A New Age in International Relations?

Adam Roberts

*International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 67, No. 3. (Jul., 1991), pp. 509-525.

Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0020-5850%28199107%2967%3A3%3C509%3AANAIIR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E

*International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* is currently published by Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/riia.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
A new age in international relations?

ADAM ROBERTS

Adam Roberts turns a sceptical eye on arguments that the international order is undergoing a transformation, and emphasizes the reappearance of some old as well as some new themes.

The remarkable events of the last two years have given substance to the idea that we are in a new age of international relations. The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the conclusion of the 1990 CFE treaty on conventional forces in Europe, the end of the Warsaw Pact as an operational body, the unification of Germany, the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait by an alliance acting with the authorization of the United Nations—all this seems to have changed the political landscape irreversibly.¹

Many people have found these events, because they seemed highly improbable only two years ago, not only interesting and in some cases welcome, but also disorienting. Familiar compass-points have disappeared. It is not just that facts have changed, but also that existing interpretations of the international system are challenged. There is a sense that we are living in a time which is fundamentally different from all past eras.

In these circumstances, naturally, there is no shortage of ideas to the effect that the contemporary international system is in a state of fundamental transformation. Some of these ‘transformational’ ideas have gained a good deal of currency around the world. Among them are the following: (1) The high degree of interdependence between states, especially in the economic field, has created a new situation in which force has declining utility. (2) The possibilities of non-violent change are greater now than in previous eras of world history. (3) The Yalta system in Europe has been decisively replaced by a new and better order. (4) With the end of the ideological confrontation between East and West, the end of history is nigh. (5) There is now the actuality, or the strong possibility, of a new world order, based on international law, the UN Charter and Security Council—and also on American power and influence.

¹ This article is the text of the 1993 Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, given at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 8 May 1991.
False dawns in earlier eras

Although many of these ‘transformational’ ideas do have substance, and although we are indeed living in an age which is in important respects new, it may be well to begin with a warning. International relations seem peculiarly to inspire ideas of new eras. We have been here before, many times. The 1815 Congress of Vienna was deeply imbued with a sense that it was ushering in a new era—and one which served the cause of the European peoples as well as sovereigns, and even of human rights more generally. A similar sense of a new era was particularly widespread in the years after the First World War. The conviction that mankind was entering a new era contributed, not only to the peace settlement of 1919, but also to the foundation of Chatham House. It was at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 that members of the British and American delegations met and reached this report and resolution:

Until recent years it was usual to assume that in foreign affairs each government must think mainly, if not entirely, of the interests of its own people. In founding the League of Nations, the Allied Powers have now recognized that national policies ought to be framed with an eye to the welfare of society at large. The proceedings at Paris have shown how necessary it is to create some organization for studying the relation of this principle to practical questions as they arise: Resolved Therefore:

‘(1) That those present undertake to form an Institute, entitled “The Institute of International Affairs, founded at Paris, 1919”, composed at the outset of two branches, one in the United Kingdom and one in the United States.

‘(2) That the purpose of this Institute should be to keep its members in touch with the international situation and enable them to study the relation between national policies and the interests of society as a whole.’

One sees here the conviction that international ills are caused by ignorance; the proposition that national policies could and should be framed with an eye to the welfare of society at large; and above all the sense that the past is benighted and the present enlightened.

The same spirit that led to the creation of Chatham House also contributed, in the interwar years, to the founding of international relations departments in many British universities, including the London School of Economics. Many of the early holders of posts in these universities were profoundly imbued with the sense of being in, and at the same time helping to shape, a new era. In 1926 Philip Noel-Baker, Cassell Professor of International Relations at London University, sought to describe and promote a new era in a book on The League of Nations at work. As late as 1936, Sir Alfred Zimmern, Montague Burton

---

2 See e.g. the account of 8 Feb, 1815 on the cessation of the slave trade, Clive Parry, ed., Consolidated Treaty Series, Vol. 63, pp. 474–5.


4 Noel-Baker ended one of his books with this peroration: ‘In one sense mankind is always at the crossroads. But the present generation has a clearer and a graver choice than any that has gone before.'
Professor of International Relations at Oxford, was similarly optimistic about a new era in his major work on *The League of Nations and the rule of law*. He believed that the system of managing international relations through a concert of great powers was being largely supplanted by a new diplomacy, more equal in character, revolving around the League of Nations; and that war could be eliminated entirely. In words that might apply to all passionate advocates of a 'new age', Don Markwell has said of him: "Zimmern's preoccupation with the present clearly led him to exaggerate its uniqueness."

