The Relevance of 'International Society' in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities in a Potential Post-Liberal Order[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, I aim to update and apply the idea and practices of "international society," as developed in the classic book written by Hedley Bull (1977). This, by assessing its continuing relevance in the first decades of the 21st century. For scholarly, practical, and policy reasons, I believe that Bull's masterpiece offers a relevant 'guide to the perplexed' to navigate world politics in our turbulent times. The two research questions to be addressed in the paper are: First, what are the challenges confronting the idea of the contemporary international society and its practices in the third decade of the 21st century? Second, what is the relevance of the idea of the international society and its practices nowadays?

To answer the first question, I compile a list of significant contemporary challenges to the international society. In a nutshell, these include the rise of non-state actors and their challenge to the centrality of states; the impact of globalization and the preponderance of global issues (such as COVID-19 and climate change); and the lack of agreed global and shared norms, in both cultural and normative terms, which make international cooperation more difficult to obtain. Facing these four intertwined challenges, I argue that the idea and practices of international society can be updated to face the complex realities of our times. I sustain this argument by linking the concept and practices of the international society to the relevant mechanisms of global and regional governance, including the institutions of the international society. I refer to alternative world orders from the North and the South that reflect the resilience of the international society. Moreover, the opportunities for the flourishing of international society might include its potential decoupling from the Liberal International Order.

Keywords: international society, post-liberal order, , international cooperation, global governance

Resumen

En este artículo, pretendo actualizar y aplicar la idea y las prácticas de la "sociedad internacional", tal como se desarrollan en el libro clásico de Hedley Bull (1977), evaluando su relevancia continua en las primeras décadas del siglo XXI. Por razones académicas,

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prácticas y políticas, creo que la obra maestra de Bull ofrece una "guía para perplejos" relevante para navegar la política mundial en nuestros tiempos turbulentos. Las dos preguntas de investigación que se abordarán en el artículo son: Primero, ¿cuáles son los desafíos que enfrenta la idea de la sociedad internacional contemporánea y sus prácticas en la tercera década del siglo XXI? En segundo lugar, ¿cuál es la relevancia de la idea de la sociedad internacional y sus prácticas en la actualidad?

Para responder a la primera pregunta, compilo una lista de importantes desafíos contemporáneos para la sociedad internacional. En pocas palabras, estos incluyen el surgimiento de actores no estatales y su desafío a la centralidad de los Estados; el impacto de la globalización y la preponderancia de los problemas globales (como el COVID-19 y el cambio climático); y la falta de normas globales y compartidas acordadas, tanto en términos culturales como normativos, que dificultan la obtención de cooperación internacional. Frente a estos cuatro desafíos entrelazados, argumento que la idea y las prácticas de la sociedad internacional pueden actualizarse para enfrentar las complejas realidades de nuestro tiempo. Sostengo este argumento al vincular el concepto y las prácticas de la sociedad internacional con los mecanismos relevantes de gobernanza mundial y regional, incluidas las instituciones de la sociedad internacional. Me refiero a órdenes mundiales alternativos del Norte y del Sur que reflejan la resiliencia de la sociedad internacional. Además, las oportunidades para el florecimiento de la sociedad internacional podrían incluir su posible desvinculación del Orden Internacional Liberal.

Palabras clave: sociedad internacional, orden post-liberal, guía para perplejos, cooperación internacional, gobernanza global

Introduction

In this paper, I aim to update and apply the idea and practices of "international society," as developed in Hedley Bull's classic book *The Anarchical Society* (1977), by assessing its continuing relevance in the third decade of the 21st century. I want to reclaim the analytical importance of the idea of an international society, and test the extent to which it remains relevant for our present times. For scholarly, practical, and policy reasons, I believe that Bull's masterpiece offers a relevant 'guide to the perplexed' to navigate world politics in our turbulent times. The two major research questions to be addressed in the paper are: (1) What are the challenges confronting the idea of the contemporary "international society" and its practices in the first three decades of the 21st century?; and (2) What is the relevance of the concept and practices of international society nowadays?

To answer the first question, I compile a list of significant contemporary challenges to the international society. In a nutshell, these include the rise of non-state actors and their challenge to the centrality of states; the impact of globalization and the preponderance

of global issues (such as COVID-19 and climate change), and the lack of agreed global and shared norms, in both cultural and normative terms, which make international cooperation much more difficult to obtain. In this context, the normative dilemmas of juxtaposing considerations of order versus justice become paramount.

Facing these intertwined challenges, I argue that the concept and practices of international society can be –and actually they are – updated to the complex realities of the third decade of the 21st century. I sustain this argument by linking the concept and practices of the international society to the mechanisms of global and regional governance, as embedded in its primary institutions, including the nation-states themselves, the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war, the management of great powers, and trade. Moreover, I demonstrate the continuing relevance of the international society by referring to alternative world orders, framed in the Global North and in the Global South. Thus, international society is broader and more resilient than the Liberal International Order, which is a crucial (but not unique) component of it.

