The Making of the Modern World

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Dear reader,

This is a chapter I wrote for a book, *International Relations: A Beginner's Guide,* edited by Stephen McGlinchey and forthcoming with E-International Relations Publishing in January 2017. It is my attempt to describe the origin of the state, and the European interstate system, as they came to develop from the Middle Ages onwards, and also to say something about how the European system spread to the rest of the world. It is very much an entry-level chapter, intended for first-year undergraduates. Yes, it is an example of the future of academic publishing — open source, open access, no profit, etc. This is the final, published, version. Please cite as:

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If you have any comments or questions, email me at erik@ringmar.net

yours,

Erik

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The Making of the Modern World

ERIK RINGMAR

International relations, as it is presented in the flow of daily news, concerns a large number of disparate events: leaders are meeting, negotiations are concluded, wars are started, acts of terror committed, and so on. In order to make sense of all this information we need to know a lot about the contemporary world and its history; we need to understand how all the disparate events hang together. At university, we study these topics, but it is a basic tenet of the academic study of international politics that this rather messy picture can be radically simplified. Instead of focusing on the flow of daily news, we focus on the basic principles underlying it. This is what we will try to do in this chapter. So, let us begin by thinking big: what is international relations, how was it made, and how did it come to be that way?

The state is a good place to start. There are a lot of states in the world – in fact, according to the latest count, there are no fewer than 195 of them. States are obviously very different from each other, but they are also similar to each other in important respects. All states are located somewhere, they have a territorial extension; they are surrounded by borders which tell us where one state ends and another begins. In fact, with the exception of Antarctica, there is virtually no piece of land anywhere on earth's surface that is not claimed by one state or another and there is no piece of land that belongs to more than one state (although, admittedly, the ownership of some pieces of land is disputed). Moreover, all states have their own capitals, armies, foreign ministries, flags and national anthems. All states call themselves 'sovereign', meaning that they claim the exclusive right to govern their respective territories in their own fashion. But states are also sovereign in relation to each other: they act in relation to other states, declaring war, concluding a peace, negotiating a treaty, and many other things. In fact, we

often talk about states as though they were persons with interests to defend and plans to carry out. According to a time-honoured metaphor, we can talk about international politics as a 'world stage' on which the states are the leading actors.

Over the course of the years there have been many different kinds of states, yet this chapter is mainly concerned with the European state and with European developments. There are good reasons for this. For much of its history, Europe was of no particular relevance to the rest of the world. Europe had few connections to other continents and European states were not more powerful, and certainly no richer, than those elsewhere. But this began to change from around the year 1500. This was when the Europeans first developed extensive trading links with the rest of the world. That trade helped to spur both economic development and social change. As a result, the Europeans began to assert themselves. Eventually, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, European states occupied and colonised the bulk of the world, dramatically transforming the course of world history. Yet, as we will see, it was only when the colonised countries became independent in the twentieth century that the European state and the European way of organising international relations finally became the universal norm. Today's international system is, for good and for bad, made by Europeans and by non-Europeans copying European examples.

The rise of the sovereign state

In medieval Europe international politics consisted of a complicated pattern of overlapping jurisdictions and loyalties. Most of life was local and most political power was local too. At the local level there was an enormous diversity of political entities: feudal lords who ruled their respective estates much as they saw fit, cities made up of independent merchants, states ruled by clerics and smaller political entities such as principalities and duchies. There were even brotherhoods – such as the Knights Hospitaller, a military order – who laid claims to a political role. There were also, especially in northern Europe, many peasant communities that were more or less self-governing. There were kings too of course, such as the kings of France and England, but their power was limited and their poverty looked like wealth only in comparison with the conditions of the near-destitute members of the peasant class underneath them.

