The Imperial Discipline

The Imperial Discipline

Race and the Founding of International Relations

Alexander E. Davis, Vineet Thakur
and Peter Vale

PLUTO PRESS

First published 2020 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4060 9 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 4062 3 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0659 8 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0661 1 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0660 4 EPUB eBook

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Contents

Introduction: Race, Empire and the Founding of International Relations

At the end of a long and busy day in the frenetic weeks of activity leading up to signing of the Treaty of Versailles, 33 men gathered in the Paris' Hotel Majestic on 30 May 1919.[1] While the bare bones of the League of Nations (LoN) were being thrashed out and debated in every corner of the city, this gathering of men was invited by a British delegate, Lionel Curtis (1872–1955), to discuss an institution quite different from the League. Focusing solely on an inter-state institution like the League, Curtis reasoned, was no guarantee of peace. The text on pages of treaties was often an unreliable barometer of the state of the world. The mind of the public, not the ink on the pages, shaped the future. Hence, he argued, efforts towards peace would eventually have to be directed towards shaping the minds of the public.

Attending this meeting were members of the American and British delegations. The meeting, presided over by General Tasker H. Bliss (1853–1930), American Plenipotentiary to the Peace Conference, was presented with a memorandum, co-written by Curtis and his one-time student at Oxford but now secretary of the LoN Commission, W.H. Shepardson. The memorandum proposed setting up a joint Institute of International Affairs with a branch each in Britain and America. It argued that the interest of the international society at large ought to become the primary factor in international affairs, an interest that required thinking beyond just the nation or the state. As such, universal interest subsumed and surpassed national interest, and in that spirit the memorandum urged that a joint institute with branches across the Atlantic would demonstrate the possibility of embodying such thinking in concrete institutions.

Curtis had been asked to become part of the British delegation by Robert Cecil, the chief of the LoN section of the British delegation. He was selected because he had published an article titled 'Windows of Freedom' in the journal *The Round Table*, where he had argued that the prospective LoN must ultimately strive for a world government, and suggested that the British Commonwealth could provide a model. Curtis was no arm-chair academic. In the aftermath of the South African War, he had been recruited by Alfred Milner, the High Commissioner to South Africa, as one of a

group of youngsters brought to the-then Transvaal to bring administrative efficiency. In 1907, Curtis, who later became one of the central pillars of this group called 'Milner's Kindergarten', made the case for a federated South Africa in a document titled 'Selborne Memorandum'. For the next two and a half years, along with his Kindergarten group, Curtis devoted his energies towards propagandising the need for a unified state in South Africa through publications and 'Closer Union' societies. When the Union of South Africa was finally declared in 1910, the Kindergarten took credit, and going further, made plans to create a federated global empire. The organisation, The Round Table, of which both Curtis and Cecil, as well as several of those present in this meeting were part, was established in 1910 with the purpose of finding a scheme for the organic union of the British empire. Before, and to some extent during, the war, the Round Table had carried out propaganda for a larger federated organisation of the British empire, which Curtis had notched up further with his proposals for a world government. In this period, Curtis had served as the roving ambassador of the Round Table movement.

Almost a year after the meetings in Paris and Versailles, on 5 July 1920, when said institute was inaugurated, it was reduced to only one leg. After waiting for the Americans for a considerable period, the British Committee went ahead on its own. The institute was now called the British Institute for International Affairs. Three years later, in 1923, through a generous grant from a Canadian benefactor, Colonel R.W. Leonard (1860–1930), the institute moved to a Georgian house at 10 James Square whose past occupants included three former British prime ministers. It was named Chatham House, after the first of those prime ministerial occupants. In 1926, the institute received a Royal Charter, and became the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA). Although the American Committee had finally been able to start the Council for Foreign Relations, the idea for a joint institute was by then dropped. However, the two institutes have shared a close relationship ever since. On 1 January 1928, the first Chatham House affiliated institute was opened in Canada, followed closely by institutes in Australia (February 1933), South Africa (May 1934), New Zealand (July 1934) and India (March 1936). A branch of Chatham House was opened in Newfoundland in April 1936.