It is easy with the benefit of hindsight to criticize the assumptions of the era after the First World War. The theory of national self-determination, so strongly proclaimed by President Wilson and others at the time of the Paris Peace Conference, has not been a cure for all ills in the way that its proponents hoped; the League of Nations failed to work as planned; the new diplomacy was not so very new.

**Martin Wight's scepticism**

Martin Wight was not a 'new era' man. Born in 1913, he embarked on his academic career in international relations at a time when optimistic assertions of a new age were out of fashion. At the time of his death in 1972 he had published little—not because he was unproductive, but because he had high standards.

What published work there was left puzzles: how to explain, for example, the apparent conflict between his Christian pacifism and his respectful understanding of power politics in his work of that name, published by Chatham House immediately after the Second World War. Martin Wight's posthumously published works help to solve such puzzles. In particular, Hedley Bull's masterly introduction to *Wight's Systems of states*, published in 1977, comes close to explaining how, during the Second World War, Wight...

---

6 "There is always a sensible way of dealing with public matters if statesmen and peoples will be sensible enough to look for it. But the statesmen and peoples will not be thus sensible if they have the fear of war ever present in their minds... Thus the first and major function of the League is to eliminate once and for all the fear of war. Once this has been achieved, we shall witness a relaxation of tension which will manifest itself in many different forms." Alfred Zimmern, *The League of Nations and the rule of law 1919–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1936), p. 495. Compare the above passage with his more pessimistic view in Zimmern, *The decline of international standards*, *International Affairs* 17: 1, Jan.-Feb. 1938, pp. 1–31. (His conclusion at p. 25 is remarkably Anglo-centric.)


8 By 1913 Harold Nicolson had abandoned the idea, so prevalent in the years after 1919, that there was a distinctive new diplomacy: "I have for long wished to paint a picture of the new diplomacy as a sequel, or counterpart, to that sketch of the old diplomacy which I essayed in the biography of my father. The more I have considered the subject the less have I come to believe in any real opposition between the two... The contrast between the old and the new diplomacy is thus not merely an exaggeration, but may prove harmful to the scientific study of international relations." *Peacemaking 1919* (London: Constable, 1935), pp. 4–5.

managed to be simultaneously a conscientious objector and an admirer of Churchill; and how his pacifism gradually dropped away in later years.\(^9\)

The text of *Systems of states* amply confirms that Wight was not an adherent of the idea that there was, or was likely to be, a ‘new age’ in international relations. It is imbued with a sense that modern political doctrines—whether nationalist, communist, or whatever—are at best new variations on ancient themes.\(^10\) He simply did not believe in progress. As Hedley Bull said in the second Martin Wight Memorial Lecture:

One of Wight’s most persistent themes is that in international politics by contrast with domestic politics progress has not taken place in modern times; that international politics is incompatible with progressivist theory; that in progressivist theories the conviction precedes the evidence; that ‘it is not a good argument for a theory of international politics that we shall be driven to despair if we do not accept it.”\(^11\)

The anti-progress theme is developed further in a book by Martin Wight, *International theory: the three traditions*, to be published later this year.\(^12\) Based on his notes for a lecture course he gave at the LSE in the 1950s, the book conveys a strong sense of international relations as a field in which there is an unending struggle through the centuries between different philosophies. He characterizes these as the realist, the rationalist, and the revolutionist—or, to use labels for the three traditions which are less alliterative but perhaps easier to grasp, as the Machiavellians, the Grotians, and the Kantians.

His focus on these three approaches is interesting because all three relate powerfully, not just to the often arcane world of academic interpretations of international relations, but also to worldviews which have powerfully influenced political leaders and statesmen. Furthermore, all three relate not just to our own era but also to previous centuries. His first category, the realist-Machiavellian, encompasses not only the ‘realists’ of the past half-century, who have had so profound an influence on our times, but also some of their intellectual ancestors—even if many present-day realists would feel uncomfortable at being lumped in a category with Machiavelli or Hobbes. His second category, the rationalist-Grotian, encompasses not only those modern figures who put emphasis on international law, international institutions, or at any rate on the idea that the states of the world form in some sense an ‘international society’, but also the many earlier figures with whom they are happy to be associated, of whom Hugo Grotius is the most conspicuous. His third category, the revolutionist-Kantian, encompasses practically all those who

---


\(^10\) Wight observed that in post-colonial countries, fearful of secessionist movements, the principle of self-determination had been eroded by a restoration in secular form of the ancient principle of *causa regni eius religio*. Likewise he suggested that the foreign policies of communist states were not so new:

‘Communist parties, like the dynasties before them, have shown a tendency to become the vehicles of national interests’ Wight, *Systems of states*, pp. 172 and 173.


see the internal structure of states as being a central issue, who assert the connection between democracy and peace, or who call for a new international relations in which the sovereign state no longer occupies a central place.\textsuperscript{13}

Wight’s emphasis on the enduring significance of these categories, his belief that all interpretations of international relations or recipes for change can be accommodated within them, is a further reminder to us not to assume too easily that our era is unique and the ideas which we pursue original. Wight quotes Tocqueville:

It is unbelievable how many systems of morals and politics have been successively found, forgotten, rediscovered, forgotten again, to reappear a little later, always charming and surprising the world as if they were new, and bearing witness, not to the secundity of the human spirit, but to the ignorance of men.

