thought to derive ultimately from God and the political system was basically theocratic. It might therefore seem fanciful to contemplate a return to the mediaeval model, but it is not fanciful to imagine that there might develop a modern and secular counterpart of it that embodies its central characteristic: a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty.

It is familiar that sovereign states today share the stage of world politics with other actors' just as in mediaeval times the state had to share the stage with 'other associations' (to use the mediaevalists' phrase). If modern states were to come to share their authority over their citizens, and their ability to command their loyalties, on the one hand with regional and world authorities, and on the other hand with sub-state or sub-national authorities, to such an extent that the concept of sovereignty ceased to be applicable, then a neo-mediaeval form of universal political order might be said to have emerged.

We might imagine, for example, that the government of the United Kingdom has to share its authority on the one hand with authorities in Scotland, Wales, Wessex and elsewhere, and on the other hand with a European authority in Brussels and world authorities in New York and Geneva, to such an extent that the notion of its supremacy over the territory and people of the United Kingdom had no force. We might imagine that the authorities in Scotland and Wales, as well as those in Brussels, New York and Geneva, enjoyed standing as actors in world politics, recognised as having rights and duties in world law, conducting negotiations and perhaps able to command armed forces. We might imagine that the political loyalties of the inhabitants of, say, Glasgow, were so uncertain as between the authorities in Edinburgh, London, Brussels and New York that the government of the United Kingdom could not be assumed to enjoy any kind of primacy over the others, such as it possesses now. If such a state of affairs prevailed all over the globe, this is what we may call, for want of a better term, a neo-mediaeval order.

The case for regarding this form of universal political organisation as representing a superior path to world order to that embodied in the states system would be that it promises to avoid the classic dangers of the system of sovereign states by a structure of overlapping authorities and cross-cutting loyalties that hold all peoples together in a universal society, while at the same time avoiding the concentration of power inherent in a world government. The case for doubting whether the neo-mediaeval model is superior is that there is no assurance that it would prove more orderly than the states system, rather than less. It is conceivable that a universal society of this kind might be constructed that would provide a firm basis for the realisation of elementary goals of social life. But if it were anything like the precedent of Western Christendom, it would contain more ubiquitous and continuous violence and insecurity than does the modern states system.

### Non-historical Alternatives

We must finally note the possibility that an alternative will develop to the states system which, unlike the four that have just been considered, does not conform to any previous pattern of universal political organisation.

Of course, any future form of universal political organisation will be different from previous historical experience, in the sense that it will have certain features that are unique and will not exactly resemble any previous system. My point is not this trivial one but the more serious one that a universal political system may develop which does not resemble any of the four historically derived alternatives even in broad comparison. The basic terms in which we now consider the question of universal political organisation could be altered decisively by the progress of technology, or equally by

its decay or retrogression, by revolutions in moral and political, or in scientific and philosophical ideas, or by military or economic or ecological catastrophes, foreseeable and unforeseeable.

I do not propose to speculate as to what these non-historical alternatives might be. It is clearly not possible to confine the varieties of possible future forms within any finite list of possible political systems, and for this reason one cannot take seriously attempts to spell out the laws of transformation of one kind of universal political system to another. It is not possible, by definition, to foresee political forms that are not foreseeable, and attempts to define non-historical political forms are found in fact to depend upon appeals to historical experience. But our view of possible alternatives to the states system should take into account the limitations of our own imagination and our own inability to transcend past experience.

### Notes

- 1 See 'Rousseau on war and peace', in Stanley Hoffmann, *The State of War: Essays in the Theory and Practice of International Politics* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1965).
- 2 This is quoted by Richard Cobden at the beginning of 'England, Ireland and America': see *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden* (London: Cassell, 1886), p. 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- 4 John Stuart Mill, 'A few words on non-intervention', in *Dissertations and Discussions*, vol. 3 (London: Longmans, Green, 1867).
- 5 See, especially, Cobden, 'England, Ireland and America' and 'Russia, 1836', in *Political Writings*.
- 6 John Strachey, *On the Prevention of War* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

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