

# The long-term perspective in the study of the history of international relations

David J. Sarquís<sup>1</sup>

*The past is never dead. It's not even past.  
All of us labor in webs spun long before we  
were born, webs of heredity and environment,  
of desire and consequence, of history and eternity.*

*William Faulkner (2012: 73)*

## Abstract

This essay explores the possible answers to the question, when do international relations (IR) appear? The question itself invites a distinction between IR as theory and as practice. The traditional landmark for the latter has been the mid-seventeenth century, after the signing of the peace treaties that put an end to the Thirty Years war (1648) and gave way to the emergence of the Westphalian model on international relations. This landmark has been justified based on the specificity of interaction between the newly born sovereign states, which changed the scene of previous exchanges among independent polities. In spite of the validity of the argument, the long-term view proposes enhancing the historical horizon for the study of international relations in search of precedents to cast light both on the sociological regularities and the historical singularities in the modes of interaction among independent polities at a larger scale. The aim is to break away from the ethnocentricity of the Westphalian model and the cultural dominance of western thought, which has traditionally neglected regional experiences in different latitudes and assumes that international relations is an exclusively European tradition. From this perspective, the emergence of IR as theory must also be reconsidered.

**Keywords:** International Relations, Material and Formal Objects, Westphalian Tradition, Eurocentrism, Universal History

## Resumen

Este ensayo explora las posibles respuestas a la pregunta: ¿Desde cuándo hay relaciones internacionales? La pregunta misma invita a la distinción entre RI como teoría y como praxis. La fecha tradicionalmente aceptada para esta última es 1648, luego de la firma de los tratados de Westfalia que pusieron fin a la Guerra de los Treinta años y dio paso al surgimiento del sistema wesfaliano de relaciones internacionales. Este hito histórico ha sido justificado sobre la base de la especificidad del flujo de interacciones entre los recién nacidos Estados Soberanos que modificaron el escenario de las formas anteriores

---

<sup>1</sup> Full-time professor and researcher for Universidad del Mar, Santa María Huatulco, Oaxaca, Mexico. Ph. D in IR from the National Autonomous University of Mexico and Ph. D in History from the Metropolitan University of Mexico.

de interacción entre colectividades políticamente independientes. A pesar de la validez del argumento, la perspectiva de largo plazo sugiere ampliar el horizonte histórico para el estudio de las relaciones internacionales en busca de antecedentes que arrojen luz, tanto en el ámbito de las regularidades sociológicas como en el de las singularidades históricas en los modos de interacción entre comunidades políticamente independientes a mayor escala, para así romper con la etno-centricidad del modelo wesfaliano y el predominio cultural del pensamiento occidental que tradicionalmente ha minimizado las experiencias regionales de otras latitudes y asume que las relaciones internacionales son una experiencia exclusiva de la tradición europea. Desde esta perspectiva, el surgimiento de RI como teoría también debe ser reconsiderado.

**Palabras clave:** Relaciones Internacionales, Objetos Material y Formal, Tradición Wesfaliana, Eurocentrismo, Historia Universal

## Introduction

Considering historical aspects related to International Relations (IR), we must distinguish between IR as a *material object* and IR as a *formal object of study*, both of which have their own history. IR as a material object refers to events occurring in an international scenario (wars, peace processes, alliances, migrations, integration processes, failing states, international trade, etc.). These phenomena that are generated through the interaction between politically independent and culturally differentiated polities<sup>2</sup> and that with time become more complex, as the number of participants in these processes increases and becomes diversified, thus creating international systems<sup>3</sup> as objects of study for internationalists.

This diversification allows new agents, other than politically autonomous groups such as tribes, clans, peoples, or nations, to begin participating in the international scene, contributing to fuelling the dynamics of the international system and making the processes that occur within the system notoriously more complex in terms of their structure, their functions, their behavior and evolutionary trajectories.

---

2 Thereby follow the idea of a polity (or political authority) as a form of human association with a distinct identity, a capacity to mobilize persons and their resources for political purposes. That is, for value satisfaction and a degree of institutionalization and hierarchy (leaders and constituents) different from any unitary notion of society or social networks, as suggested by Ferguson and Mansbach (1996: 34). Members of a polity may differ in their views on a wide variety of issues (form of government, distribution of wealth, even cultural beliefs) as no polity is ever entirely homogeneous or stable, but they all have a shared sense of belonging based on their common history and shared values; their common authorities and laws and a fairly permanent condition as a member of the group).

3 Seeing the international stage as a system is, of course, an ontological and epistemological option. An international system is thus a group of interacting polities sharing a common location and time. Their interaction creates a structure in the form of values, principles, rules and gradually institutions, which influence their behavior and conditions their evolutionary processes as a social entity. Systems are never totally homogeneous, as their building blocks (polities) tend to keep their own identity. This fact makes all social systems inherently contradictory and unstable. Yet, paradoxically in order to survive, they tend to homogenize in search of a point of equilibrium.

Today, besides national-states, we have, among others, international organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, multinational corporations, and belligerent groups as recognizable new ‘actors’<sup>4</sup> on the international scene, and even a number of organizations acting on the margins of the law, whose performances contribute to forging the structures upon which a concrete international historical system is built. Also a few special cases such as the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, the Order of Malta and the Holy See. Some of these actors on the international stage are, at the same time subjects of international law,<sup>5</sup> adding to the complexity of the contemporary international system as a whole.