It would perhaps be permissible to apply to moral and political studies what Mme de Sévigné said so agreeably about love—that it is \textit{un grand recommencement}.\textsuperscript{14}

Tocqueville’s ironic comment applies particularly to the field of international relations. Here we have a vast field of action, reflection, and study: yet in everyday political parlance we still lack a clear language and concepts to define different approaches to the subject. The terms of everyday usage—Right and Left, nationalist and internationalist, hawk and dove—are essentially crude summaries of individual stances rather than reflections of any overall philosophy of international relations. There can be few other subjects in which wheels are re-invented so regularly.

In short, Martin Wight’s whole approach, as much as any particular theoretical framework he adopted, forces reflection on whether the outward changes we have seen in the international system in recent years reflect, or require, a significant shift in international theory. Have we entered a ‘post-realist’ age? Are we all Grotians now?

If we look at some contemporary claims that the international system is indeed transformed, it is easy to side with Martin Wight in suspecting that too much is being claimed, too superficially.

**Interdependence**

The idea that increased international interaction must profoundly affect international relations has been very influential in recent years. It is not just that trade, tourism, communications and mutual military vulnerabilities have been on the increase. It is also that there has been a growing awareness that, as a matter of practical necessity, there has to be a degree of cooperation in the utilization of resources, in the protection of the environment, and in many

\textsuperscript{13} In Kant’s writings there is not only that strong element of cosmopolitanism or universalism on which Martin Wight placed much emphasis, but also a strong statist element, ‘aware of the positive functions of the state system and of the existence of rights and obligations that bound all individuals as individuals and not as citizens of particular states.’ Andrew Furell, ‘Kant and the Kantian paradigm in international relations’, \textit{Review of International Studies} 16: 3, July, 1990, p. 205.

\textsuperscript{14} Alexis de Tocqueville, presidential address at the annual public session of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, Paris, 3 Apr, 1854: \textit{Oeuvres complètes} (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1866); Vol. 9, p. 125; cited in Wight, introduction to \textit{Systems of states}, p. 10 of MS.
other fields. Mikhail Gorbachev referred repeatedly in his book *Perestroika* to ‘the growing tendency towards interdependence of the states of the world community’. Calling this ‘the main issue’, he said:

all of us in the present-day world are coming to depend more and more on one another and are becoming increasingly necessary to one another...

And here we see our interdependence, the integrity of the world, the imperative need for the pooling of the efforts of humanity for the sake of its self-preservation.  

Gorbachev is of course not alone among statesmen or indeed scholars of international relations in putting emphasis on interdependence and in stressing its novelty. He may well have deliberately highlighted this issue in order to justify a fundamental shift in foreign policy which was also needed on other grounds. Curiously, like many theorists of interdependence, he failed to remind his readers that the idea had been around for a very long time. Indeed, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels said in a famous passage in the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848:

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible...

This statement serves as a reminder that, important as interdependence certainly is, there is a need for caution before rushing to the conclusion that it must transform everything. Even if interdependence did have the effect of undermining national differences, that would not necessarily make war impossible. Interdependence can at times be a source of friction and a stimulus to war. Those who stress the capacity of interdependence to transform international relations, or even to pave the way for the elimination of war, seldom mention the phenomenon of civil war. Indeed most Western specialists in international relations have considered war as essentially an international problem: they have paid much too little attention to civil wars. Within a state, as we may be seeing in Yugoslavia today, the interdependence of the communities involved sometimes makes them more, rather than less, bitter. One can imagine that Martin Wight would have been deeply sceptical about claims that interdependence in the 1990s would completely transform the international system.

**Non-violent change**

Many of the remarkable changes in the world in the last few years have come about through peaceful processes. These processes have been of many different kinds: largely peaceful evolution within a single state, as in the Soviet Union at the time of Gorbachev’s advent to power in 1985, leading to fundamental

---

changes in both domestic and foreign policy; international negotiation and assistance in managing a ceasefire and elections, as in Namibia; or peaceful public pressure in the form of strikes, demonstrations and emigrations, leading to the collapse of existing regimes, as in many countries of Eastern Europe and indeed several republics within the Soviet Union. Over a slightly longer perspective, the ending of the European empires in Africa and Asia, though marked by some long and painful wars, was also characterized by some impressive instances of more or less non-violent transition. Peaceful change—something that all international systems must be able to provide for and to accommodate—has been achieved, at least up to a point, in our era.

