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Contribution to a Critical Exchange on David Armitage's *Foundations of Modern International Thought, Contemporary Political Theory* 13 (4) 2014: 387-92. ISSN 1470-8914/1476-9336.

Beyond Traditions in International Thought

Foundations of Modern International Thought
By David Armitage
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Foundations of Modern International Thought brings together a series of David Armitage's previously published essays. In the Introduction to the text, Armitage quotes Hugh Trevor-Roper's 'classical apologia' for sets of collected essays, that they 'receive an underlying unity from the philosophy of the writer' (p. 2). More broadly, he justifies his particular collection as a contribution to the developing field of international intellectual history. In this respect, he claims, they form the third part of a trilogy with his previous works *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (2000) and *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007). However, unlike the previously published texts, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* is not a systematic engagement with specific concepts within the history of international thought. It is an eclectic collection of essays, which engages with several different concepts, including the concepts of 'global' 'transnational' and 'international' themselves, as well as with the work of specific thinkers, with essays dedicated to the work of Hobbes, Locke, Burke and Bentham. The book is organised into four parts. Part One involves broad-ranging methodological and substantive reflections on international intellectual history. Part Two interrogates the work of Hobbes and Locke as foundational thinkers for modern international thought. Part Three focuses on the contributions of eighteenth century ideas and thinkers. Part Four turns to the international history of Declarations of Independence and begins tracing out the fundamental significance of the American revolution for the origins of contemporary international society and for how we still conceptualise states and international law in theory and in practice. Although some of the essays were already familiar to me, there was also much that I had not read before and I found the book to be full of erudition and insight. All of the essays provide food for thought for those of us working in the broad field of International Relations theory, or those who teach the history of international political thought, as well as for specialist historians of international thought.

Part One focuses on methodological questions that have become much more explicitly central to the history of international thought over the past decade. Of particular interest are Armitage's reflections on the meanings of 'context', if one takes an approach to the history of international thought that is influenced by, but not reducible to, Cambridge School contextualism. Chapter One ends with the intriguing question of how one historicises conceptions of space, and comes to an optimistic conclusion as to the possibilities of producing properly contextual international or global histories: "Here again, the opportunities may be greater than the dangers. Canons of relevance must be defined, routes of active (or at least plausible) transmission mapped and scales of reference calibrated according to contemporaries' conceptions of the

international or the global; with such boundaries in place, it should be feasible to construct meaningful spatial contexts for the ideas we trace across borders and bounded discursive communities." (p. 32) Chapter Two raises the question of whether there is a pre-history of globalisation, and challenges any unitary response by stressing the multiplicity of globalisation's histories and pre-histories. Chapter Three, for me one of the most interesting chapters, traces land-based (elephant) and ocean based (whale) images of empire in the history of international/ global political thought, and the ways in which these images are transmitted and utilised. In this respect, Armitage suggests that Carl Schmitt perceived something central to how we conceptualise world history, with his account of that history as an ongoing battle between land and sea-based powers in *Nomos of the Earth*: "It is possible to go even further than Schmitt to argue that the opposition of land powers and sea power, behemoths and leviathans, elephants and whales, is fundamental both chronologically and ontologically to western historiography." (p.50) In the conclusion to this essay, Armitage suggests that contemporary work in world history that conceives that history in terms of inter-state relations, is working with the legacy of land-based (elephant) conceptions of empire, in contrast to accounts of globalisation, that draw on the legacy of oceanic conceptions of imperial power (whale) as fluid and boundless. The argument of the chapter simultaneously pushes scholars to recognise the historicity (and politics) inherent in the vocabulary available for capturing international and global relations, and suggests deep rhetorical continuities in the history of western thought.