These institutions may well be very familiar to those engaged in the study of international relations (IR). Considerably fewer IR students and scholars would be familiar with the imperial and world-making purposes of their founders. As we explore the stories of origins and developments of each of these institutes, we want to use this introduction to explore the

linkages between knowledge production and world-making that came to define the mandate of these institutes of international affairs. In particular, we will string our subsequent discussion through three key themes which are central to this kind of knowledge production: understanding of the 'scientific method'; tracing the development of an epistemic community which is sympathetic to such ideas of knowledge; and race-thinking – which we argue was the central concern of world-making in this period.

The centenary of the institutional 'birth' of IR took place in 2019. The occasion prompted celebration, reflection and navel gazing about what the discipline had accomplished (if anything) since its foundation. The idea of 2019 as IR's centenary is ultimately grounded in the idea that the discipline was founded at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and Chatham House, two institutional initiatives that began in 1919. A disciplinary lore has formed around this story – that IR was inspired by a demand for the 'scientific study of international politics' as a project for global peace after the horrors or World War I (WWI). We call this lore the Aberystwyth narrative: the tale IR tells itself about its origins, in which it was begun by well-meaning liberal thinkers who hoped to prevent the nightmare of global conflict from repeating. Following this, we are told, was the 'great debate' between realists and idealists, over whether we should analyse the world as it is or how we would like it to be.

In discussing the scienticisiation of political philosophy, Peter Lassman has suggested that 'if a social science were possible then ... politics in its normal sense would become unnecessary'.[2] The academic as the knower of truth and laws authors the future, while politics and politicians follow. To redirect a claim about philosophers to politicians, made by Peter Lasslet in 1956, the horrors of war had made politics too serious a task to be left to politicians.[3] Consequently, the 'science' of the political was meant to elevate the academic over the politician – the former charted the future, while the latter dabbled in the present. Just as sociology was driven by the desire to achieve 'positive polity',[4] IR was designed as an intellectual project for realising 'world peace'. The nature of this world peace, however, was not nearly as idyllic as the Aberystwyth narrative would have us believe. Rather, we argue here that the origins of IR lie far more in imperial debates about race and racial hierarchies, and the structure of empire. The world peace in question, then, was to be a permanent imperial control under the British empire. Within this, racial categorisations were central to the thinking of interwar IR.

In this book we argue that the 'science' of studying international politics, the method of doing it, and the implacable belief that knowledge created,

not just explained, reality came from initiatives undertaken by the group of people who were part of a society called 'The Round Table', and that these initiatives were key to the founding of IR. The Round Table was founded in September 1909. It was based on the Closer Union Societies formed a year previously in South Africa. *The Round Table*, the first journal of IR started in 1910, was the journal of the Round Table movement and was modelled on a journal started in South Africa two years previously, *The State*. Alfred Zimmern (1879–1957), Lionel Curtis and Philip Kerr (1882–1940) – the first IR Chair at Aberystwyth, the founder of Chatham House, and the first editor of the journal *Round Table*, respectively – were close academic collaborators but also active participants of the Round Table movement.

In the last few decades, an increasing number of scholars have turned their critical eye on the field's history,[5] challenging the standard narrative of IR's origins.[6] Highlighting the linkages between imperialism and the origins of IR, they have dismissed the 'great debates' narrative of the discipline which argues that IR begins with the efforts of the 'idealists' to 'scientifically study' international affairs in the aftermath of WWI. Instead, they argue that the 'birth of the discipline' not only precedes WWI, but also that it emerged out of discussions about race and empire, not peace and war.[7]

Despite this re-writing of the discipline's history, we remain stuck with a sense that IR began in the US and the UK: the great imperial centres of the time. As this re-writing has taken place, a number of scholars have sought to uncover non-Western ways of thinking about IR, so as to draw them in to the discipline to challenge eurocentrism.[8] For such efforts to be fully realised, however, we need to understand the disciplinary history of IR, and how it thought about coloniser and colonised. If the origins of IR are imperial, though, surely to complete our understanding of them we need to think beyond the power centres of empire, and consider ideas which emerged from the colonies and the colonised. IR does not have one single history. As Robert Vitalis has suggested, it is a 'mongrel' discipline, drawing on elements from politics, philosophy and colonial anthropology, to create a new discipline.[9] It has a great plurality of origin stories across the world. As such, we do not aim to fully dispel the Aberystwyth narrative. It is accurate in so far as Chatham House and the Aberystwyth School were founded in 1919. Rather, we seek to re-write its context and content, while adding more stories to IR's origins from other geographic and social contexts. The addition of these stories can only deepen and add complexity to our understanding of the discipline of IR, and the world it seeks to explain.