Martin Wight’s brand of Christian pacifism was not the kind that is wrapped in promissory notes; it was, as Hedley Bull has said, ‘more doctrinal than practical’, and not based on a claim that there existed clear non-violent alternatives to the use of force in international relations. He once said ‘Hope is not a political virtue; it is a theological virtue.’ True, he would have liked international economic sanctions to be more effective, and he went so far as to call the failure to impose them effectively against Italy in 1935–6 ‘a turning point in international history that has conditioned everything since, a seminal failure, the generator of a whole series of other failures.’ As for non-violent struggle, or civil resistance, as practised for example in the Indian independence struggle, the interest he displayed in it did not, it appears, extend to seeing it as a means of replacing violence generally in human affairs.

If we share his approach, at least to the extent of contemplating the peaceful change of recent years with an appropriate degree of scepticism, certain conclusions are likely to follow. The underlying reason so much peaceful change occurred was not because all use of force is ruled out in the contemporary world, but rather because several empires, most notably the Soviet one, were grossly over-extended. Their demise was a confirmation of the old lesson learned the hard way by Napoleon: ‘All empires die of indigestion.’

Yet empires can and often do collapse very violently; and the process of non-violent change in many states of Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990 does deserve attention. Non-violent movements did exert considerable pressure on what to some outward appearances were still totalitarian regimes. They exposed the hollowness of the claims of socialist regimes to represent the people, or even the working class. Restrained themselves, they also induced some degree of restraint in their adversaries. They provided a persuasive argument for taking seriously the potential of civil resistance in international relations. Indeed it is sobering to reflect on what might have happened, and what risks there would have been of...
internal division, of local repression, and Soviet military intervention, if these movements had assumed a violent form—if there had been liberation fronts instead of civic forums.

Yet the success which occurred, and which was the culmination of decades of non-violent pressure, was undeniably the result of a relatively benign international environment. The old argument that Gandhi could succeed against the (relatively civilized) British but might have failed against a Stalin or Hitler appears in a new form: it was a key fact that there was a Soviet leader in power who had given indications of his reluctance to use force in Eastern Europe.

The success of civil resistance in Eastern Europe was also assisted by the fact—to which decades of popular pressure had contributed—that within the East European states there were national communist leaders who, except in Romania, had lost ideological conviction and the will to rule. This had happened first and most crucially in Poland, where already in January 1989 the Party leadership had accepted that Poland would have to move in the direction of pluralism.²¹

One other factor assisting the cause of non-violent change in Eastern Europe was the existence on the same continent of democratic societies with a capacity for defence. Those who led the struggle for non-violent change in Eastern Europe did not, for the most part, want the West to disarm and some embarrassed their Western liberal friends by supporting the combative line and shrill rhetoric of President Reagan and Mrs Thatcher. For the most part they saw non-violent struggle as appropriate to their particular circumstances in Eastern Europe, not as a solution to all conflicts. If the change was a vindication of non-violent struggle, it also vindicated the Western policies of preparedness, of unwillingness to engage in offensive rollback, and of patient pursuit of human rights and rules of coexistence in the Helsinki process.

This judgement—that non-violent struggle was seen as appropriate to a particular set of purposes, rather than as offering a fundamental transformation of the international system—has been confirmed by events since the collapse of the communist regimes. The new governments of Eastern Europe have shown little inclination to rely on civil resistance as means of national defence against future threats, whether internal or external. The very men—Václav Havel, Lech Walesa—who played a key part in keeping their respective national struggles disciplined and non-violent now as presidents support military defence policies and are casting around anxiously to embed these in a better multilateral framework than the late Warsaw Pact.

The end of the Yalta system

The idea that the bitter legacy of Yalta has at last been overcome—that a continent artificially divided has been made whole again—has become part of the conventional wisdom about 1989 and its aftermath. Such a view of the Yalta

²¹ The proposals for political pluralism, originally articulated by Solidarity, were adopted by the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party on 17–18 Jan. 1989.
conference of February 1945, and of how the present world relates to it, is far too simple. Europe was divided in 1945 not because of the Yalta conference, but because of the simple fact that the armies of two ideologically hostile great powers were already well advanced in the process of occupying large areas of Europe.