IR as a formal object, on the other hand, represents the conceptual instruments –the set of notions, ideas, visions, and categories of analysis– used to reflect upon the material object, elucidate it, explain it and furnish it with meaning. It is through this effort of schematization of international reality that we develop the theoretical basis to form a discipline, scientifically oriented towards the goal of finding appropriate ways to represent the material object in our minds and gain a better understanding of it. Ideally, a further goal in this direction would be to enable decision makers with the capability to foresee and attempt a degree of control upon unfolding events on the international stage, although in practice, such goal seems virtually unachievable, as reality seems to find endless ways to surprise us.

Once we have clearly established the distinction between IR as a material object and as a formal object of study (convention suggests writing the former in lower case and the latter in capital letters), it becomes pertinent to draw a temporal landmark to construct the history of each of these aspects. This seems appropriate because it allows analysts to see the specific evolutionary processes of IR on both accounts, clearly interconnected with one another, yet perfectly distinguishable from each other: the former related to events in the real world, and the way they are turned into facts;<sup>6</sup> the latter to their processes of interpretation. In both cases, we will be attempting to draw their respective trajectories,

4 Actors of the international stage is the wider concept to encompass all those entities whose performance can alter the structure of an international system. Traditionally, the idea was focused mainly on States but today includes a wide variety of groups and even influential individuals.

5 A subject of international law is an entity possessing international rights and obligations and having the capacity (a) to maintain its rights by bringing international claims; and (b) to be responsible for its breaches of obligation by being subjected to such claims. This definition, though conventional, is unfortunately circular since, while the indicia referred to depend in theory on the existence of a legal person, the main way of determining whether the relevant capacity exists in case of doubt is to inquire whether it is in fact exercised. All that can be said is that an entity of a type recognized by customary law as *capable* of possessing rights and duties and of bringing and being subjected to international claims is a legal person. Law Explorer (2018) *Subjects of International Law* p. 115, available at <https://lawexplores.com/subjects-of-international-law/> Retrieved 30 September 2022. The above definitions suggest all subjects of international law are actors of international relations, but not all actors on the international stage are subjects of international law. It is important to keep the difference in mind because it helps us clarify why international relations and international law, in spite of being closely related, are actually two different disciplines with their own field of study.

6 The notions of events and facts tend to be used as synonyms, thus interchangeable. Following Ushenko (1932) I find that in spite of being closely related, there is a substantial difference between the two concepts. Events denote occurrences, things that happen, or as Wittgenstein suggested, *that which is the case*, whereas facts are events interpreted by an observer. Therefore, and contrary to popular belief, facts are never entirely objective, because in perceiving an event, the observer imprints his interpretation of what has occurred.

aspiring to understand how past events shape the present at the local, national and international levels, thus uncovering the complexity of human relations. The suggested difference between events and facts allows us to understand why there are so many views regarding the same occurrences, as Walt (1998) explains in “One world, many theories”.

### **A small digression on the nature and scope of formal objects**

Once the distinction between IR as a formal object and IR as a material object has been made, we can now inquire about the moment in time in which each one of them appeared. If the formal object implies a process of *awareness* of the material object, I would think it is safe to say the material object predates the formal object, that is, events in the real world must take place before an observer conceptualizes the occurrence and turns it into a fact. The type of awareness I have in mind in this case is related to the consciousness of *the other*, not as a singular individual, but the other as a different polity: International Relations has to do with the study of interaction among collectivities. So, when do humans of a given group become aware of *the otherness*? This must have been something that occurred very early on, during the peopling of our planet. Even if interaction among the first primitive bands was limited, the sole presence of *the other* seems to have conditioned the behavior of human groups from very early on, reading them to encounter a friend or a foe.

It may seem as an exaggeration to contemporary analysts considering these encounters among primitive peoples as anything related to modern international relations; not that moderns are any less primitive, but inasmuch as forms of interaction have evolved and institutionalization has occurred, the differences would seem to be overwhelming, to the point where we are witnessing entirely different phenomena. Clearly, there are important differences, but there are also aspects of the processes of interaction among polities (similarities) which deserve attention, at least as precedents of modern international relations. In addition, recognizing similarities in these interactions throughout time allows analysts to consider the ‘larger picture’ of universal history and identify the sociological regularities that characterize it. For a long time, History as a formal object has been considered as the intellectual effort to grasp the singularity of historical events. From this perspective, it becomes virtually impossible for a historian to generalize, as the inevitable conclusion of the singularity of historical events reads: history does not repeat itself!

A scientific approach toward any object of study requires generalizations. It used to be the case that scientific research always aimed at the discovery of the general laws, which *caused* specific phenomena. Causality has been intrinsically associated with the idea of science, which has become the most solid way to acquire high-quality knowledge. Humans look for knowledge not only to explain events, but also to try to predict their upcoming and their consequences.