IR is often thought of, following Stanley Hoffman's famous formulation, as an 'American social science'.[10] This speaks to a US-centrism which has

been prevalent within much of the discipline's thought. The discipline's largest academic organisation, which hosts its flagship annual conference, the International Studies Association, rarely ventures outside of the continental US. When it does, it only goes as far as Toronto and Hawaii. Much of the critical work on IR's disciplinary history has likewise centred on the US story. We are mostly appreciative of this work, and as such, the US is not an explicit case study in the book. This is partly because we feel the US story has been covered excellently elsewhere.[11] Aside from Vitalis, Jessica Blatt has looked at race in the making of American political science, the founding of the *Journal of Race Development*, which was a predecessor journal to *Foreign Affairs*.[12] Perry Anderson has shown the ways in which American foreign policy thinkers have sought imperial control throughout US international history.[13] In our case, however, taking the emphasis off the US experience is also for institutional reasons. The Round Table were not directly responsible for the foundation of IR in the US in the way that they were around the British empire. Throughout, we seek to document the ways in which US IR and the British imperial IR were connected and influenced one another.[14] The Round Table and its key thinkers all spent time in the US, and were absorbed in particular with its racial politics. As such, our story will engage with that of the US, and it will contextualise the US story by placing it in a transnational context. But when we consider IR's development outside of the US, the analogy of IR as a mongrel becomes even more appropriate. IR developed in various cultural and imperial contexts simultaneously and transnationally. To decolonise the field, then, and the knowledge it produces, we must understand these plural histories and take the discipline's history out of the hands of the imperial centres.

We intervene by revealing the centrality of the empire's frontiers to the emergence of IR and by writing its history in new contexts. We take up Long and Schmidt's challenge to get our 'hands dirty by reading texts, journals, memoirs, and other sources that have been standing dormant on library shelves'.[15] We study the unexplored archives of IR outside of its imperial centres to argue that, ever since its foundation, IR has concealed an agenda of transforming the 'Empire' into the 'International'.[16] Within this, debates about race and hierarchy were crucial. This can be seen, for example, in discussions about imperial futures that took place in the mid-1800s, such as the idea of 'Greater Britain'. Precisely who is inside and who is outside of 'Greater Britain' was itself always a murky question. This reveals to us some of the racial ideas that were part of the discipline's founding, the UK and its settler colonies almost always included, but colonies such as India and South Africa only occasionally considered. This was the case with the

institutes examined here, with India in particular on the margins of their project. The Round Table took inspiration from these ideas and this discursive context. The foundational anxiety of IR in this context, then, was not so much the creation of 'world peace', but the successful maintenance of Britain's empire. This archival excavation helps us locate the origins of the discipline at the interstices of the three levels of imperial being – empire, state and society – and the developing conceptions of sovereignty in the Edwardian era.

This did not just happen in national, geocultural contexts, although these can be useful units of analysis. We argue that IR began in a fundamentally transnational fashion: it developed around the British empire by a network of committed imperialists seeking to develop a new 'objective' perspective on international affairs. This group – a thought collective, in the terms of Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe[17] – developed IR's original methodology, its first journal and its first institutes. Led by Lionel Curtis, the Round Table created an academic discipline with a political and imperial goal in mind. In this book, we chart the story of IR's emergence through the British Dominions and in India. We argue that Anglo-American IR did not spring forth out of nowhere in Aberystwyth or in the US. Rather, it developed at least in part through the periphery's interactions with the imperial centre. The development of ideas in distant frontiers was central, beginning with the politics of race and the process of state-making in South Africa. This means that, rather than the imperial centres of Washington and London, we focus on the far-flung British settler colonies and on late colonial India. IR, then, developed at least in part by interaction and travel between the empire's capital and its edges. In these diverse geographical locations, IR was created with an imperial mission in mind: the binding of the empire together through a shared outlook on world events.

None of this is to say that these are the only contexts or the only histories that matter, or that the US and UK centred stories are wrong or ahistorical. Rather, central to the premise of the book is that the inclusion of more diverse and plural origin stories of IR is essential in decolonising the discipline.