In medieval Europe there were two institutions with pretensions to power over the continent as a whole – the (Catholic) Church and the Empire. The Church was the spiritual authority, with its centre in Rome. Apart from a small Jewish minority, all Europeans were Christian and the influence of the Church spread

far and penetrated deeply into people's lives. As the custodian, from Roman times, of institutions like the legal system and the Latin language, the Church occupied a crucial role in the cultural and intellectual life of the Middle Ages. The Empire – known as the *Holy Roman Empire* – was established in the tenth century in central, predominantly German-speaking, Europe. It also included parts of Italy, France and today's Netherlands and Belgium. It too derived legitimacy from the Roman Empire, but had none of its political power. The Holy Roman Empire is best compared to a loosely structured federation of many hundreds of separate political units.

The political system of medieval Europe was thus a curious combination of the local and the universal. Yet, from the fourteenth century onward this system was greatly simplified as the state emerged as a political entity located at an intermediate level between the local and the universal. The new states simultaneously set themselves in opposition to popes and emperors on the universal level, and to feudal lords, peasants and assorted other rulers on the local level. This is how the state came to make itself independent and self-governing. The process started in Italy where northern city-states such as Florence, Venice, Ravenna and Milan began playing the pope against the emperor, eventually making themselves independent of both. Meanwhile, in Germany, the pope struggled with the emperor over the issue of who of the two should have the right to appoint bishops. While the two were fighting it out, the constituent members of the Holy Roman Empire took the opportunity to assert their independence. This was also when the kings of France and England began acting more independently, defying the pope's orders. Between 1309 and 1377, the French even forced the pope to move to Avignon, in southern France. In England, meanwhile, the king repealed the pope's right to levy taxes on the people.

With the Reformation in the sixteenth century the notion of a unified Europe broke down completely as the Church began to split apart. Before long the followers of Martin Luther, 1483–1546, and John Calvin, 1509–1564, had formed their own religious denominations which did not take orders from Rome. Instead the new churches aligned themselves with the new states. Or rather, various kings, such as Henry VIII in England or Gustav Vasa in Sweden, took advantage of the religious strife in order to further their own political agendas. By supporting the Reformation, they could free themselves from the power of Rome. All over northern Europe, the new 'Protestant' churches became state-run and church lands became property of the state. Yet, the new divisions were cultural and intellectual too. With the invention of the printing press, power over the written word moved away from the monasteries and into the hands of private publishers who sought markets for their books. The biggest markets were found in books published not in Latin but in various local languages. From the early eighteenth century onwards

Latin was no longer the dominant language of learning. As a result, it was suddenly far more difficult for Europeans to understand each other.

In this climate, the increasingly self-assertive states were not only picking fights with universal institutions but also with local ones. In order to establish themselves securely in their new positions of power, the kings rejected the traditional claims of all local authorities. This led to extended wars in next to all European countries. Peasants rose up in protest against taxes and the burdens imposed by repeated wars. There were massive peasant revolts in Germany in the 1520s with hundreds of thousands of participants and almost as many victims. In the latter part of the sixteenth century, there were major peasant uprisings in Sweden, Croatia, England and Switzerland. In France, in the middle of the seventeenth century, the nobility rose up in defence of its traditional rights and in rebellion against the encroachments of the king.

Medieval kings were really quite powerless. They had no proper bureaucracies at their disposal, no standing armies and few ways of raising money. In fact, there were few good roads, ports and not many large cities. These, however, soon came to be constructed. From the sixteenth century onwards the states established the rudiments of an administrative system and raised armies, both in order to fight their own peasants and in order to defend themselves against other states. Since such state-building was expensive, the search for money became a constant concern. The early modern state was more than anything an institutional machinery designed to develop and extract resources from society. In return for their taxes, the state provided ordinary people with defense and a rudimentary system of justice. If they refused to pay up, state officials had various unpleasant ways to make them suffer.

Early modern Europe was the golden age of political economy. During this period, the economy was not thought of as a distinct sphere separated from politics but instead as a tool of statecraft which the state could manipulate to serve its own ends. Economic development meant higher revenues from taxes and gave the kings access to more resources which they could use in their wars. The state was keen to encourage trade, not least since taxes on trade were a lot easier to collect than taxes on land. It was now that a search began for natural resources – agricultural land, forests, iron and copper ore, but also manpower – which the state might make use of. Maps were drawn up which located these resources within the country's borders, and lists were made of births, marriages and deaths in order to better keep track of the population. Domestic industries were set up and given state subsidies, above all in militarily significant sectors such as metal works and in sectors that were easy for the state to tax. In addition, various 'useful sciences' were

encouraged, by the newly established scientific academies, and prizes were given to innovations and discoveries. In state-sponsored universities, future members of the emerging administrative class were taught how best to regulate society and assure peace and social order.