Our desire to predict is *historical*: we are historical creatures. As such, we can actually travel through time, not literally, but we can remember the past and picture ourselves in the future, which makes us distinctly human. Most humans tend to dread uncertainty. So, being able to predict (or apparently being able to predict) the future has normally been considered an asset. However, why can we appear to be able to predict in the first place? The short answer is *regularity*: nature describes patterns of regularity in its behavior, and so does society. Sir James G. Frazer explains the evolution of mentality, from the magical to the scientific in *The Golden Bough*. It is all based on the cyclical nature of nature, which in turn influences the cyclical nature of society. Cycles, however are not entirely mechanical, if they were, prediction would be a hundred percent accurate. Although with the oncoming of the scientific revolution of the 17th century scientists came to represent the Universe as a giant clockwork mechanism, they have learned better with the passing of time, through the lessons of complexity. Just as shamans in the old days had to learn from mistakes that could cost them their lives due to faulty predictions, scientist today have acknowledged regularity in the Universe has twists.

Nonetheless, the Universe is not entirely random either. If it were, no form of prediction whatsoever would be possible at all. Except perhaps for *divine revelation*, there would be no way to anticipate the things to come. The Universe then is neither entirely mechanical nor random. It is probabilistic. Patterns of regularity do exist, because things tend to repeat themselves (as fractals) but alterations can actually occur. When we try to predict, we are basically trying to figure out what are the possibilities that x, y or z will occur. Prediction is not a wild guess nor a wilful thought. It is a statement based on statistical and or/ quantum probability,<sup>7</sup> which define the patterns of regularity in the Universe that, in turn, explain the singularity of events, both in nature and in society.

In general, we tend to think that natural events are easier to predict than social events, always subjected to the unmeasurable effect of the human will in their outcomes. This idea is clearly based on misconceptions about a mechanical disposition of nature and about the scope of science, as much as prejudice regarding human behavior. Both nature and society describe patterns of regularity throughout time, so both exhibit a measure of predictability, although, in each case, to a different degree.

It is the analyst's challenge to discover the patterns of regularity within their objects of study and figure out the way to measure their influence upon singular events. Behind most

---

<sup>7</sup> The term *probabilistic* defines a situation or model where there are multiple possible outcomes, each having varying degrees of certainty. Probabilistic is often taken to be synonymous with stochastic but, strictly speaking, stochastic conveys the idea of randomness, whereas probabilistic is directly related to probabilities and therefore is only indirectly associated with randomness. Thus, it might be more accurate to describe a natural event or process as stochastic, and to describe its mathematical analysis as probabilistic. See Probability and *stochastic processes*, Department of applied Mathematics and Statistics, Whiting School of Engineering, Johns Hopkins University, available in <https://engineering.jhu.edu/ams/research/probability-and-stochastic-processes/>

conceptions of science lies the presence of some sort of guiding principle that rules over the patterns of regularity which allow explanations and (some degree) of predictability. All formal objects in science begin with a recognition of a specific field of inquiry and the ensuing processes of conceptualization and rationalization that allow for the development of a discipline.

### **The origins of IR as a formal and a material object**

In terms of the formal object, consensus among specialists was almost universal until a couple of decades ago: IR as a discipline, they claimed, was born at the end of the First World War, with a famous course given at the University in Wales, in Aberystwyth, in 1919 in response to the devastation brought about by the Great War. Then, a group of revisionist (Ashworth, 2019, Schmidt, 2019, Villanueva, 2019) came along trying to prove that, in disciplinary terms, IR started to develop, at least a couple of decades earlier than the suggested “official date”. For them, the birth of the discipline was a more complex process, than a mere reaction to the nasty effects of the war, involving a larger number of issues than what the mainstream narrative had taught thus far.

Initially, the revisionists argue, international thought was centered more on topics like imperialism, the justification of colonialism and the question of interracial relations or the vicissitudes of international trade more than with the causes of war and the struggles for peace, as the official discourse suggested.

Their arguments, however, important as they have turned out to be, granted they give us a more accurate idea regarding the origins of modern IR theory, failed to provide IR with a distinct subject matter.<sup>8</sup> All those topics included in their arguments were already being analyzed by other disciplinary efforts and thus the status of IR as a discipline has remained an open question for over a century now (Rosenberg, 2010; Albert & Buzan 2017; Sarquís, 2019).

We may agree, then, that international affairs had become a topic of academic interest even since the last decade of the 19th century. Although the question remains, when (and if) it ever became an actual discipline or if it remains merely a wide and complex field of study scrutinized by other social disciplines (political science, law, economics, history anthropology, sociology, etc. with a more consolidated disciplinary ground). After more

---

8 Revisionists cannot really be blamed for this. Their original efforts were aimed at showing the inaccuracies of the traditional narrative regarding the origins of IR as a discipline, which is not necessarily the same as the formal object. The latter being a complex intellectual outcome of observing and delimiting a field of inquiry and construing the notions, concepts, images and models to explain it and furnish it with meaning. Only when this process sets foot in an academic institution and the ideas developed therein begin to be discussed and accepted as valid explanations does the discipline begin to exist. In our case, the formal object began to develop with the work of ancient analysts like Tucídides, Kautilya, Isocrates or Polybius, who reflected upon the relation with the others; different polities, which demanded explicit public policies for interaction. The discipline as such came much later on, towards the end of the 19th century as the revisionist suggest.

than a century of discussions, the question remains hotly debated, as a number of experts consider IR as a field of study (material object) but not as a discipline (Wight, 1960; Kaplan, 1961; Holsti, 1985; Seara 2019).