In this book, we take an archival journey into the founding of the Round Table, the movement as well as its journal, and its subsequent institutions. We trace the emergence of ideas and methods through two of this collective's initiatives. We begin with the formation of the South African Union (1906–1910) and follow this with its global iteration through Curtis' Dominion tour from September 1909 to March 1911, on which they sought to take forward their method of study. It is this tour that we argue was for-

mative for IR. Following this, we look at the ideas and institutions produced by the various national contexts in which this mission and method were embedded: Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and India. This collective developed a stream of ideas about Empire and the International, but also about questions of scientific methodology and its relationship to shaping the future. In this formative period, the 'scientific study' was connected not so much to creation of world peace (though this was desired), but fostering greater connections between the imperial centre and the Dominions. The goal was not so much world peace as it was fostering an 'organic unity' that would bind Britain and the settler colonies together.

This historical tale also allows us to thrash out another of the central concerns of the 'founding fathers' of academic IR – the issue of race. The more one reads interwar 'idealist' texts, the more the centrality of race and empire in the worldviews of British thinkers becomes clear.[18] However, IR's compulsive framing of notions such as world peace and world state around the idealist/realist binary ignores their obvious racial and imperial overtones.

HISTORY, THEORY, MEMORY: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Long and Schmidt noted over a decade ago that 'Disciplinary history is rarely a neutral or impartial undertaking. Rather, it is often closely tied to intellectual struggles to determine and legitimate the contemporary identity of the field.'[19] We would take this slightly further: understanding and contesting the history of the discipline cannot be neutral. Indeed, if it were not tied to some theoretical concern or some debate, what would be the purpose of writing such a history? These histories are inexorably tied to dictating the identity of the field and the terrain it covers. Whether or not we begin with anarchy or, as Vitalis suggests we should in his recent disciplinary history, with empire, depends on how one sees the history of the discipline.[20]

To that end, some excellent disciplinary histories have been produced in the past few years that have begun to reshape the IR memory-bank, which have begun to emphasise imperialism, race and hierarchy as foundational concerns.[21]

And yet, these histories, in their own paradoxical way, focus primarily on the US and Europe. This is not meant as a criticism, and not to suggest the works are themselves Eurocentric. Vitalis focuses on America, but produces an outstanding documentation of an African-American school of thought that resisted the dominant white world order. One criticism that Hobson

has addressed of his work is that it could be conceived of as Eurocentric as it does not go into detail into the non-Western origins of some of the thought he discusses.[22] Our goal here, however, is merely to point out that the focus of these histories still lies on the US and European origins of IR. This implicitly shapes the identity of the field. Even though they are critical, and they bring race, imperialism and hierarchy to the fore, they are not enough in and of themselves to decentre the discipline's focus on Europe. Disciplinary histories of course struggle to take in the entirety of the history of a discipline across different global/national/local scales, and so it is relatively common for a disciplinary history to be limited to a particular geographically focused area. As we show here, however, IR's history was ultimately not based just in Europe and/or America, but developed in a transnationally networked fashion, with particular nodes operating in localised contexts.

That the discipline has forgotten the origins that we uncover here is an example of its deep and enduring Eurocentrism. In this sense, it is not just the history of ideas or the history of events in IR which shape the way we think, but the way in which we remember them. The way in which we remember the field today tends to emphasise IR as developed simultaneously as a Western set of ideas, focused on two particular states: the US and the UK. Just as writing national history constructs national identities and reflects contemporary political concerns, writing a disciplinary history constructs the identity of a discipline. If we write the history of the discipline through a Eurocentric model, or as emerging solely from the 'West', even if it is to critique these models, we still fail to look at the racial and colonial origins of IR as it developed elsewhere. The colonial origins of IR outside of the imperial metropoles, and the influences of the imperial frontier on their thought, however, were important in the global development of the discipline. IR was transnational and colonial at its origins. This history, then, is another reason why Eurocentrism in IR has been so difficult to shift, because non-Western voices were excluded from the beginning as a central concern of the project.