Martin Wight, in various references to the subject, showed sympathy with the view that Yalta represented a betrayal of small powers. He compared it to Munich:

The same method of arriving at international settlements by the great powers over the heads of the small powers concerned was seen at Yalta in 1945, when the Polish question was settled by the three Allied great powers without Polish representation, as the Czechoslovak question had been settled at Munich without Czechoslovak representation...the method throughout was the same—the great powers acting as a directorate. This is the system of power politics that the League of Nations was designed to supersede, but failed to do.\footnote{Wight, Power politics, 1979 edn, p. 213.}

There is more than a hint here that international politics are bound to be thus; that great powers were acting as great powers have always done. This is confirmed by another passage, in which Wight notes the reference to democracy in the Yalta Declaration, but then dismisses it as reflecting ‘only a transient moment on the surface of affairs’.\footnote{Wight, Power politics, 1979 edn, p. 291.} In this Wight was too pessimistic. In 1991 it is worth quoting the words that the much maligned statesmen at the wartime Yalta conference actually uttered. In the February 1945 Declaration on Liberated Europe, the ‘Big Three’ at Yalta, plus France, undertook to assist:

the people in any European liberated state or former Axis satellite...to form interim governmental authorities broadly representative of all the democratic elements in the population and pledged to the earliest possible establishment through free elections of governments responsive to the will of the people; and...to facilitate where necessary the holding of such elections.\footnote{Text in Diane Shaver Clemens, Yalta (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 191. On France’s association with the declaration see pp. 157–8; Herbert Feis commented aply on the declaration: “It is hard to judge whether either Soviet or British governments shared the sense of the American formulation; that its principles might govern events. Its loose use of phrases allowed easy passage to any determined purpose... But the effort to enthroned principle, at Yalta and subsequently, ought not to be dismissed as futile. The Declaration on Liberated Europe may have served to sustain the resistance of democratic elements in Central Europe. The principles which it enunciated may have affected action for a while and still survive as an inspiring guide for the future.” Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin: the war they waged and the peace they sought, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 530.}

Since 1989, what was thus promised in the Yalta Declaration has belatedly come to pass in the very countries of Eastern Europe whose vulnerability caused the declaration to be drawn up in the first place. ‘Interim governmental authorities broadly representative’ were formed in several countries in 1989; free elections were held in 1990; the Yalta powers did play some part, albeit a small one, in facilitating such elections. Thus it is much too simple to see what has happened in Eastern Europe as a mere rejection of a benighted past, or as
a final burial of Yalta. Rather, what happened is the vindication of a key principle which is by no means new: that international relations have to be based on some conception of democracy and human rights, as well as on the coexistence of sovereign states.

The end of history?

In summer 1989, the deputy director of the US State Department’s policy planning staff, Francis Fukuyama, wrote his celebrated essay, ‘The end of history?’ With the usual disclaimer that his opinions did not reflect those of the US government, and with his tongue not far from his cheek, he declared: ‘In watching the flow of events over the past decade or so, it is hard to avoid the feeling that something very fundamental has happened in world history.’ What was the essence of this ‘something very fundamental’?

The twentieth century saw the developed world descend into a paroxysm of ideological violence, as liberalism contended first with the remnants of absolutism, then bolshevism and fascism, and finally an updated Marxism that threatened to lead to the ultimate apocalypse of nuclear war. But the century that began full of self-confidence in the ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy seems at its close to be returning full circle to where it started: not to an ‘end of ideology’ or a convergence between capitalism and socialism, as earlier predicted, but to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.22

It is easy to laugh at the spectacle of a State Department official announcing the end of history; it is as improbable as a meteorologist announcing the end of weather. Fukuyama’s essay is indeed open to many criticisms. Taking Hegel to Washington, DC, was undoubtedly an achievement; but the vision of history that had misled Marx—of history as a dialectic reaching its necessary and foreseeable conclusion—may well have misled Fukuyama as well. If it is right to see the Cold War as over, there may yet be other deep conflicts in the international system. The article sees too many past wars, too simply, as cases of ideology versus liberalism. It says little about the complex of reasons which explain why expansionist ideologies became so influential in the past and might do so again. It caricatures the position of those—and Martin Wight would probably have been one—who assert that underneath the skin of ideology is a hard core of great-power national interest; and that even if the ideology declines, the great-power rivalry may endure.

Despite its philosophical adornments, Fukuyama’s article is little more than a logical counterpoint to the highly ideological view of world politics held by many, not least in Washington, DC, over the past four and a half decades. For those who saw Soviet communism as the source of all problems, and who downplayed the local sources of international crises and conflicts, the decline of communist ideology and the dramatic changes in Soviet foreign policy since 1985 pose a problem. What kind of world do we have if the communist devil

who occupied such a central role has disappeared? One answer to this problem is to proclaim the end of history. Those who did not see Soviet communism as the source of all evil have less need of a fundamental reinterpretation of world history.