The debate does not alter the fact that, as I have pointed out, different manifestations of *international* thought have existed since antiquity, all of which have been considered important precedents for the development of contemporary IR theory, although it would not be proper to call these a discipline.<sup>9</sup> My own position in this regard is clear, IR is a discipline by its own merit; its proper object of study is the international system. An internationalist analyzes how the system emerges, functions, develops through time until it collapses and gives way to the birth of a new system. The development of the discipline as such is a recent development, which started at the end of the 19th century but which nurtured itself from international thought that can be traced back to Antiquity, when *the international* was not yet a separate object of study.

The question regarding the temporality of the material object, on the other hand, is even more controversial. For purists, *international relations* as practical phenomena can only exist after the gestation of the modern international system, that is, after the signing of the treaties of Münster and Osnabrück in 1648, which marked the end of the Thirty Years' War through the peace of Westphalia. This is so, they argue, because of the specific characteristics acquired through interaction among the newly born sovereign states as of that date, and the uses and practices they implemented to carry out their exchanges, most visibly in the areas of diplomacy and international law. The idea makes sense, because specialists are particularly interested in differentiating uses and practices in inter-state interactions of different eras, (thus distinguishing between international historical systems and their regulating order)<sup>10</sup> precisely through their specificity — the nature of the actors, and the weight of the variables influencing them, which condition the new international environment when a characteristic international order changes. In any case, it is worthwhile noticing that, from this perspective, both the formal and the material objects are essentially modern phenomena, which means, history before the mid-seventeenth century would be virtually of no interest for contemporary internationalists. Oğurlu has clearly distinguished the distinctive features of the modern system of international relations:

The basis of modern international relations was established by the 1648 Westphalian Peace Treaties, which mark the birth of nation states as the privileged and primary actors,

9 Law Insider provides a fairly simple and straightforward definition of academic discipline in these terms: Academic Discipline means an area of knowledge and skills relevant to a specific profession or science, defined and categorized by the Ministry of Education and Training. <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/academic-discipline>. I would only add that normally, a discipline would require an object of study. In this sense, IR as an intellectual effort over a distinct object of study is indeed a very recent disciplinary endeavor.

10 I use the concept of 'order' in the same sense suggested by Kissinger. Not as a stable or balanced condition in which all the parts of a system abide by law, but as a set of guiding principles, which condition the behavior of the international actors of a given system, based on a shared interpretation over the nature of what constitutes a just agreement or the distribution of power. (Kissinger, 2017: 20)

replacing the medieval system of centralized religious authority with a decentralized system of sovereign states as the sole legitimate form of sovereign authority. The Westphalian state-centric system was based on some new principles, including the sovereignty, sovereign independence and equality of the nation states, territorial integrity, the equal rights and obligations of the states, non-intervention in others' domestic affairs, and the conduct of inter-state diplomatic relations through embassies, among many others. Power was at the center of this system to regulate inter-state relations in the absence of any higher systemic authority. (Oğurlu, 2019: 175).

### The long-term view

The goal of a long-term view in the study of international relations is enhancing the historical horizon of our material object, and consequently, of the formal object. The point is not to claim 'there is nothing new under the sun' but to search the precedents that explain the emergence of modern international relations and recognize the differences with past experiences, which account for their specificity on a larger temporal and geographical terrain. It is indeed important to assess both the similarities maintained throughout time and the changing factors as criteria for the specificity of historical international systems. Most regional experiences in polities' interaction before the emergence of the Westphalian model, assumed they were at the center of the world and represented the true essence of humans, always surrounded by barbarians.

Adopting a rigid view that sets the temporal limits towards the mid seventeenth century leaves most of the historical horizon of our species in the dark for internationalists, privileges the European conception of international relations and neglects other cultural traditions in 'international' politics. Thus, this starting point for international relations as a material object has also been challenged by a group of revisionist who consider that the *international* does not only include interaction among modern nations,<sup>11</sup> but among polities in general since ancient times (Frank, 1993; Buzan and Little, 2000; Chase-Dunn and Anderson, 2005; Teschke, 2009, Sarquis, 2012).<sup>12</sup>

A long-term historical view of international relations as practical phenomena is possible if we accept a degree of flexibility with the concept 'international'. Not only to refer

11 The nation is indeed a modern phenomenon, hardly visible at all before the 18th century and only consolidated during the 19th century, mainly in Western Europe and North America. It is a sociological category to define a form of association whereby peoples of different origin, traditions, beliefs and cultural values merge in a common way of life, mainly for political reasons (to strengthen themselves in the face *the others*) and develop a common sense of belonging to a given polity, henceforward sharing a common destiny. (See, Anderson, (2016) *Imagined Communities*, New York, Verso)

12 The revisionist critique of the Westphalian landmark suggests both, that the national state was not really a by-product of the Thirty Years War or the treaties of Westphalia, since they did not really take shape until the 19th century or that changes in the operational modes of international relations did not necessarily emerged distinctively after 1648. Teschke (2009) in particular challenges the euro-centric view that the Westphalian system inaugurated a new international order conditioned by the flux of interaction among the new territorial sovereign states, and strives to demonstrate that it was more influenced by the development of the capitalist mode of production as a long-term process.



to interaction among modern nations, but from a wider perspective to cover interaction among autonomous political groups (polities), allowing us to contemplate the uses and practices of older communities, such as clans, tribes, and peoples (Ferguson and Mansbach, 1996: 23; Rosenberg, 2010: 223) their values, beliefs and modes of interaction. It also allows us to explore in further detail sociological regularities in the development of such interactions, which in turn would help explain more accurately historical singularities of international historic systems.