In my own re-reading of Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* about forty-five years after its publication, I will concur with Alderson and Hurrell (2000, viiii) that "Bull's work remains of continued relevance in understanding the political and moral dilemmas of the post-Cold War world." As my colleagues argued about twenty years ago, the intellectual framework of international society seems to be valid and useful nowadays, in these uncertain COVID-19 days. In this sense, and in order to answer the two research questions posed above, I will focus on three dimensions that explore the intricate links between theory and praxis: the idea or concept of international society; the practices of the international society, as evidenced in its institutions, alongside mechanisms of global and regional governance; and the relevance of the international society as questioned by the empirical challenges coping with the complex international realities. Hence, in order to assess the idea of international society we have to explain and understand the theoretical concept in any given historical reality (see Shaw 1994).

The Concept of the International Society

The concept or idea of an '"international society" or "society of states" is directly related to the Grotian tradition of international politics, carving a middle ground between the Realist conception of a mere system of states and the universalistic/idealistic Liberal (Kantian) view of a potential community of humankind. For Bull, the Grotian prescription for international behavior is that "all states, in their dealings with one another, are bound by the rules and institutions of the society they form" (Bull 1977, 27). According to Bull's definition (1977, 13), "*A society of states* (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the

sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions. If states today form an international society, this is because recognizing certain common interests and perhaps some common values, they regard themselves as bound by certain rules in their dealings with one another, such as they should respect one another's claims to independence, that they should honor agreements into which they enter, and that they should be subject to certain limitations in exercising force against one another. At the same time, they cooperate in the working of institutions such as the forms of procedures of international law, the machinery of diplomacy and general international organization, and the customs and conventions of war."

International societies can be traced at different levels of aggregation, from the global to the local. Historically, the idea of international societies has been translated and located at the level of regions, sharing a common culture or civilization. Thus, the European international society, evolving from medieval Europe through the nineteenth century Concert of Europe, became a global international society after World War II in the contemporary age of decolonization and economic globalization.

There are basically three major elements of any international society: common interests and values, common norms and rules, and common institutions. Like any other society, an *international* society includes a set of actors who share a sense of *common interests* in the elementary goals of social interaction, including the preservation of life, freedom, and the limitation of violence. At the level of the international society we can identify four such goals: (1) the preservation of the system and the society of states themselves; (2) maintaining the independence and sovereignty of the individual member-states; (3) the maintenance of peace, defined as the normal absence of war among the members of the society; and (4) the limitation of violence resulting in death or bodily harm, the keeping of promises, and the stabilization of possession by rules of property (Bull 1977, 16-19; see also Kacowicz 2005, 44-6; and Barnathan 2004, 196-197).

Among many other possibilities, norms can be defined as standards of behavior spelled out in terms of rights and obligations (Krasner 1982, 186). Similarly, rules are general imperative principles that require or authorize prescribed classes of persons or groups to behave in prescribed ways (Bull 1977, 54-55). The essential norm of international society is the principle of state sovereignty, which embodies the logic of national self-determination. This norm includes the principles of territorial integrity, political independence of existing states, legal equality, and nonintervention as its corollary.

Common interests, values, norms, and rules have a certain impact on the member-states of the international society through their articulation, formulation, and formalization into common *institutions*. Thus, institutions can be considered as a set of

habits and practices shaped toward the realization of common goals (see Bull 1977, 74).

According to Bull, the major institutions of international society are nation-states themselves, in the absence of a recognized supranational authority. States cooperate and collaborate with each other, shaping institutions such as the balance of power, international law, diplomatic mechanisms, great power management, and even the regulation of war. Institutions might sustain several and changing degrees of formalization and institutionalization, ranging from informal diplomatic contacts through elaborated schemes of economic and political integration (see Kacowicz 2005, 46). These major institutions actually embody the main practices of the international society.

The Practices of International Society

Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot define practices as "competent performances." In their definition, practices can be understood as socially meaningful patterns of action that embody background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world (see Adler and Poulot 2011, 6-8). From their standpoint, we need to know more about the relationship between practices and norms, and in particular, how norms come to be enacted and performed by international practices. In terms of applying and implementing the idea and concept of international society (the 'theory') in practical terms, the *practices of the international society* are actually embodied in the institutions of the international society, including (1) the balance of power, transiting from unipolarity to multipolarity nowadays; (2) mechanisms of international law; (3) diplomacy; (4) war, including the transition from international wars to civil wars and 'intermestic' wars (civil wars with international intervention); (5) the management of the international order by great powers; and as a possible addition (and Bull's omission), (6) trade and other mechanisms of the international political economic system, in the context of complex interdependence and globalization (see Terrada 2020, 113-114).

By speaking of "institutions," Bull meant that the agents in question –sovereign states– were willing to adjust their behaviour in order to comply with a given norm or practice. Compliance in this case is normative (hence, voluntary and self-imposed), rather than coerced by other actors. Hence, we should emphasize the fact that the International Society approach embraces a normative, rather than a mechanical explanation for state behavior in international relations (in contrast to Waltz 1979). This means that states, who are the paramount members of the international society, do certain things not because they face external constraints, but because they themselves want to act in a particular way. In other words, states attach important value to their practices, which are the institutions of the international society itself.