Parts Two and Three of the book include several essays devoted to particular thinkers, including looking at how their work has been previously interpreted in histories of international thought. I found the chapters on Locke and Bentham particularly informative and enlightening, although some of the arguments made in these central parts of the book feel rather dated from the point of view of 2013. One of the themes of the volume as a whole, but particularly of Parts Two and Three, is the critique of International Relations theory and its anachronistic parsing of the history of political thought into three 'traditions'. This is a charge associated particularly strongly with the work of twentieth century English School theorists, such as Wight and Bull, who identified thinkers and ideas from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with so-called 'traditions' of *realism* (stressing anarchic relations between states), *rationalism* (stressing the social character of relations between states) and *revolutionism* (stressing the possibility of the radical transcendence of inter-state relations). Within this three 'traditions' account, direct identifications were made between Hobbes and twentieth century realist thinkers such as Morgenthau, between Grotius and twentieth century English School theory, and between Kant and twentieth century liberalisms. This English School account was accompanied by a particular reading of the history of the relation between international law, natural law and legal positivism, which projected the natural law/ legal positivism distinction back on to a contrast between the accounts of domestic and international law in Grotius and Hobbes. It is now something of a commonplace, largely because of the work of historians of international thought such as Armitage, that these accounts of traditions of international thought and of the history of international law are flawed in many respects. In particular, this is because they rely on a conflation of nineteenth century appropriations of seventeenth century thinkers, such as Grotius and Hobbes, with the ideas of those thinkers themselves. In this context, the debunking message of Armitage's essays on Hobbes and Burke, although well articulated and persuasive,

reads now as somewhat superfluous from the point of view of contemporary history of ideas in International Relations. Although it does remain pertinent to the ways in which many textbooks and syllabuses as still organised within the discipline.

As well as challenging readings of international thought by International Relations theorists of an English School complexion, Armitage also takes on postcolonial readings of the history of international thought in the chapters on Locke. In recent years, International Relations has begun to be influenced by postcolonial histories of European imperialism and its relation to liberalism. In this context, it has been argued that Locke, widely recognised as a crucial thinker for the pre-history of liberal ideas, was also an early imperialist thinker (p. 114). Armitage takes issue with this account of Locke and argues for a more nuanced reading of the meaning of Locke's texts in relation to the conceptual vocabulary he was using and the historical context within which he was writing. Although he acknowledges how Locke's work as a colonial administrator influenced his thought in a variety of respects, Armitage argues that his thought lacks one of the elements that Tully argues is crucial to the meaning of an imperial vision: placing 'the world's peoples in a hierarchical order with Europeans at the top of the scale' (p. 115). In a careful unpacking of Locke's texts, Armitage points out the specificity of Locke's imperial concerns (confined to the Atlantic), the ways in which his ideas shifted over time, and the lack of any such hierarchy of peoples in his mature work. He teases out the way in which Locke acknowledged the equal rationality of people, including Amerindians. According to Locke, who was, as Armitage reminds us, a dyed in the wool empiricist who rejected the Cartesian notion of 'innate ideas', differences in productive capacity between peoples were to do with circumstances, and not innate superiority or inferiority. Armitage goes on to point to how Locke's arguments were later utilised to legitimate imperial hierarchies, but only by reading Locke's arguments about property in ways that essentialised distinctions that Locke himself had considered as contingent. Armitage concludes that although it is reasonable to see Locke as legitimating a particular kind of settler colonialism, the underlying arguments for this were on a par with his justifications of enclosure at home. This means that to classify him as a liberal imperialist (setting aside the anachronism of the use of the term 'liberalism' in this context), is to occlude major differences between seventeenth century and nineteenth century imperialisms and the conceptual vocabularies through which both were understood and legitimated. To identify Locke with thinkers such as Mill is to distort the histories of both liberalism and imperialism.

Armitage's treatments of eighteenth century international thought in Part Three, in Chapters Eight and Nine, again point to problems of anachronism. Chapter Eight explains the anachronism inherent in using concepts of 'identity' and 'nation' to capture collective self-understandings of the state in eighteenth century Britain. It also, interestingly, points to how international law, or the law of nations, increasingly became a reference point in parliamentary debate in the eighteenth century, in particular in the last two decades, paving the way for the recognisably modern distinctions between national and international law that would emerge in the nineteenth century. Chapter Nine again targets the problems with the three 'traditions' approaches to the history of international thought, focusing on Burke's usage of the concept 'reason of state'. As Armitage points out, 'traditions' approaches by contemporary international theorists have struggled to place Burke in any of the available theoretical boxes. Standard interpretations of 'reason of state' in