The Westphalian system

The European states emerged in the midst of struggle and strife, and struggle and strife have continued to characterise their existence. Yet, in early modern Europe it was no longer the competing claims of local and universal authorities that had to be combated but instead the competing claims of other states. The Thirty Years' War, 1618–1648, was the bloodiest and most protracted military confrontation of the era. As a result of the war Germany's population was reduced by around a third. What the Swiss or the Scottish mercenaries did not steal, the Swedish troops destroyed. Many of the people who did not die on the battlefield died of the plague. The Thirty Years' War is often called a religious conflict since Catholic states confronted Protestants. Yet, Protestant and Catholic countries sometimes fought on the same side and religious dogma was clearly not the first thing on the minds of the combatants. Instead the war concerned which state should have hegemony (or dominance) over Europe. That is, which state, if any, would take over from the universal institutions of the Middle Ages. The main protagonists were two Catholic states, France and Austria, but Sweden – a Protestant country – intervened on France's side and in the end no dominant power emerged.

The Treaty of Westphalia, 1648, which concluded the 30 years of warfare, has come to symbolise the new way of organising international politics. From this point onwards, international politics was a matter of relations between states and no other political units. All states were sovereign, meaning that they laid claims to the exclusive right to rule their own territories and to act, in relation to other states, as they themselves saw fit. All states were formally equal and they had the same rights and obligations. Taken together, the states interacted with each other in a system in which there was no overarching power. Sovereignty and formal equality led to the problem of anarchy. Within a country 'anarchy' refers to a breakdown of law and order, but in relations between states it refers to a system where power is decentralised and there are no shared institutions with the right to enforce common rules. An anarchical world is a world where everyone looks after themselves and no one looks after the system as a whole. Instead, states had to rely on their own resources or to form alliances through which the power of one alliance of states could be balanced against the power of another alliance. Yet, as soon became clear, such power balances were precarious, easily subverted, and given the value attached to territorial acquisitions,

states had an incentive to engage in aggressive wars. As a result, the new international system was characterised by constant tensions and threats of war – which often enough turned into actual cases of warfare.

At the same time various practices developed which helped regulate common affairs. The foremost example was the practice of diplomacy as exemplified by the way peace treaties were negotiated. From the seventeenth century onward, European states met after each major war in order to reach a settlement and lay down the terms of their future interaction. These diplomatic practices had their origin in relations between the city-states of northern Italy. Once these states had made themselves independent both of the pope and the emperor, they soon discovered that their relations had become vastly more complicated. In order to avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts, the different rulers began dispatching ambassadors to each other's courts. This diplomatic network provided a means of gathering information, of spying, but also a way of keeping in touch with one another, of carrying out negotiations and concluding deals. The practices of diplomacy soon expanded to include a number of mutually advantageous provisions: the embassies were given extraterritorial rights and legal immunity, diplomatic dispatches were regarded as inviolable and ambassadors had the right to worship the god of their choice. These originally north Italian practices gradually expanded to embrace more states and by the middle of the seventeenth century the system included France, Spain, Austria, England, Russia, Poland, Denmark, Sweden and the Ottoman Empire. Diplomatic practices were never powerful enough to prevent war, indeed wars continued to be common, but they did provide Europeans with a sense of a common identity. A European state was, more than anything, a state that participated in the system of shared diplomatic practices.