In addition to these institutions, which have to be examined in their relevance and functions for keeping the international society relatively stable and thriving, I posit that the practices of the international society also include nowadays mechanisms of multilateralism, regional and global governance, and humanitarian intervention. Multilateralism in our contemporary international society refers to the role states keep playing in world politics, albeit through different and transformed mechanisms and structures. It is time to shed light not only on the development of mechanisms of regional and global governance, but also on the interstate interactions that construct and manage these mechanisms, and thus give new significance to the concept of international relations and of the international society. In other words, the main point of contact between the idea and the practices of international society is through the politics evidenced in the action of states in the contemporary international society (see Kacowicz and Mitrani 2016, 212).

The practices of international society through mechanisms of global and regional governance include the various institutionalized modes of social coordination aiming at the creation and implementation of collectively binding rules and regulations, to provide collective goods in specific issue areas (including security, economics, environment, health and many others). In this sense, *global governance* includes the possible regulation of the global sphere and the multiplicity of spheres of authority and nature of actors, both public and private, involved in the regulative process and the production of public global goods (see Kacowicz 2018, 63). Similar mechanisms might take place at the regional level, such as in the European Union or in Latin America.

As for the diverse, divergent, and contradictory practices of humanitarian intervention in the contemporary international society, they reflect the normative gaps between the 'pluralist' and 'solidarist' versions of the English School regarding the limits and scope of the international society. A pluralist international society privileges order and the freedom of states to protect the rights and lives of their own citizens, but not extending these duties beyond borders. In this sense, humanitarian intervention might infringe upon the sovereignty of states, which have different interpretation of what constitutes justice and values (Wheeler 2000, 29). Conversely, a solidarist international society privileges justice, by promoting universal norms that should be enforced by the international community that justifies humanitarian intervention (Rollwagen 2015, 2). As an illustration of these different practices, we could examine the (limited) international community's military actions against Kaddafi's Libya in 2011 and against ISIL in 2014-2017, in contrast to the lack of intervention in the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, at least on humanitarian grounds.

The Challenges to the Contemporary International Society

What are the challenges confronting the idea and the practices of the contemporary international society in the third decade of the 21st century? On the basis of these challenges, what is its continuing relevance, if any? In a multifarious process of political metamorphosis, from the inter-national society to a more global society, different alternative world orders as suggested in the Global North and in the Global South have translated into complicated international realities that still reflect the lingering relevance of the idea of international society, as manifested through mechanisms of regional and global governance and the contradictory nature of our age, already coined by Bull in 1977, as 'New Medievalism.'

We can compile a relative long list of significant challenges to the international society, which overlap but are not identical to the challenges to the existing Liberal International Order (which are usually domestic and internal). These include the rise of non-state actors and the challenge to the centrality of the state; the impact of globalization and the preponderance of global issues; and the lack of global, universal, and shared norms, in both cultural and normative terms. These challenges might differ from the contestations to the Liberal International Order, which usually are from within (see Boerzel and Zurn 2021; Cooley and Nexon 2022).

As Galia Press-Barnathan cogently argues, one of the major challenges posed to the contemporary international society is *the rise of non-state actors*, both benign and malign, which present a significant threat to the state's reign as the main actor in the international arena (Press-Barnathan 2004, 198). As Barnett and Sikkink argue (2011, 750), "the ecology of international politics is no longer dominated by states", so it increasingly includes non-state actors such as nongovernmental organizations, transnational corporations, IOs, and transnational networks operating in a global public domain. For example, we can briefly refer to 'malign' non-state actors in the security realm. Across the globe, the terms of the security debate have shifted dramatically over the last thirty years. Since the end of the Cold War, many countries in different regions of the world have confronted new types of security challenges that they have been hard-pressed to tackle effectively. The end of the Cold War brought with it a more permissive strategic environment, leading new non-state actors into the forefront of the security environment, including the proliferation of violent NSAs (non-sate actors). At the same time, this new post-Cold War era exposed the fragility and institutional underdevelopment of many of these states in terms of feeble governance, failing to address issues of human security, crime, and domestic violence (see Felbab-Brown 2017, 2; and Shelley 2014 and 2018).

Moreover, in more benign terms, one can argue that the traditional concept and practices of international society overlook the possible influence of non-state actors and

societies, including local and transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which might constitute part of a local or even global transnational civil society. As Mor Mitrani argues, international political institutions within international society have become more open and responsive to the impact and influence of these non-state actors and public opinion, broadening the scope of international society in order to cope with the challenges posed by these non-state actors (Mitrani 2013, 183). In this context, some analysts further argue that globalization is bringing in its wake a new cosmopolitan culture, further promoting the solidarist version of international society and enhancing global civil society through NGOs like Amnesty and Greenpeace (Armstrong 2011, 47).