Social sciences are inherently historical; that is, the singularity of historical events counts as a determining factor to characterize phenomena. It is thus always controversial to attempt timeless generalizations regarding their objects of study. Context is undoubtedly a crucial variable in building explanations of social phenomena in general and international relations in particular. Vogels, Rainie and Anderson (2020) report that in a recent survey by PEW Research Center on the future of technological innovation, most experts agreed that ‘it’s all just history repeating itself’. However, does this mean a mechanical repetition of events? I believe, together with Eve (1933) that this is a physical impossibility. History, the same as nature, as I have previously stated is cyclical, but not mechanistic. New agents are born, conditions change, new variables emerge, so history, strictly speaking cannot repeat itself in detail. Nevertheless, historical tendencies are similar and although outcomes can differ, cycles are recurrent throughout different eras and that is why the study of history in the long-term perspective becomes relevant and is possible from a scientific perspective.

Although the process of differentiating epochs allows us to recognize change through time and the advent of new international orders and systems, the case for the analysis of similarities still stands, as it allows us to identify continuity in international processes and tendencies in the construction of international systems. So, both the analysis of changing features and continuities on the international scenario turn out to be helpful in configuring the larger picture of international relations and universal history because they can be complimentary<sup>13</sup> and need not be mutually excluding. So, what does complementarity tell us about the real world? Simply put, it suggests:

(...) that there are many truths about the world and many ways of seeing it. These truths might appear divergent or contradictory, but they are all equally essential in representing the true nature of reality; they are complementary. As Bohr famously put it, “The opposite of a big truth is also a big truth”. Complementarity provided a way to reconcile the paradoxes that seemed to bedevil quantum theory’s interpretation of reality (Jogalekar, 2021).

---

13 Niels Bohr’s complementarity principle suggests that the same object of study can be seen from different perspectives, which may even seem to turn out contradictory results but which, Depending on the experimental arrangement, the behavior of such phenomena as light and electrons is sometimes wavelike and sometimes particle-like. It is impossible to observe both the wave and particle aspects simultaneously. Together, however, they present a fuller description than either taken separately. (Britannica Encyclopaedia, 1998).

The complementary principle seems to go against Aristotelian logic, so it has not been easily accepted among positivist scientists. According to Aristotle, things are what they are (identity principle) and not anything else. Complementarity suggests a more Hegelian view (dialectical) of reality, where a long-term view can co-exist with the view of a more limited time span. Thus, aspects of continuity in the dealings of independent political entities with each other throughout time should not be readily dismissed in favor of the specificity of a given era. Continuity can definitely cast light on enduring characteristics of the 'international' in the broadest sense throughout time, highlighting interaction among independent political entities that exist since the dawn of civilization, without neglecting the fact that they change. (Bozeman, 1960; Watson, 1992; Frank, 1993).

This way, without falling into reductionism, it can be argued that there is a margin for generalizations concerning long-term historical processes, following the stream of continuity, but keeping it closely related to its concrete historical specificity. We can enrich the area of a generic idea of social processes, as part of the general effort of abstraction, which then has to be taken to its concrete historical dimension, where differentiating gives the observed phenomena their specificity. Raymond Aron suggested this possibility more than 50 years ago, when he spoke of sociological regularities in time influencing the development of historical singularities in concrete spaces (Aron, 1967: 852) thus (perhaps even involuntarily) paving the way for a scientific interpretation of events within the social sciences.

So, why should we be concerned with the long-term perspective in the study of international relations? For many contemporary purist internationalists, Santayana's dictum regarding the notion that *those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it* appears not to make much sense. They claim that the conditions generated by the modern international system are such that no previous experience can be meaningfully compared to it —a view that leads to a presentist perspective (that is, only concerned with current events) in the study of international phenomena (Hunt, 1980, quoted by Sarquís, 2012: 26).<sup>14</sup>

Although it may seem myopic, this view cannot be dismissed as completely wrong. Historians traditionally tend to focus more on the singularity of events than on the search for cyclical regularities of phenomena in time, which would seem to be of more interest for the social sciences (hence the traditional view that history belongs to the field of the humanities and cannot be studied scientifically).

The debate concerning the scope of the historical reach of international relations as practical phenomena (as opposed to IR as a discipline) has gained increasing relevance in

<sup>14</sup> According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Presentism* is the view that only present things exist. So understood, presentism is primarily an ontological doctrine; it's a view about what exists, absolutely and unrestrictedly. The view is the subject of extensive discussion in the literature on time and change, with much of it focused on the problems that presentism allegedly faces. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/presentism/> Retrieved September 1, 2022. Based on this definition I hereby use the term to signify an attitude according to which only the present matters.

recent years. There is a growing number of scholars worldwide attempting to break away from the boundaries established by the euro-centric Westphalian model, which establishes the mid-seventeenth century as the landmark and accept the idea of pre-Westphalian 'international relations' (Schwarzenberger, 1951; Bozeman, 1960; Frank & Gills, 1983; Watson, 1992; Buzan & Little, 2000; Rosenberg, 2010, Sarquis, 2012).