An inter-national system

The early modern state was a coercive machinery designed to make war and to extract resources from society. Yet at the end of the eighteenth century, this machinery came to be radically transformed. Or rather, the 'state' was combined with a 'nation' forming a compound noun – the 'nation-state' – which was organised differently and pursued different goals. A nation, in contrast to a state, constitutes a community of people joined by a shared identity and by common social practices. Communities of various kinds have always existed but they now became, for the first time, a political concern. As a new breed of nationalist leaders came to argue, the nation should take over the state and make use of its institutional structures to further the nation's ends. In one country after another the nationalists were successful in these aims. The nation added an interior life to the state, we might perhaps say; the

nation was a soul added to the body of the early modern state machinery.

The revolutions that took place in Britain's North American colonies in 1776, and in France in 1789, provided models for other nationalists to follow. 'We the People of the United States' – the first words of the Preamble to the US Constitution – was a phrase which itself would have been literally unthinkable in an earlier era. In France, the king was officially the only legitimate political actor and the people as a whole were excluded from politics. In addition, the power of the aristocracy and the church remained strong, above all in the countryside where they were the largest landowners. In the revolution of 1789, the *old regime* was overthrown and with it the entire social order. The French nation was from now on to be governed by the people, the nation, and in accordance with the principles of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* – liberty, equality and brotherhood.

Already in 1792, confrontation began between the revolutionary French nation and the kings of the rest of Europe. The wars were to go on for close to 25 years, most ferociously during the Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century named after the French general, Napoleon Bonaparte, who made himself emperor of France. In contrast to the kings of the old regimes, the revolutionary French government could rely on the whole people to make contributions to the war due to the power of patriotism. This allowed first the revolutionaries, and later Napoleon, to create a formidable fighting machine which set about conquering Europe. Germany was quickly overrun and its sudden and complete defeat was a source of considerable embarrassment to all Germans. The Holy Roman Empire, by now in tatters, was finally dissolved in 1806 in the wake of Napoleon's conquest. Yet, since there was no German state around which prospective nationalists could rally, the initial response was formulated in cultural rather than in military terms. Nationalist sentiment focused on the German language, German traditions and a shared sense of history. Before long a strong German nation began looking around for a unified German state. The goal was eventually achieved in 1871, after Germany – appropriately enough, perhaps – had defeated France in a war.

The Congress of Vienna of 1815, where a settlement was reached at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, was supposed to have returned Europe to its pre-revolutionary ways. Yet, nationalist sentiments were growing across the continent and they constantly threatened to undermine the settlement. All over Europe national communities demanded to be included into the politics of their respective countries. Nationalism in the first part of the nineteenth century was a liberal sentiment concerning self-determination – the right of a people to determine its own fate. This programme had far-reaching implications for the way politics was organised domestically, but it also had

profound ramifications for international politics. Most obviously, the idea of self-determination undermined the political legitimacy of Europe's empires. If all the different peoples that these empires contained gained the right to determine their own fates, the map of Europe would have to be radically redrawn. In 1848 this prospect seemed to become a reality as nationalist uprisings quickly spread across the continent. Everywhere the people demanded the right to rule themselves.

Although the nationalist revolutions of 1848 were defeated by the political establishment, the sentiments themselves were impossible to control. Across Europe an increasingly prosperous middle-class demanded inclusion in the political system and their demands were increasingly expressed through the language of nationalism. The Finns wanted an independent Finland; the Bulgarians an independent Bulgaria; the Serbs an independent Serbia, and so on. In 1861 Italy too – long divided into separate city-states and dominated by the Church – became a unified country and an independent nation. Yet it was only with the conclusion of the First World War in 1918 that self-determination was acknowledged as a right. After the First World War most people in Europe formed their own nation-states.

As a result of the nationalist revolutions, the European international system became for the first time truly 'inter-national'. That is, while the Westphalian system concerned relations between states, world affairs in the nineteenth century increasingly came to concern relations between nation-states. In fact, the word 'international' itself was coined only in 1783, by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham. In most respects, however, the inter-national system continued to operate in much the same fashion as the Westphalian inter-state system. Nation-states claimed the same right to sovereignty which meant that they were formally equal to each other. Together, they interacted in an anarchical system in which power was decentralised and wars were a constant threat. Yet, the addition of the nation changed the nature of the interaction in crucial ways. For one thing, leaders who ruled their countries without at least the tacit support of their national communities were increasingly seen as illegitimate. This also meant that newly created nation-states such as Italy and Germany were automatically regarded as legitimate members of the European community of nations. They were legitimate since the people, in theory at least, were in charge.