Second, the effect of *globalization* upon the international order stands in the core of Andrew Hurrell's 2007 study about the changes and future prospects of the contemporary international society in the age of global politics, referring to specific issues such as human rights and economic globalization. Hurrell locates the processes of globalization in the context of order, but refers to the existence of a "global order," rather than merely an international one, with an emphasis on the development of complex global governance around but also beyond the nation-state. Similarly, Barry Buzan suggests an alternative theoretical framework to refine the conceptualization of globalization and applying that to the traditional scheme of international society, based on the idea of 'world society.' This idea involves the analytical interplay among the three pillars of the English School: the concepts of the international system, international society, and world society. There is no simple zero-sum game between globalization and the international state system, they both coexist simultaneously. More specifically, Buzan distinguishes between international and world society by their respective composition of actors – territorial (states) and nonterritorial (nonstate) actors (Kacowicz and Mitrani 2016, 205). It should be added that the world society includes in itself the international society as one of its components. Nowadays, Buzan also refers to the emergence of a 'global international society' (Buzan 2020).

There is an enormous and unresolved ideological and normative debate regarding the complex relationship between the phenomena of globalization and the distribution of wealth, analyzed through the prism of poverty and inequality (see Kacowicz 2013). There is a myriad of recent analyses that 'blame' the uneven and unjust effects of economic globalization as one of the main causes for the democratic backlash and opposition to the Liberal International Order (for instance, see Kornprobst and Paul 2021; Miller 2021; and Paul 2021). I think the effects are more nuanced, and they are usually mediated through the actions of governments.

In the third place, and against the current global crisis of the coronavirus pandemic, we can refer to the relevance and salience of global issues, such as climate change or

poverty and inequality gaps, which are difficult to accommodate within a sovereign-based international society. Global issues such as the environment and climate change, as well as poverty and underdevelopment, demand global solutions and mechanisms of global governance that are rather inexistent or inefficient, due to the reluctance of states to give up on their sovereign rights (see Armstrong 2011, 47). Thus, global challenges impinge on the efficacy of both the primary and secondary institutions of international society, so we should endeavor to unpack their effects, and think about the revision and adaptation of these institutions to improve their deliverability and effectiveness.

Economic globalization and global problems demand the establishment or creation of new political mechanisms that transcend the state system in order to cope with the complexities of our world. In this sense, global governance mechanisms are necessary in order to manage the new world order of economic and environmental globalization and global challenges and problems. And yet, we are stuck with the 'tragedy of the commons' in the inability of nation-states to cooperate effectively beyond borders due to the lingering Westphalian structure (see Hardin 1968).

Thus, we can concur with Barnett and Sikkink (2011, 749), that world politics is transitioning from a focus on international relations towards the emergence of a global or world society, that challenges the relevance of the traditional international society. Barnett and Sikkink recognize that in the realities "of an increasingly dense fabric of international law, norms, and rules that promote forms of association and solidarity, the growing role of an increasingly dense network of state and non-state actors that are involved in the production and revision of multi-layered governance structures, and the movement toward forms of dialogue that are designed to help identify shared values of 'humankind'" (Barnett and Sikkink 2011, 750; see also Buzan 2004; Linklater and Suganami 2006).

Fourth, and in juxtaposition to the argument about solidarist values of humankind (as partially deployed in the attempts and practices of humanitarian intervention), and in a dialectical fashion, we experience nowadays a *remarkable withdrawal from solidaristic, cosmopolitan normative common framework back to nationalism and particularism*, which result in the erosion of the institutions of the liberal international order, though not necessarily those of the traditional international society. We have to keep in mind that earlier European international societies were always characterized by a common culture and shared values (see Armstrong 2011, 47). Although all states in the United Nations have formally agreed to what Robert Jackson coins a global covenant based on the mutual respect for sovereignty and self-determination, as well as the (at least formal) promotion of democracy and human rights, this has not happened in practice (see Jackson 2000; and Armstrong 2011, 46). We witness nowadays a global decline of ideologies and party politics (see Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021, 623). Two of the great world powers, China

and Russia, directly and openly challenge the common norms and values of the liberal international order, including the promotion of democracy and human rights, which were part of the unipolar system (i.e., the Liberal International Order), that reigned in the international order between 1991 and the first decade of the twenty first century under U.S. supremacy. At the same time, neither China nor Russia necessarily threaten or undermine the logic of the Westphalian order (with the potential volatile exceptions of Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine, and China vis-à-vis Taiwan, but that could possibly be justified in terms of sovereignty and/or national self-determination).

Liberals argue that the former U.S. Trump Administration itself eroded the Liberal principles of international society. Moreover, based on developments over the past few years, this democratic and Liberal backlash has been exacerbated by anti-globalist populism, as well as the practices and discourses of authoritarianism and nationalism, which corrode the underpinnings of Liberal internationalism, though not necessarily the institutions of the international society. Thus, in dialectic terms, and in direct ideological polarization and contradiction to solidarist versions of the international society, we find the growing influence of populist and nationalist leaders who support each other, from Trump in the USA (until the end of 2020), Duterte in the Philippines, Netanyahu in Israel (until June 2021), and Bolsonaro in Brazil. These trends further exacerbate the inherent obstacles to international cooperation, stemming from the anarchical nature of the international society (see Oye 1986).

Having said that, we should clearly distinguish, in both analytical and normative terms, between the Liberal principles of the international society and its 'Westphalian' (non-Liberal) elements. Hence, the normative consensus of the post-Cold War era was premised on U.S, normative primacy, rather than a more pluralistic approach, which allows for a myriad of different ideological and political ideas, beyond the Liberal International Order.