All these authors claim that not only can the contemporary international system be explained through the historical trajectory that brought us to the present, but that it is perfectly in line with a clear pattern of regularity defining the emergence and transformation of international historical systems through time.

Critics of this trend tend to consider the effort futile, arguing that there were no nation-states before the mid-seventeenth century. Such a situation, they argue, would make long-term historical comparative analysis useless, as it could not possibly contemplate the specificity of the conditions under which the current system operates (for example, sovereign, territorial states endowed with supposedly identical legal rights, permanent diplomatic missions, international organizations, etc.).

From a rigid perspective, based on the very name of the discipline, 'international relations', the best known histories of our subject-matter tend to focus strictly on the structural specificity of the nation-state and its forms of interaction with other such collectivities (Duroselle & Renouvin, 2000; Zorngibe, 1997). However, specialists are increasingly keen to explore the distant past in search of similarities in the dealings among independent polities of all times, in order to explain the very existence of present day nation-states and the emergence of the contemporary international system. Their aim is to find meaningful precedents that help understand the complexity of international scenarios in the long term, beyond the limits of the Westphalian boundary, which in turn poses specific theoretical challenges to justify the existence of an autonomous discipline of IR.

Although each international historical system has its own distinctive characteristics, that is its own specificity that makes it unique (just as in the case of every human being that has ever existed in relation to the entire species), important structural and functional similarities bind together all forms of interaction among polities throughout time. One should not have to sacrifice either perspective on behalf of the other, as the complementarity principle suggests. A critical eye on the international scenario should learn to value each aspect integrating them: the similarities that bind all international historical systems together and the differences that account for the specificity of each historical period.

In order to develop a flexible concept of international phenomena, we should consider that the term 'international' could include not only the specificity of interaction among nations for we should remember that the nation is only a recent form of social

grouping. On a wider level, that of politically autonomous and culturally differentiated human groups, each form of grouping can be seen as an actor upon the international stage dealing with others of the same species or type.

Such an approach also allows us to foresee a long-term historical process at work: these polities, which have existed under different schemes of socio-political organization throughout history (such as bands, primitive families, tribes, peoples, nations), inevitably interact with other such groups when they share concrete space-temporalities and gradually merge into larger systems (Saunier, 2013: 5).

This interaction subsequently generates larger hybrid socio-cultural entities. These synthesize the characteristics of all those involved in the process, passing from an initial condition of anarchy (when everyone fends for themselves due to the lack of a common power or authority) to a phase of organized homogeneity (traditionally called 'Empire'), in which one of those actors has risen as a hegemonic power and leads the system.

Polybius accurately describes this process in his *Histories*, a detailed account of the way in which the Romans conquered all the territories adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea to form an Empire, the same way the Greeks, the Phoenicians or the Persians (and every other group for that matter) had done in their respective areas with less success. From the experience of the Romans, Polybius recognizes the importance of a universal history (a history that involves all peoples) as distinct from local histories. In Book VIII 2.5 he declares:

Reading particular histories, we may see, no doubt, how the Romans took hold of Syracuse, or how they became the owners of Hispania, but not how they imposed their dominium over the rest of the peoples, nor the obstacles they encountered in this enormous enterprise or whose help they counted on and under which circumstances they achieved their success. These and many other questions are difficult to answer without resorting to a Universal History. (Polybius, 1986: 214)

Polybius is probably the first historian to observe the close interconnection and mutual influence between 'domestic' and 'external' affairs and make it explicit in his analysis. The way he sees it, local peoples tend to build their stories from a predominant endogenous perspective: seen this way, it is their own development in the world that matters. Polybius emphasizes the presence of the others as a conditioning factor of 'domestic' affairs, thus suggesting the existence of *internationality* as a historical condition through which local polities develop. More than 2000 years later another historian, Arnold Toynbee would also acknowledge that no national history would make sense in the absence of serious considerations regarding the influence exercised by surrounding peoples. Toynbee wrote in *A Study of History* (1947: 15)

Is English history, then, intelligible when taken by itself? Can we abstract an internal history of England from her external relations? If we can, shall we find that these residual

external relations are of secondary importance? And in analyzing these, again, shall we find that the foreign influences upon England are slight in comparison with the English influences upon other parts of the world? If all these questions receive affirmative answers we may be justified in concluding that, while it may not be possible to understand other histories without reference to England, it is possible, more or less, to understand English history without reference to other parts of the world (Toynbee, 1947: 15).

Toynbee presents us with a tantalizing philosophy of History showing a systemic view of social events, in a unifying perspective, which interconnects and includes the whole of humanity. From an IR point of view, his critical approach to the idea of a predominantly national history is a major contribution. Precisely because it questions the relevance of the National State as a central figure in terms of historical social relations, where no local history is sufficiently meaningful without including interactions with *the others* and contemplating the specificity of their context. For Toynbee, then a *civilization* would be a more proper unit of analysis for the social sciences in general and for historians in particular. Beyond their political modes of organization, he considers them more as cultural entities integrated by various peoples sharing a common set of beliefs, which define their way of life. It is not difficult to represent his idea of 'civilization' in systemic terms.