A ‘new world order’, and elements of older ones

Even if history is not yet at an end, it is possible that it moves in a certain direction. The changes of recent years do seem to offer hope for a ‘new world order’—one in which international law, great power cooperation and international organizations all play a larger part than they have been able to do for most of this century.

Suggestions that some kind of new world order is emerging, or at least that the opportunity to create one exists, long antedate the Iraq–Kuwait crisis of 1990–91. Over a decade ago, Ralf Dahrendorf, putting much emphasis on economic and human rights aspects of the subject, gave some lectures on a new world order at the University of Ghana. On 11 April 1990, President Gorbachev told a meeting of the World Media Association in Moscow: ‘We are only at the beginning of the process of shaping a new world order.’

However, it was after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait of 2 August 1990 that the phrase ‘new world order’, with its suggestion that order has indeed to be kept against aggressors, entered contemporary parlance. On 11 September President Bush, appearing before a joint session of both houses of Congress, reiterated four ‘simple principles’ that he had earlier outlined regarding the Gulf crisis, and then added a fifth:

Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective—a new world order—can emerge; a new era—freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace, an era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony.

A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavour. Today, that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we have known, a world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle, a world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice, a world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.

There was also real substance in Bush’s remarks of 11 September—especially

26 Ralf Dahrendorf suggested a number of elements of a possible new world order, but said: ‘The notion that a new world order should be created in one fell swoop is not only unrealistic; it is also based on a naive belief in benevolent government which many have learnt to distrust’. A new world order? Problems and prospects of international relations in the 1980s (Accra: University of Ghana, 1979), p. 86.


when he said ‘We are now in sight of a United Nations that performs as envisioned by its founders.’ But it is not difficult to imagine what the astringent mind of Martin Wight might have made of the remarkable mélange of homogenized history and recycled vision in Bush’s speech. A cynical interpretation might have been that preparation for a large and risky military operation overseas always involves an escalation of rhetoric, and this was no worse than most. It is not surprising that after such wild promises the United States is experiencing a post-Gulf War hangover, and that welcoming parties for returning soldiers have a curiously low-key air. A world as beset by civil wars, dictatorial regimes and natural and man-made disasters as the one we see every day on television is not quite what Americans were led to expect only a few months ago. Perhaps the talk of a New World Order is essentially a New World Phenomenon: no more than a survival of those philosophies—which both the United States and the Soviet Union have inherited from their respective revolutions—that reject the unsatisfactory state of international relations.

Wight would have disliked many things done in the name of the new world order. He would perhaps have been among those who felt that sanctions against Iraq, having been implemented with remarkable efficiency following the Iraqi attack on Kuwait, were not given enough time to work. Here there is room for doubt: there is a serious argument that sanctions, even if supported 100 per cent, would not have forced Saddam Hussein to abandon his conquests. What seems beyond dispute, however, is that the American and British governments—and indeed the UN Secretariat—made little attempt to present a well worked out and intellectually coherent case justifying what was probably a right conclusion: that sanctions had to give way to war.

The UN-backed coalition which achieved the necessary purpose of expelling Iraq from Kuwait was a remarkable instance of collective security at work. Yet it would be wrong to see it as the sole basis of a new international order. Even before Korea, there were some precedents for widespread international cooperation against threats to the peace: for example, against Napoleon in 1815. Saddam Hussein’s brazen aggression against Kuwait was against the grain of post-1945 international conduct. It will not be so easy to put such a coalition together in more ambiguous cases.

There was another peculiar aspect of the war over Kuwait which makes it a questionable basis for a new world order. In this case the principal regional organization, the Arab League, was peculiarly weak. In other instances,

---

50 US Department of State Dispatch, 17 Sept. 1990, p. 91.
31 On 13 Mar. 1815 Talleyrand, writing to King Louis XVIII, referred to the declaration issued the same day by powers assembled at the Congress of Vienna after being informed of Napoleon Bonaparte’s escape from Elba, and to measures they had taken: ‘Thus all tends towards the same end, with a unanimity and concord between all the powers such as I do not believe has ever before been witnessed.’ Mémoires of the Prince de Talleyrand, ed. Oue de Broglie, Vol. 3 (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden and Welsh, 1891, trans. Mr Angus Hall), p. 73.
intervention by regional bodies may be both possible and desirable: there has been a recent example in West Africa, with the ECOWAS-sponsored intervention in the civil war in Liberia. 23

If there is anything resembling a new world order, the case for it should not be made to rest solely on the Gulf War. Inevitably, that war, like all wars, is viewed very differently in different parts of the world: seen by some as the performance of a duty to international law and organization, it is interpreted by others as something akin to colonialism—if only in the sense of Westerners exposing obvious weaknesses in non-European societies. Upheld by some as an example of the new world order in action, it is seen by others (including many on the staff of the UN itself) as proof of the need for a world order which we do not yet have.