As will be seen throughout the following chapters, concepts such as race, racism, empire, hierarchy, culture, civilisation were central to the foundation of IR. At the same time, the imperial frontier was also central, not just the great imperial powers of the US and the UK. Contemporary IR theories often avoid these concepts. Despite this forgetting, these concepts have become targets for analysis in the past few years. Hierarchy has been analysed from various theoretical perspectives. These include postcolonial, constructivist, Marxist and even English School approaches. Race and

racism have become areas of critique and interest,[23] despite what Sankaran Krishna called in 1999 a 'wilful amnesia' and a systematic politics of forgetting.[24] Culture and civilisation, as exemplified by Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis, have longer and more obvious histories within IR, but are often handled in a manner which scholars attentive to race and racism have criticised. Indeed, as we will see, colonial, racialised, essentialist and hierarchical ideas of culture and civilisation were central to the Round Table's original project.

When we are told that the study of IR, and its practice, are predicated on anarchy, on the state system, that it began with Westphalia and that colonial societies were outside of it, we erase imperialism from our analysis. When we remember IR as we know it as beginning with the Peace of Westphalia, we limit it to Europe and America, and dismiss the majority of peoples from engaging in (and with) its study. This is particularly troubling when we remember that the international and its affairs were themselves the site of colonial domination and expansion. What is at stake, then, is the decolonisation of IR's knowledge production.

IR as a discipline, as argued by Navnita Behera, produces and privileges particular kinds of knowledge through its universal claims and key concepts of borders, sovereignty, anarchy and the state.[25] This focus needs to be replaced by 'diverse notions and understandings, informed by varied geo-cultural epistemologies derived from across the globe … and develop plural traditions depending on the local context [and] histories'.[26] In order to accomplish this goal, we need to flood IR with new stories of origin, which go beyond the discipline's origins in the US and the UK. As only two of our stories (those of South Africa and India) come from the Global South – our South African story is certainly the whitest of all – we do not claim to be re-writing the discipline in quite this manner. Rather, we seek to tell a limited number of new stories of IR's origins from around the British empire, while calling on more diverse scholars from different backgrounds to add to these stories from other contexts.

It is worth pausing here to note that this knowledge production is not just to do with race, empire and hierarchy, but also with gender. With the possible, if unlikely, exception of some of the anonymous articles in *The Round Table*, the authors examined here are overwhelmingly white and male. Patricia Owens has rightly pointed out that women have played important roles in international thought, but that their influences have been obscured or even purposefully erased.[27] Here, we present an institutional history of a deeply patriarchal organisation. Our focus is on the explicit manifestations of racial thought within that organisation. Women's exclu-

sion from the Round Table, and from this form of international thought, was so germane to its purpose as to not have been often commented upon. We do not seek to present our story of disciplinary origins as the sole story. Rather, we urge that more stories of origin are told. Within this, women's role in the history of international thought and IR is the untold story most urgently in need of telling.[28]

The circulation and dispersion of ideas around the empire led to distinct traditions of IR in each of the societies to which it travelled. These traditions of thought still exist today. They reflect the contemporary strategic culture of these societies. Australian IR remains often dedicated to the study of Asia. Anti-colonial thought from India is still common, though it emerged from foreign policy elites who might have neglected India's own social hierarchies and maintained forms of colonial governance. Today, though, Indian think tanks seeking political influence produce a great deal of analysis which celebrates the Indian state, its inherent historical unity and the eternal nature of its borders. IR works produced by mainstream think tanks are seldom theoretically incisive, nor even concretely historical. Much of the policy end of Indian IR treats its university counterparts with active disdain.[29] IR in New Zealand and Canada remain more distinctly liberal internationalist, and often celebrate the ability of these states to 'punch above their weight'. In South Africa, as we will show, 'race' was the core concern of early institutions. For anyone conversant with the history of South Africa this is not startling, but what indeed is startling is that during apartheid, the country's sole IR institute managed to evade race completely in the name of impartiality. For all the conflicts – the staple of IR – that South Africa generated in the second half of the twentieth century, it was obvious that their resolution would have to go through the race question even if the local IR community kept the issue at arm's length.

Although we suggest that imperialism was the key foundational concern of IR, and that it was the abiding ideology of the Round Table, this is not to argue that it was solely imperialistic. There are occasional moments of resistance which appear throughout this history. As Vitalis identifies a black power politics strand of resistance through the Howard School in America, there are important moments of resistance to imperial forms of IR that permeate our narrative here. In India, those critical of India's alignment with the colonial worldview opposed the Indian Institute for International Affairs (IIIA), leading to the formation of the Indian Council on World Affairs (ICWA). This rival institute was then able to host the Asian Relations Conference of 1947, which gave voice to anti-colonial concerns.