

## Chapter 5

# Theory from Practice: An International Society Approach to IR

How should we go about studying real-world events or activities from an International Society perspective?

From studying Chapter 5, we have a notion of how International Society scholars look at the world, and how they think about international relations. They take what is basically a historical and institutional view of world politics. They notice both conflict and cooperation, both system and society, both order and justice in the relations of states. They try to understand the difference between an international system and an international society, and the ways in which an international system may be transformed into an international society, and the reverse. They notice the institutional dimension of world affairs, such as diplomatic practices, treaty relations, and international organizations. But they also do not fail to notice that war is a recurring feature of international relations, and that some wars can bring international society almost to an end. They also notice, however, that the end of wars are often marked by an attempt to rebuild international society on the foundations of an international peace settlement written into a treaty, such as the United Nations Charter which followed the Second World War (1939-45), or the Dayton Accords which marked an end to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-95).

International society scholars also notice that normative questions are involved in international relations, including the ethics of war and peace. They see peace as a fundamental value of international relations. But they also see limits in how far it is possible to establish peace on a long-term basis. They see war as a last resort in conflicts between militarily equipped independent states. They recognize the significance of sovereign states, but they also acknowledge the importance of human rights. They see limits to the possibility of building international justice. They see a basic difference between international politics and domestic politics: justice is more likely to be established in domestic politics than in international politics. In short, they try to give a balanced view of IR, somewhere between that of Realism, on the one hand, and Liberalism, on the other hand. They are not as pessimistic as realists, but they equally are not as optimistic as liberals: in short, they are sceptics but not cynics. Research questions typically emerge from viewing international events and episodes from this perspective. Two examples are the geographical expansion of international society involved in European decolonisation, and armed humanitarian intervention in sovereign states after the Cold War.

## Assignments

1. Check the online resources for links on European imperialism and look for various texts and statements that indicate at least two important reasons why European powers decolonised.
2. Check the online resources for links on armed humanitarian intervention, for example in Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, East Timor, or Libya. Organize the texts you find on one or more of these cases and try to answer the question:

how far do they indicate the existence of an international society versus the existence of merely an international system?