In this context, the lack of a normative and cultural consensus in the current international society poses a significant challenge when we have to confront the two paramount values and goals in international society that might clash with each other – the preservation of the international order, versus the promotion of justice. As Chan argues cogently, the international order with its status quo bias does not necessarily promote justice, liberty, or equality (Chan 2021, 1351). Since the end of the Cold War, the research agenda of the international society has expanded and changed to a certain degree, moving from order towards justice in world politics (see Jackson and Sorensen 2003, 170). Issues of poverty, inequality, and under-development, exacerbated by global challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change, reveal the inner contradictions of the international society.

Confronting these four intertwined challenges – the rise of non-state actors, globalization, the salience of global issues, and the lack of a common normative and cultural

framework – we should assess now the continuing relevance of the international society facing these challenges. In brief, the argument refers to the proliferation of mechanisms of regional and global governance, and the complex reality, already envisioned by Bull back in 1977, of 'New Medievalism.' Moreover, international society exists and persists even considering alternative scenarios of 'world order,' designed both in the Global North and in the Global South.

The Continuing Relevance of International Society in a Post-Liberal Order

As stated before, facing these substantial challenges, I argue that the idea and practices of international society can be – and actually they are—updated to the complex realities of the third decade of the 21st century. I want to sustain this argument by linking the concept and practices of international society to the mechanisms of global and regional governance. Moreover, alternative world orders, as depicted in the Global North and in the Global South, assume as a given the idea and practices of international society, whether in the traditional, inter-state form, or in the global/world politics transformed version.

International Society, World Society, World Order, and Global Governance

The relevance and persistence of the idea of international society can be argued by directly relating it to the concept and realities of 'global governance' and 'world order'. The term of global governance provides us with a proper theoretical terminology to describe and analyze the *complex* of systems of rule-making, political coordination, and problem-solving that transcends states and societies, constructing new political realities and reconstructing old ones. Global governance does that by describing the structures and processes of governing beyond the state where there is no single supreme supranational political authority (Held and McGrew 2002, 8; Kacowicz 2012, 686-687).

There is a long tradition in the discipline of International Relations (IR) of studying the present and the future of international politics by imagining alternative "institutional designs" of alternative world orders as objects of interest in themselves (see Hakovirta 2004, 47). In this sense, global governance should be located along a continuum of the changing architecture of world politics in terms of governance (regional and global), as the newest classification of world order. Thus, within the two extremes of 'international order' and 'world government' we might recognize the different phases (and faces) of global governance.

At the first phase of the continuum of global governance, its initial form takes the shape of a pluralist and limited society of sovereign states, which embodies the idea of an *anarchical international society* (see Bull 1977). There is an interesting parallel or

analogy between the idea of an 'anarchical international society' and the concept of 'global governance.' Both concepts suggest the feasibility of a peaceful, progressive, benign, and well-ordered international regime in the absence of a unifying governmental, supranational entity. Similarly, both ideas are imperfect, voluntaristic, lacking a real government, and aiming at the regulation of norms and the creation of common expectations (see Hurrell 2007, 3; Yunker 2005, 213).

At a second phase in the continuum, with the impact of globalization, international society still remains relevant by evolving into a *world or global society*. As a result of the dynamics of globalization, which imply more than just increased interstate interdependence but rather the de-territorialization of international relations, non-state entities such as benign and malign NGOs and less organized groups become crucial components of the international society, which becomes global rather than international (see Keohane 2005, 123).

Moreover, moving into the direction of world government (but without ever reaching it, otherwise the international/global society will cease to exist), it is obvious that globalization implies that we cannot still refer to an international order, but rather to a *world order*. By "world order" Bull meant "those patterns or dispositions of human activity that sustain the elementary or primary goals of social life among mankind [humankind] as a whole" (Bull 1977, 20). Thus, world order is a wider category of order than the international order, which embodies both the international society and the global/world society. It takes as its units of order not just nation-states, but rather individual human beings, and assesses the degree of order on the basis of the delivery of certain kinds of public goods (such as security, human rights, basic needs, or justice) for humanity as a whole (see Clark 2005, 730; Whitman 2005, 27; and Rosenau 1992, 5).

Alternative World Orders and the Lingering Relevance of the International Society: The View from the North

World order can mean alternative 'architectural' designs that include the international order itself (such as the ephemeral unipolar structure of the international system at the end of the Cold War, or the messy and uncertain transition to bipolarity (US-China) or even multipolarity nowadays). Several alternative (and sometimes overlapping) world order scenarios come to mind, all of them pointing to the continuing relevance of the international society and of the global society:

1. "New medievalism" and the overlapping of authorities and identities (see Bull 1977);
2. A "tale of two worlds": North-South divide and bifurcation of the world (see Goldgeier and McFaul 1992);

3. A cultural "clash of civilizations" (see Huntington 1993 and 1996);
4. A "coming anarchy," disorder and disarray spraying from the developing world into the developed one (see Kaplan 1994 and 2002);
5. Liberal globalism and the "end of history," the triumph of globalization and liberal values (Friedman 2005; Fukuyama 1989 and 2006);
6. A multilateral and polycentric world, characterized by the end of U.S. hegemony and a "multiplex" world instead (Acharya 2014; Kupchan 2012 and 2014). This is also a 'fluid' world (Bauman 2012), an international order of globalized states that includes the dynamic forces of globalization, nationalism, and regionalism (Clark 2011; Kacowicz 1999); and
7. A cosmopolitan and global democracy, but without necessarily reaching a world government (Falk 1999 and 2002).