There were also new hopes for world peace. While kings wage war for the sake of glory or personal gain, a people is believed to be more attuned to the aspirations of another people. Inspired by such hopes, liberal philosophers devised plans for how a 'perpetual peace' could be established. For some considerable time, these assumptions seemed quite feasible. The nineteenth

century – or, more accurately, the period from 1815 to 1914 – was indeed an uncharacteristically peaceful period in European history. At the time, great hopes were associated with the increase in trade. As Adam Smith pointed out in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), a nation is rich not because it has a lot of natural resources but because it has the capacity to manufacture things that others want. In order to capitalise on this capacity, you need to trade and the more you trade the wealthier you are likely to become. Once the quest for profits and market shares has become more important than the quest for a neighbouring state's territory, world peace would naturally follow. In a world in which everyone is busy trading with each other, no one can afford to go to war.

By the twentieth century most of these liberal hopes were dashed. As the First World War demonstrated, nation-states could be as violent as the early-modern states. In fact, nation-states were far more lethal, not least since they were able to involve their entire population in the war effort together with the entirety of its shared resources. The peaceful quest for profits and market shares had not replaced the anxious quest for security or the aggressive quest for pre-eminence. In the Second World War, the industrial might of the world's most developed nations was employed for military ends with aerial bombardments of civilian populations, including the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan. Between 1939 and 1945 over 60 million people were killed – around 2.5 per cent of the world's population. This figure included the six million Jews exterminated by Germany in the Holocaust, which was one of the worst genocides in recorded history. After the Second World War, the military competition continued between the United States and the Soviet Union. This was known as a 'cold war' since the two superpowers never engaged each other in direct warfare, but they fought several wars by proxy such as those in Korea and Vietnam.

The Europeans and the rest of the world

Most of what happened in Europe before the nineteenth century was of great concern to the Europeans but of only marginal relevance to people elsewhere. Europe certainly had a significant impact on the Americas, North and South. However, it had far less impact on Asia and relations with Africa were largely restricted to a few trading ports. The large, rich and powerful empires of East Asia were organised quite differently than the European states, and international politics followed different principles. The same can be said for other parts of the world such as the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world. And yet, it was the European model of statehood and the European way of organising international relations that eventually came to organise all of world politics.

As previously mentioned, trade was an important source of revenue for states in early modern Europe, and no trade was more lucrative than the trade with East Asia. Europeans had developed a taste for East Asian goods already in the Middle Ages – for spices above all, but also for silk and other exotic commodities. During the Mongol empire, 1206–1368, much of the vast stretch of the Eurasian landmass was unified under one set of rulers and it was easy to obtain goods via the great caravan routes which criss-crossed Asia. When the Mongol Empire fell, overland trade became more insecure and the Europeans began looking for ways to get to East Asia by sea. It was when Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope, at the southernmost tip of Africa, in 1497 that the Europeans for the first time discovered a direct way to travel by sea to East Asia. The Portuguese took the lead in this trade, but they were soon replaced by the Dutch, and above all, by the Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602. All over Europe similar trading companies were soon established and they were all granted monopolies on the highly profitable East Asian trade. These monopolies were sold to the highest bidder, and for European kings this was an easy and quick way to raise revenue.

The Europeans who came back from travels in East Asia were amazed at the wondrous things they had seen. East Asian kings, they reported, were far richer and more powerful than European rulers. Europe seemed a provincial backwater compared to the centres of civilisation they had stumbled upon. From an East Asian point of view, however, the Europeans were nothing but a small contingent of traders who docked at a few ports, conducted their trade, and then left. Yet, the increase in trade which the opening of new trade routes produced was nevertheless important to the countries of East Asia. The Europeans paid for their goods in silver – often mined at Potosí, an enormous mine in today's Bolivia – and this inflow of precious metal helped spur inter-Asian trade. In order to facilitate commerce, various European trading companies were given the right to establish small trading posts. The Portuguese established outposts in Goa in India, Macau in China, East Timor and Malacca in today's Malaysia; while the Dutch founded Batavia, a trading post on the island of Java in today's Indonesia.

