

Chapter 1

Theory from History: Studying IR

What is the point of studying international relations? There are at least two good responses to that question. The first response is practical: almost everybody in the world at the present time is affected, one way or another, to a greater or lesser extent, by the international system. Many people probably are not aware of the effect the international system has upon their lives. If they were aware they would see why it is important, as a practical matter, to know something about international relations. The second response is intellectual: international relations is a very important feature of political life, both at the present time and historically. If we are trying to be political scientists we are bound to be interested in knowing how the international system works and why it works the way it does. If we are trying to be historians we are likewise interested in knowing the history of international relations: where and when the state system emerged and how it has evolved over time. It is of course the various intellectual responses to the question posed at the beginning that this book is mainly about.

International relations is a historical subject before it is a theoretical subject. The dissolution of Medieval Europe, and in particular the institutions associated with the Holy Roman Emperor and the Papacy, is the usual historical background for understanding the emergence of the state system. Speaking very generally, this was a fundamental transformation of political life, from an old world institutionalised in terms of single Christian empire to a new world institutionalised in terms of a system or society of states. One of the points at which there is extensive agreement by IR scholars is this way of understanding the origins of modern states and the state system. One of the most important areas of historical research in IR focuses on this fundamental change from the medieval world of theocracy to the modern world of states. There are a number of useful websites for researching this important historical episode at the background of IR.

A related development is the emergence of a world economy that followed closely on the heels of modern state system, mainly as a result of technical innovations that enabled Europeans to project military and commercial power far beyond Europe and right around the world. That eventually led to the establishment of European empires in different parts of the world and the creation of a world economy.

Assignments

1. *Repudiating papal or imperial supremacy and asserting religious and political independence.* Check the online resources for links on the history of the state system, and look for various historical texts and statements that reveal that change. Here are three examples that could be researched with that aim in mind: English King Henry VIII's rejection of papal supremacy in the 1530s; Martin Luther's early sixteenth century defence of state sovereignty by his assertion that Christians must obey their local rulers; English Queen Elizabeth I's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588; the wars of secession fought by the Dutch against Spain.

2. *Recognizing the supremacy of state sovereignty and of the corresponding sovereign state system.* Check the online resources for links on the history of the state system, and look for various historical texts related to the Peace of Westphalia.

3. *Asserting the economic and political imperialism of European powers in the Americas, Asia, the Middle-East and Africa.* Check the online resources for links on the economic penetration and control of these parts of the world by modern European states, beginning in the sixteenth century.