These collective formations normally run a systemic cycle from chaos to order, as they reach a higher degree of homogeneity and stability; so systems, initially formed through interaction among polities tend to become societies and subsequently communities, although not all of them manage to go all the way, and they are never permanent. Depending on their resources and ability to institutionalize their beliefs and consolidate their power, they will survive for a certain period. However, eventually they become fragmented, due both to external pressure and to internal contradictions, giving way to a new cycle, under new historical conditions. Here is a theoretical model that allows us to examine any historical period in its international dimension in a meaningful way.

Nevertheless, even when it is contemplated as a pattern of regularity in time, this systemic tendency is never linear. We know today that nothing in nature (much less in society) occurs in a simple mechanistic manner. When a child is born, we know that he/she is bound to grow, reproduce and finally die, but we can never know when or how this will happen or what kind of life the child will lead. It is very much the same with international systems.

This is why, even if we can conceive of any process as a regular recurrence, we still have to go into the details about its specificity. A look into the distant past may reveal the sociological regularity that manifests itself in the historical singularity of each international system. But there is no way to guarantee how each system will evolve or behave from cradle to grave; the Greeks, for example, basically remained a fragmented system of polis, whereas

the Romans managed to build a long lasting empire, and they are both basically part of the same civilization.

### **Concluding remarks**

The study of history is often considered a mere case of data gathering. From elementary school onwards, students are normally forced to memorize names of people, places, battles, significant events and so on. For a lot of them, studying history in such a way turns out to be a very boring endeavor. Instead of cluttering their minds with that kind of information, it would probably be a lot more useful to study trends and cycles in history, the nature of interaction between domestic and foreign affairs since pre-historical times and the way such interaction generates 'international' systems, as larger entities with a specific life of their own.

The long-term perspective allows us to identify the different variables that influence the behavior of a historical international system, to explore continuity and change through time and to develop more inclusive theoretical models, in order to achieve a better understanding of international reality.

Is the view of the international as a fragmented collection of independent polities struggling for their national interest more accurate than the view of humanity as a whole sharing in the effort to build norms and regulations for more stable interactions? (Berh, 2010: 2). The long-term view of international relations suggests both are actually possible ways of representing an international scenario in our minds and indeed actually complementary. IR theory can certainly benefit from such a view in order to see, for example, how realism emerges as a natural idea from the former whereas the latter invites to a systemic representation of the international.

Globalization is another case in point. It is, no doubt, one of the most relevant international phenomena of the contemporary world. However, is it exclusive to our time? Well, yes and no. It all depends on how you represent it in your mind as an object of study.

Seen as the result of the expansion of capitalism or a byproduct of the scientific and technological revolutions of our time in communication and transportation, the answer can only be in the affirmative. Nevertheless, that is only because we are focusing on the variables that made it operational in our time —on the form rather than the substance of the phenomenon.

Seen as a process through which international systems homogenize, globalization can have a very long-term historical horizon. Polybius certainly had an impressive intuitive glimpse of what we call globalization today when he wrote about the Mediterranean world at the end of the Punic wars:

(...) ever since this date history has been an organic whole, and the affairs of Italy and Libya have been interlinked with those of Greece and Asia, all leading up to one end. And this is my reason for beginning their systematic history from that date. For it was owing to their defeat of the Carthaginians in the Hannibalic War that the Romans, feeling that the chief and most essential step in their scheme of universal aggression had now been taken, were first emboldened to reach out their hands to grasp the rest and to cross with an army to Greece and the continent of Asia thereafter (Polybius, 1986: 32).

Nevertheless, when we delve into the specificities of how the globalization process becomes operational in each case (the schemes that intervene in globalizing: imposition, cooperation, imitation, or hybridization), we begin to see the differences in each historical case. Moreover, paradoxically, the deeper we look into these differences, the more likely we are to become convinced that we are dealing with an entirely new process. Such are the risks of overspecialization.

Seeing globalization as a long-term historical systemic process allows analysts to make a meaningful claim for the diachronic unity of our species, which helps us understand the common heritage and the common destiny of humanity. As my friend Nayan Chanda (2008) has suggested, it helps us see how and why we have inextricably bound together virtually since the dawn of civilization. ❧

## Sources

- Albert, Mathias & Buzan, Barry (2017). “On the subject matter of International Relations”. *Review of International Studies*, 43(05), Cambridge University Press, pp. 898–917.
- Anderson, Benedict (2016) *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*, New York, Verso
- Aron, Raymond (1967) « Qu'est-ce qu'une théorie des relations internationales ? » *Revue française de science politique* 17-5, pp. 837-861 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/rfsp.1967.393043>
- Ashworth, Lucien (2019) “Los mitos que me enseñó mi profesor de Relaciones Internacionales: Reconstruyendo la historia del pensamiento internacional” en *¿Cien años de Relaciones Internacionales?: Disciplinarietà y Revisiónismo*, (Lozano, A. Sarquís, D. Villanueva, R y Jorge, D. Eds.) pp. 213-249, México, Siglo XXI
- Berh Hartmut (2010). *A history of international political theory: ontologies of the international*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Complementarity principle”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 21 Dec. 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/science/complementarity-principle> Accessed 4 October 2022.
- Bozeman, Ada (1962). *Politics and culture in international history*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press