A new age?

It is easy to criticize this or that ‘transformational’ view of international relations. Many are little more than slogans; or, like so many good ideas, illustrate vividly by oversimplifying madly. And yet we are all conscious that the landscape of international relations has changed dramatically: to deny that we are in a different age, with its special problems and opportunities, would be absurd.

We must first recognize a central paradox of this new age. Wherever we look, the new age has strong elements of older ones. In the Gulf crisis, reactions within states to the prospect of involvement in war were determined, above all, by that state’s particular historical experience of war. The end of the Cold War takes us back to the world of 1945, with, as President Bush indicated, the possibility this time of seeing the security provisions of the UN Charter implemented. Or perhaps it takes us back to the world before 1917, for in the entire intervening period there has been a deep ideological divide in international society which is now truly over. Indeed it is striking how far China, as well as the Soviet Union, has gone in dropping ideology as a guide to foreign policy: it defends its rights to act as it does internally not on the grounds of scientific socialism, or anti-imperialist struggle, but by reference to the ancient principle of the sovereignty of states. The new age also takes us back even further, to the age of the Concert of Powers, of which we had a rough approximation in the recent workings of the UN Security Council. In an ironic twist of fate, at the Geneva summit in late 1985 it was President Gorbachev, inheritor of the revolutionary tradition, who lectured the supposedly conservative President Reagan on the enduring features of international relations. He mentioned Palmerston’s famous statement in 1848, the exact words of which were:

23 ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States. Following discussions in Sierra Leone in July 1990, the peacekeeping force of the ECOWAS monitoring group ECOMOG was first deployed in Liberia on 25 Aug. 1990. It has experienced considerable difficulties in carrying out its task of ending the civil war.
We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.22

Perhaps the new era is taking us back further still, to an international society bearing resemblances to that of the Middle Ages, where there are different hierarchies of authority for different purposes, rather than a parcelling out of the world into sovereign states with claims to the exclusive loyalty of their subjects. The modern buzzword 'subsidiarity' is this ancient theme in new guise.

Characterizing the new age

How then should we characterize the new era of international relations? The combination in the past two years of largely peaceful revolution in Europe and violent conflict outside might suggest a possible interpretation: that the European world, the world of the Paris Charter of 1990, is a Grotian one, observing norms of cooperation, and perhaps even has its Kantian element: a civil society of civil societies, with sovereignty fraying at the edges; while at least parts of the world beyond are still Hobbesian, with force still a very active final arbiter within and between countries, and sovereignty loudly proclaimed.

Such a view has some merit; and it is not too far from Wight’s central preoccupation with Europe, whose great wars in this century he saw in a tragic light as civil wars within Western civilization.24 Yet it is far too crude. True, most international conflicts of the contemporary world are essentially post-colonial in character. In newly decolonized countries, political systems and also borders tend to lack legitimacy. Yet ideas of international society, associated especially with the UN, are widely held in the post-colonial world. Moreover, many recent achievements of the UN—achievements which provide a better basis for ideas of a new world order than the Gulf War—relate to the post-colonial world. The steady stream of ceasefires and settlements of conflicts over the past few years, usually with some UN involvement in the process, played a part in ending wars between Iran and Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Namibia, and perhaps soon in Angola.

Any claim of a simple conceptual distinction between the European and post-colonial worlds falls foul of another fact: the problems which we think of as post-colonial are not confined to the extra-European world. In the one part of the United Kingdom where there was decolonization in this century, and where we have a land frontier with another state, we have not been conspicuously successful. Moreover, the process of decolonization in Eastern Europe raises the question of whether these states can make a greater success of independent national existence, both internally and externally, than they did in the 1920s and 1930s.

24 For an argument that ‘Wight’s contribution is vulnerable to the charge of being unduly Eurocentric’, see Bull, ‘Martin Wight and the theory of international relations’, p. 115.
Martin Wight himself never felt obliged to make a final decision as between the different visions of international relations about which he taught and wrote so fruitfully. He, like me, would have rebelled against characterizing the present era in world history with a simple catchword. However, conscious that he is looking over my shoulder and probably disapproving, I offer the following comments on the new age. They have a tinge of optimism—something which is seldom justified in international relations, and in which Wight only indulged very rarely.

First, the problem of Germany, so central to all views of international relations in Martin Wight's lifetime, has been worked out in a way which offers real hope for stability. Never before has the unification of Germany been achieved in such happy circumstances, coinciding with the liberation of Eastern Europe and negotiated by consensus with neighbouring powers and great powers alike.