For the sake of brevity, I will refer here in detail to the first and sixth world order's scenarios from the North, the 'New Medievalism'; a multilateral/polycentric and a 'fluid' world, which are particularly pertinent to address the continuing relevance of the contemporary international society.

The New Medievalism

One possible manifestation of world order is the idea (and practice) of new medievalism. In 1977, Bull coined the term to refer to a "modern and secular equivalent of the kind of universal political organization 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" (Bull 1977, 254).

Thus, neo-medievalism as a particular world order of the contemporary international society and/or world society encompasses a political order in which human beings are governed by a number of overlapping authorities and multiple identities. In this model of world order, the state would transfer some of its powers to international institutions (at the regional or global levels), which would deal with global problems, through mechanisms of global and regional governance. Moreover, the state would also transfer some other powers to domestic actors and regions (at the sub-national level), where the sense of a distinctive cultural identity and community remains strong (see Linklater 2011).

Bull spoke of a 'new medievalism' to connote the fragmentation of political authority reminiscent of the pre-Westphalian era, although he did not believe that other political

actors were yet strong enough to offer a serious challenge to the paramount role of the nation-state in global politics. About forty-five years later, the logic of 'new medievalism' and the overlapping of political authority and identities, at the sub-national, supra-national, transnational, and global levels have become more and more relevant, in order to make sense of our current world order, and as a depiction of global governance. Thus, the contemporary relocation, allocation, and delegation of political authority among several layers of global governance (international, sub-national, transnational, supra-national, public, and private) resembles the complexity of competing and overlapping jurisdictions and spheres of political action and responsibility that characterized medieval Europe (see Held and McGrew 2002, 10; and Linklater 2011). In practical terms, we can find innumerable contemporary examples of 'new medievalism' in the daily realities of Europe, the privatization of security across the world, the increasing role of international organizations, the disintegration of states, like the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the rise of multinational corporations and social networks, and the technological shrinking of the world (see Jackson and Sorensen 2003, 172).

A Multilateral, Polycentric, and "Fluid" World: An International, Multipolar, and Hybrid Order of Globalized States

A multilateral or polycentric world order echoes the 1995 report of the Commission on Global Governance, which called for a radical reform of the United Nations and an assertive form of multilateralism without any clear hegemonic presence (see Hettne 2002, 21). Raymo Väyrynen calls this world order a form of plurilateralism, where the international system structure is complex and even volatile, because it is not stabilized by any hierarchical system, be it unipolar or bipolar (see Väyrynen 2002, 110 and 111). Similarly, Amitav Acharya refers to a "multiplex world," with multiple layers of authority and leadership (like "new medievalism"), with important roles assigned to regions, regional powers, and regional institutions within a thick web of complex interdependence. Finally, Charles Kupchan (2012 and 2014) refers to a world order that is no longer dominated by a single country or region, "no one's world". This world order then becomes an arena of competition and cooperation among traditional (Western) powers and the rise of 'new' powers, including China, India, and Brazil (see also Zakaria 2011).

What all of these scholars share in common is a vision of a world order after the end of the West's material and ideological hegemony; in more specific terms, the end of the U.S. hegemony and the erosion and decline of the Liberal International Order. This order consists of a myriad constellation of different (state) powers. The world is in the midst of a defining change in the distribution of power, in military and especially in economic terms. The crucial normative and practical question here is whether the emerging and traditional powers will be able to manage this systemic change in peaceful

terms against the background of ideological and normative diversity. Moreover, it is not clear whether these (great) powers might be able to cooperate in building and keeping the necessary equilibrium between demands of order and demands of justice. As Kupchan suggests, there is a towering normative contestation that requires serious deliberations about fundamental dimensions of order, "including legitimacy, sovereignty, intervention, democratic promotion, international justice, economic equity, the role of international law and institutions, and the balance between privacy and security" (Kupchan 2014, 7). The future remains uncertain, and the contestation will not be only economic and military, but essentially normative.

Unlike Huntington's doomsday scenario about a normative clash between "the West and the rest", it is uncertain whether the emerging powers, first and foremost China, have a clear normative agenda that would prioritize their alternative norms to the Liberal International Order (see Ikenberry 2011). We do not know whether and how China's growing power and influence will (re)shape world politics, and whether China plans to undermine not just the Liberal Order, but also the Westphalian principles of the international society it usually defends (see Weiss and Wallace 2021). Hence, as Acharya points out, there is a need for cooperation between the emerging powers and the established powers such as the United States and the major European countries in order to maintain this "multiplex" world. The world then becomes an arena of multiple great powers and regional powers tied together by complex forms of interdependence. Such interdependence comprises trade, finance and production networks, as well as shared vulnerabilities to transnational and global challenges such as climate change and COVID- 19. The metaphor is that of a multiplex cinema in which one can see several shows, directors, and actors under one roof, rather than one single (hegemonic) film about the United States. We should be aware that there is no guarantee that there will be a happy end in each of the movies shown simultaneously.