- Buzan, Barry & Little, Richard (2000) *International systems in world history: Remaking the study of International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Chanda, Nayan (2008) *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers, and Warriors Shaped Globalization*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher & Anderson, E.N. *The historical evolution of world systems*, New York, Palgrave-MacMillan
- Eve, A.S. (1933) Does History Repeat Itself? *Nature* 132, 30 Available in. <https://doi.org/10.1038/132030a0>
- Faulkner, William (2012). *Requiem for a nun*, New York, Vintage International.
- Ferguson Yale & Mansbach, Richard. *Politics: authority, identities and change*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press
- Frank, Günder (1993). *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* New York, Routledge.
- Holsti, Kalevi (1985) *The dividing discipline: hegemony and diversity in international theory*, Boston, Unwin Hyman
- Ingram, David and Jonathan Tallant, "Presentism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/presentism/> Retrieved September 1, 2022.
- Jogalekar, Ashutosh (2021) "Complementarity and the World: Niels Bohr's Message in a Bottle" 3 *Quarks Daily*, <https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2021/11/complementarity-and-the-world-niels-bohrs-message-in-a-bottle.html>, Retrieved October 4, 2022.
- Kaplan Morton (1961) "Is International Relations a discipline?" *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 23 No. 3 Cambridge University Press pp. 462-476
- Kissinger, Henry (2017) *Orden Mundial*, México, Debate.
- Neila, José Luis (2001) La Historia de las Relaciones Internacionales: Notas para una aproximación historiográfica, *Ayer* 42-1 pp. 17-42 disponible en <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41325054>
- Oğurlu, Ebru (2019) "Understanding the Distinguishing Features of Post-Westphalian Diplomacy" *Perceptions*, Volume XXIV Number 2-3, pp. 175-194
- Polibio (1986) *Selección de Historias*, Madrid, Akal.
- Renouvin, Pierre & Duroselle, Jean Baptiste (2000) *Introducción a la historia de las relaciones internacionales*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica
- Rosenberg, Justin (2010) "Escaping from the prison of political science: what IR offers that other disciplines do not" in Dyvik, Synne; Selby, Jan & Wilkinson, Rorden (Eds.) *What's the point of International Relations?* New York, Routledge pp. 219-241



- Sarquís, David (2012) *La dimensión histórica en el estudio de las Relaciones Internacionales, México: El proceso de reconstrucción de sistemas internacionales históricos*, Grial.
- Sarquís, David (2019) “¿Un siglo de Relaciones Internacionales: Ciencia o disciplina, desde dónde y para qué?” en *¿Cien años de Relaciones Internacionales?: Disciplinariedad y Revisionismo*, (Lozano, A. Sarquís, D. Villanueva, R y Jorge, D. Eds.) pp. 84-113, México, Siglo XXI.
- Saunier, Pierre (2013). *Transnational history*, London, Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Schmidt, Brian (2019) “Revisando la historia temprana de las Relaciones Internacionales: Imperialismo, colonialismo y Raza” en *¿Cien años de Relaciones Internacionales?: Disciplinariedad y Revisionismo*, (Lozano, A. Sarquís, D. Villanueva, R y Jorge, D. Eds.) pp. 250-264, México, Siglo XXI
- Schwarzenberger, Georg (1951 [1942]) *Power Politics: a study of international society*, London, Stevens & Sons
- Seara, Modesto (2019) “Relaciones Internacionales: Variaciones sobre un tema”, en *¿Cien años de Relaciones Internacionales?: Disciplinariedad y Revisionismo*, (Lozano, A. Sarquís, D. Villanueva, R y Jorge, D. Eds.) pp. 31-42, México, Siglo XXI
- Teschke, Benno (2009). *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations*, London, Verso
- Toynbee, Arnold (1947) *A Study of History*, London, Dell Publishing
- Ushenko, A. (1932). “Fact and Event”. *The Monist*, 42(2), Oxford University Press, pp. 249–258.
- Vogels, Emily, Rainie Lee & Anderson Janna (2020) *Experts predict more digital innovation by 2030 aimed at enhancing democracy*, Washington D.C. PEW Research Center
- Villanueva, Ricardo (2019) “El primer gran debate en Relaciones Internacionales: ¿Mito disciplinario?” en *¿Cien años de Relaciones Internacionales?: Disciplinariedad y Revisionismo*, (Lozano, A. Sarquís, D. Villanueva, R y Jorge, D. Eds.) pp. 195-212 México, Siglo XXI
- Walt, Stephen M. (1998) “International Relations: One World, Many Theories,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 110, pp. 29-46.
- Watson, Adam (1992). *The evolution of international society*, London, Routledge
- Wight, M. (1960). “Why is there no International Theory?” *International Relations*, 2(1), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004711786000200104>
- Zorgbibe, Charles (1997) *Historia de las relaciones internacionales* (2 tomos) Madrid, Alianza