In the Americas, the Europeans were far more ruthless. The Spanish conquered the Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in Peru and gradually took over the bulk of the continent. In North America the English established themselves, together with the Dutch and the French. The European invasion was associated with widespread genocide. In South America many natives died as a result of being overworked in mines and plantations and in North America the European settlers made outright war on the natives. Yet in both North and South America the largest number of natives died through exposure to European diseases such as the measles. Africa, meanwhile,

remained largely unknown to the Europeans.

It was only in the nineteenth century that relations between Europe and the rest of the world were irrevocably transformed. The reason is above all to be found in economic changes taking place in Europe itself. At the end of the eighteenth century, new ways of manufacturing goods were invented which made use of machines powered by steam, and later by electricity, which made it possible to engage in large-scale factory production. As a result of this so called 'industrial revolution', the Europeans could produce many more things and do it far more efficiently. As cheap, mass-produced goods flooded European markets, the Europeans began looking for new markets overseas. They also needed raw material for their factories, which in many cases only could be found outside of Europe. These economic imperatives meant that the Europeans took a renewed interest in world trade. This time it was the British who took the lead. It was in Britain that the industrial revolution had started and the British, an island nation with a long history of international commerce, had a navy second to none. Before long they had established commercial outposts from Canada to South Africa and Australia, but it was India that became the most important colony. The commercial outposts and colonial settlements soon grew in size as the British sought to protect their economic investments by means of military force.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, other European countries joined in this scramble for colonies, not least in Africa. Colonial possessions became a symbol of 'great power' status, and the new European nation-states often proved themselves to be very aggressive colonisers. France added West Africa and Indochina to its growing empire, and the Germans and Italians also joined the race once their respective countries were unified. This explains how, by the time of the First World War in 1914, most parts of the world were in European hands. There were some exceptions to this rule – China, Japan, Siam, Persia, Ethiopia and Nepal, among others – but even in these ostensibly independent countries the Europeans had a strong presence.

But this was not how the European state and the European way of organising international relations came to spread to the rest of the world, at least not directly. After all, a colonised country is the very opposite of a sovereign state; the colonised peoples had no nation-states and enjoyed no self-determination. It was instead through the process of liberating themselves from the colonisers that the European models were copied. Since the Europeans only would grant sovereignty to states that were similar to their own, the only way to become independent was to become independent on European terms. To create such Europe-like states was thus the project in which all non-European political leaders engaged. Once they finally made

themselves independent in the decades after the Second World War, as an international climate of decolonisation took hold, all new states had a familiar form. They had their respective territories and fortified borders; their own capitals, armies, foreign ministries, flags, national anthems and all the other paraphernalia of European statehood. Whether there were alternative, non-European, ways of organising a state and its foreign relations was never discussed. Whether it made sense for the newly independent states to try to live up to European ideals was never discussed either. This, briefly, is how the modern world was made.

Conclusion

In this chapter we focused on Europe since contemporary international politics, for good and for bad, was shaped by Europeans and by non-Europeans copying European examples. This is a story of how the state emerged as a sovereign actor in the late Middle Ages by simultaneously rejecting the traditional claims made by universal and local institutions. It is a story of how the state went on to strengthen its power by means of bureaucracies and armies. European states were always competing with each other, and while the military competition had disastrous effects in terms of human suffering, the economic competition that took place was a spur to development and social change. In the course of the nineteenth century, the state was transformed into a nation-state in which, in theory at least, the people as a whole were in charge. There were great hopes that nation-states would be more peaceful in their relations with one another, but these hopes were soon dashed. Nation-states were ferocious colonisers and in the twentieth century the world as a whole suffered through two devastating world wars and came to the brink of nuclear Armageddon during the Cold War. In the twenty-first century there are once again hopes for a better future, but as long as the European state-system (now the international system) lasts a more enduring peace is unlikely.