This multilateral, polycentric, and multipolar world also encompasses an international and hybrid order of globalized states, a 'fluid' world. Joseph Gratale (2016) suggested that the most accurate world order to describe today's world is encapsulated in Zygmunt Bauman's genial metaphor of globalization and modernity as "liquid." In Bauman's own terms, "liquid modernity is the growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty" (Bauman 2012, viii).

Without falling into the traps of sheer post-modern arguments, we might agree with Gratale's analysis that our contemporary international society is characterized by both change and continuity. Despite globalization (liquid), the nation-state still matters (in solid, material terms, and not just as an idea). While it might be 'imagined,' the idea of the nation remains robust and nationalism is still appealing, as the forceful return of

the state in the current COVID-19 crisis shows. Moreover, despite the increasing deterritorialization of international relations in the last few decades, geography and borders are not dead. Geopolitics matters, and national borders serve as both bridges and barriers, for inclusion and exclusion (see Gratale 2016).

Similarly, we might argue that the nation-state does not disappear, it is everything else that changes as well. The nation-state remains an important political actor in the contemporary international society, but in functional terms, it is no longer the same kind of institution (Hettne 2002, 12). Similarly, regionalism and regional institutions play a more relevant role in the architecture of 'new medievalism' that characterizes contemporary global politics.

Thus, international society remains relevant in this hybrid world order, both territorialized and deterritorialized. In a similar vein, Ian Clark suggested the categorization of the current world order as an *international order of globalized states*. Its agenda includes the managing of relations between states penetrated by the global system, but still distinguishable within it (Clark 2011, 547 and 554). In this analysis, globalization does not make the state disappear, but it affects and transforms its functions and role. After all, we might argue that 'globalization is what states make of it,' so the international order of the international society is still relevant, though it becomes a *globalized* international order.

In a similar vein, I suggested more than two decades ago that three political forces shape world politics in the contemporary international society, interacting among them: globalization, regionalization, and nationalism. These three forces cannot be assessed in isolation, independently from one another, nor from a perspective of either convergence or divergence among them. Rather, globalization, regionalization, and nationalism should be captured and studied as forces relative to and overlapping one another, sometimes antagonistic and sometimes cooperative toward each other, but never harmonious (see Kacowicz 1999).

Alternative World Orders and the Lingering Relevance of the International Society: The View from the South

As Barnett and Sikkink cogently argue, we should keep in mind that the design of alternative world orders that refer to the contemporary global international society is different if you look at the world from the perspective of the Global South rather than the Global North. In that sense, based on the historical record of colonialism and post-colonialism, scholars, analysts and practitioners of Third World states emphasize hierarchy, rather than anarchy, as the defining organizing principle of international relations and global politics (see Barnett and Sikkink 2011, 753). Still, reviewing the scholarship of

Latin American contributions, interpretations, and understandings of different world orders, we find different analyses that are still compatible and show the relevance of the international society, as follows:

1. The promotion and enhancing of a Latin American regional international society, including the enhancement of norms of international law and institutions (see Kacowicz 2005);
2. Developmentalism (desarrollismo), emphasizing the role of the state and the economic asymmetries in the 'terms of trade' between the North and the South (see Prebisch 1950, 1959; and Furtado 1964);
3. The Latin American dependency school (dependencia), emphasizing the negative role and impact of international structural factors, first and foremost the U.S. influence, the role of the international financial institutions, and the transnational presence of multinational corporations for the region's economics and politics. Still, there is an important role for states to play in order to bring justice, which should be prioritized over order (see Cardoso and Faletto 1979);
4. The 'autonomy approach', relying on a multi-level analysis at the national, regional, and global realms: diversifying alliances in terms of foreign policy, promoting region-building, and enhancing attempts to reshape the rules of the international regimes in the global economy (see Puig 1980; and Jaguaribe 1979).
5. "Peripheral Realism": Developing countries should adjust and adapt to the asymmetrical and unequal relations between the countries of the Global North and those of the Global South, by accepting the 'rules of the game' dictated by the great powers (see Escudé 1995; 1997; 2016).
6. Regionalism and multilateralism: Regionalism has been a central idea, school, approach and political praxis in the development of the international relations in the last two centuries of Latin America's history, embodying and reflecting upon the possibilities and challenges posed by the quest for economic development and political autonomy (see Deciancio 2016, 94-96; Deciancio and Tussie 2019, 6-7; Tussie 2009; and Tussie 2018; and Kacowicz and Wajner, 2022).

With the exception of the dependency school, which might pose a direct challenge (and alternative) to the global international society (but without necessarily transcending it), all the other approaches assume the reality and relevance of the international society. After all, the formulation of Latin American paradigms and blueprints have been a dialectical response to the overarching world order shaped by the North since the independence of the Latin American countries until the current third decade of the 21st century. In chronological

terms, that world order included the British economic hegemony until the turn of the 20th century; the U.S. hegemony in most of the 20th century, including the Cold War period of 1945-1989; the post-Cold War era and the unipolar moment of the 1990s and early 2000s; and the decline of the U.S. hegemony and the rise (or return) to a multilateral order in the last decade or so.