Second, the United Nations has succeeded—and in the much maligned Cold War years—in establishing itself as a truly universal organization, with virtually all states purporting to honour the same set of values enshrined in its Charter. Wight, who reported the UN sessions at Lake Success in 1946-7 for The Observer, was never an optimist about the UN, which he saw as a 'pseudo-institution' as distinct from the real institutions of alliances, diplomacy and war. It is certainly not a complete substitute for these ancient institutions, and it suffers from many faults which will have to be addressed again in the coming years. Yet it is proving more central to the maintenance of international order, and more important as a focus of action in meeting global challenges in matters such as the environment, than Wight envisaged.

Third, the United States is in important respects the only superpower. It has in successive years witnessed the sudden collapse of its principal adversaries in Europe, the states of the Warsaw Pact, and the even more sudden collapse of the Iraqi army. All this would have caused Wight to worry about American pride. In a review in 1947 of a book by Reinhold Niebuhr, he had approvingly written: 'Dr Niebuhr is a modern Ezekiel, pronouncing the divine condemnation on the victorious democracies whose success tempts them to the pretensions of a special virtue.' There is indeed some risk that the United States will at one and the same time see itself as having been thoroughly vindicated and be irritated by an increasingly complex international system. There is also a risk that, while upholding international law in general, the United States will continue to apply it in a limited and partial way. In these circumstances, some advocates of balance of power might well come to regret the decline of Soviet power or search for new power configurations to keep the United States in check. It seems likely that other forms of constraint, rather than

37 For a powerful criticism of the US record in the Reagan years and a plea for the United States to take international law more seriously, see Daniel Patrick Moynihan, On the law of nations (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
direct countervailing power, will be the most important ones. The checks and balances of the American system, the still living memories of Vietnam, and American awareness that it has been able to act effectively when acting under UN auspices may confound Ezekiel-like warnings today.38

Fourth, the history of our times has shown an encouraging trend towards democracy. This is most strikingly true in Europe, both Eastern and Southern. It is also true—however haltingly—in some other parts of the world. If that view associated with Kant—that democracies do not make war on each other—is right, then we have a further basis for optimism.

Fifth, the decline in ideological views of international relations, which can be detected in Tehran as much as in Moscow and in many other capitals as well, has had some important consequences. In particular it has opened up possibilities that foreign and defence policies, even in states which are not multi-party democracies in the full Western sense, may sometimes be less confrontational in character. There is striking evidence of this in the Soviet Union: in the last few years it has recognized explicitly not only that it is quite legitimate for other states to have concerns about the structure and deployment of the Soviet armed forces, but also that its defence policy should be formed in such a way as to take such concerns into account. This brings us at least a little closer to the vision of the British and American delegations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, 'that national policies ought to be framed with an eye to the welfare of society at large.'

No one would dare to end a Martin Wight lecture on a note of blithe optimism. International law and society are still caught propounding contradictory principles: on the one hand, the sovereignty of states and non-intervention in their internal affairs, and on the other hand human rights; on the one hand, the equality of states, and on the other the special privilege of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Statesmen still confront dilemmas as difficult as those of earlier times: the choice between existing arrangements with their presumed stability, and revisions of those arrangements in the name of self-determination or justice, is as difficult in regard to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia today as it was in the world faced by the peace-makers of 1919. In the Middle East, Iraqi aggression may have been stopped, but there is no sign of a solution to the Arab-Israel problem, whose Palestinian aspect has been made more tangled by the events of 1990-91. If this has been a century of false messiahs, there is no reason to think that with the millennium we will have seen the last of them. Problems of refugees, resources, population growth and the environment are inherently hard to tackle within our present international framework, and look like becoming more rather than less serious. Power is still a key factor in international relations—even if it is more

38 As Brian Beedham has put it in an article about the establishment of havens to rescue the Kurds in northern Iraq: 'For the first time in something close to living memory, self-constraint rather than external constraint is the chief limitation on the foreign policy of the democracies. The tumultuous changes of the post war era so far mean that it is now easier than at any time since the early 1930s for the democracies to stand up for what they believe to be right, and to resist what they believe to be wrong.' International Herald Tribune, Paris, 6 May 1991.
ambiguous in its character, more varied in its forms, and less of an over-arching goal which can be single-mindedly pursued without reference to other considerations, than some of the so-called ‘realists’ implied. We still live under the ominous shadow of nuclear weapons, which Niebuhr, and I think Wight, saw as ‘the most telling proof of the perpetual relevance of the Biblical warnings’. We are indeed in a new age in international relations, but we still need to heed Wight’s central message: to learn from the past, and not to pretend we are in an entirely new land.

38 Niebuhr, as cited by Wight in his review (note 35), p. 558.