The Institutions of the International Society: Coping with Global Challenges (COVID-19 and Climate Change, and the Opportunities Ahead

The argument here, to be further elaborated, is that the primary and secondary institutions of the international society are well-equipped to confront the challenges of our times, including COVID-19, climate change, and the lack of a normative liberal consensus. The absence of a clear hegemon in the international system creates the incentives and the opportunities for reshuffling the international order anew, including the possibility of recreating a new global Concert and/or regulating the balance of power between the United States and China (see Haass and Kupchan 2021). Hence, despite the obvious dangers involved, the possibility of decoupling the Liberal Order from the international society might open new opportunities for the global international society to transcend the more limited and bounded Liberal International Order.

The Westphalian order of the international society (based on sovereignty, territoriality, and national self-determination) and the Liberal International Order have co-constituted each other historically, and have co-existed until recently. While they share common norms such as sovereignty, self-determination, and peaceful settlement of disputes, they differ as regarding the universal promotion of human rights and democracy (see Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021, 225, 229; Tourinho 2021; Simmons and Goemans 2021; and Ikenberry 2011). Whereas the Westphalian order is based on the premise of territorial sovereign nation-states, the Liberal International Order moves in a solidaristic and universalistic direction of human rights, democracy, and over-ruling the authority of the nation-state, when and if necessary. Thus, their decoupling might open new opportunities for the international society to remain relevant, even after the shrinking of the LIO to a limited 'zone of peace' of Western and Liberal countries. From a Liberal standpoint, this resilient international order might be 'degraded' in normative terms, but it will persist anyway. By the end of the day, we might have one international society divided into two bounded international orders, one Liberal (led by the USA and its Western liberal democratic allies), and another one non-Liberal (led by China) (see Owen 2021; and Mearsheimer 2019). In sum, this emerging post-Liberal global international society (GIS) will no longer be a US-led, Western-dominated order, but it will rather reflect a contested and 'deep pluralism', with great powers competing and cooperating among themselves, their behavior driven by domestic politics, while keeping intact the

contours of the international society. As stated before, this GIS will reflect a multilateral, polycentric, and 'fluid' word order (see Acharya and Buzan 2019; and Buzan 2020).

Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that the idea, concept, and practices of 'international society' as developed by Hedley Bull in 1977 remain relevant to explain the complex realities of international relations and global politics in the third decade of the twenty-first century. In the last forty years, international society has evolved and merged into the broader idea and realities of world (or global) international society. Moreover, innumerable challenges to the current international system and society have questioned its relevance and vitality. Still a (global) international society remains an essential framework, both in analytical and normative terms, to make sense of our contemporary world.

The practices of the contemporary international society include the five original primary institutions as posited by Bull (i.e, the balance of power; mechanisms of international law; diplomacy; war; the management of great power), in addition to international trade and the secondary institutions (IOs and regimes). Moreover, these practices include mechanisms of multilateralism, regional and global governance, and humanitarian intervention. The major challenges to the contemporary global international society include the rise of non-state actors; the impact of globalization and the preponderance of global issues; and the lack of global and shared norms, in both cultural and normative (moral) terms.

Facing these substantial challenges, I argue that the contemporary international society remains relevant and pertinent by linking the concept and practices of international society to the mechanisms of global and regional governance. Moreover, I find that alternative world orders, as depicted in the Global North and in the Global South, still assume as given the idea and practices of the international society, whether in the traditional, inter-state form, or in the global/world politics version, transformed and adapted. This can be illustrated especially through the perusal of two such alternative world orders, 'new medievalism' and a pluralistic, polycentric, and hybrid order of globalized states.

By the end of the day, the ongoing discussion between the two versions of the English School, the 'pluralist' and the 'solidarist', reflect an important philosophical and normative discussion (in moral terms), regarding the possible clash and overlapping between two major principles and values that impact and regulate the global international society, order and justice (see Barnett and Sikkink 2011). The debate about which of these two values has to have paramountcy in shaping global politics remains relevant today, as it was forty years ago.

As a way of conclusions, I suggest the following assumptions/hypotheses to be further considered and explored:

- There are significant challenges to the idea, concept, and practices of the international society that erode the functioning and relevance of its primary and secondary institutions.
- World politics is transitioning from a focus on international relations towards the emergence of a global or world society, which challenges the relevance of the traditional international society, while simultaneously embodying and including it.
- Mechanisms of regional and global governance assume and prove the continuing relevance of the international society as part of its fundamental practices.
- The complex realities of current 'world orders,' such as 'New Medievalism' and multilateralism, coexist with the idea and practices of the international society.
- The major policy and moral dilemmas of the international society involve the potential clash between considerations of order and considerations of justice.
- It is important to disaggregate the tenets of the Liberal International Order from the continuing resilience of the contemporary global international society. The latter is premised on a plurality of independent and inter-dependent states, even when is normative underpinnings are moving away from its Liberal principles (like the universal promotion of democracy), back to the basic tenets of the Westphalian order, challenged by globalization, non-state actors, global issues, and the lack of a normative consensus.

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