International Relations linked it to classical realism, which was understood as being characterised by a fundamental distinction between approaches to domestic and to foreign policy, mapped onto another clear distinction between morality and politics. As Armitage shows, this is a misrepresentation of a much more subtle and ambiguous Ciceronian conception of reason of state, developed in the thought of Grotius and Vattel, upon which Burke draws in his arguments about imperialism and the French Revolution. As Armitage trenchantly puts it in the conclusion to the chapter: "Burke's place in the history of international thought should therefore be assimilated more closely to his position in the traditions of political thought, as a standing reproach to procrustean taxonomies and overhasty appropriations." (p. 171) The following chapter, 'Globalising Jeremy Bentham', continues with the theme of contestation and ambiguity over the nature of international law in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But it does so with a focus on Bentham's work and the way in which it married an entirely global vision with a rigorous anti-naturalism. This chapter is interesting for the light that it sheds on a thinker who is rarely acknowledged within canonic accounts of international thought, as well as for its broader insights into the history of evolving conceptualisations of international law in Bentham's lifetime.

In the final part of the volume, Armitage points to the significance for the construction of modern state and inter-state relations of the American revolution and the creation of new states in the Americas in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Chapters Eleven and Twelve make a case for the international legal and political implications of the American Declaration of Independence, including for the success or failure of subsequent Declarations of Independence up to the present day. Armitage situates the meaning of the Declaration in the 'jurisprudential eclecticism' of late eighteenth century understandings of international law. The declaration appeals to both natural and positive conceptions of international law, but it also marks the transition point in which positivist accounts of the law of nations begin to dominate at the expense of naturalism. And, according to Armitage, it represents a decisive shift from a world of empires, in which the meaning of sovereignty is contested, into a world of states, in which the meaning of sovereignty as autonomy and its coupling to the idea of a 'nation' gradually (over a considerable period of time) become the norm (p. 230-31). It is in this section of the volume that its most significant takeaway message is articulated. That is, that the legal and political vocabularies being formulated in the late eighteenth/ early nineteenth centuries in the western hemisphere are decisively important for understanding the development of the contemporary world of nation-states. In this respect, Armitage joins with other recent commentators in International Relations, in seeking to firmly displace the place of Westphalia in the imagined history of international society, and to concentrate instead on the ideological significance of the beginnings of the long nineteenth century outside, as well as inside, of Europe.

To read *Foundations of Modern International Thought* is to read an intellectual historian at the top of his game. Armitage's work is erudite and thought provoking, and although it is rigorously historical, it is not narrowly so. In contrast to some examples of contextual history of ideas, Armitage is willing to make bold and general claims about the ways in which ideas have travelled, and what does or does not matter from the past for contemporary understandings of the international. Many of the essays speak to the broader agendas of International Relations (IR), as well as to the

work of world historians, historical sociologists, globalisation theorists and political theorists. I am not a historian but I found Armitage's work valuable to me as an IR theorist and as a teacher in two respects in particular. Firstly, it was useful to be reminded of the dangers of anachronism and over-simplification in theoretical taxonomies. Even if these dangers are now very widely recognised by scholars in the history of international political thought, they are much less well recognised in textbooks and on syllabuses. Armitage's elegant demolition of the idea that Hobbes could be thought to be any kind of international theorist should make all of us who teach 'canonic' course in the history of international political thought ask ourselves again which thinkers should get onto the syllabus and why. And his insistence on the perils of over-simplification in mainstream and postcolonial theory, is also a useful counter to the perpetual production of categorisations in the world of international theory. Secondly, Armitage's argument for the centrality of developments outside of Europe for the nature of contemporary international relations is extremely powerful and provides a rather different and potentially very fruitful challenge to the eurocentrism of IR than we find in much revisionist work on the myth of Westphalia. In two further respects, however, I find Armitage's account raises certain problems. Firstly, Armitage re-presents rather than resolves or bridges the gap between contemporary theoretical debates in IR and intellectual history. We theorists may recognise the misappropriation of the ideas of dead thinkers in the formulation of the tools of analysis in IR, but it is not quite clear what this implies for our use of those tools. Or indeed what light this casts on the question of whether international or global conceptual vocabularies are most appropriate for making sense of the contemporary world. Secondly, at the same time as promising a new, less Eurocentric, route for thinking about the development of international society, Armitage's analysis nevertheless tends to reinscribe a history of international thought in which certain developments in Anglophone international political thinking in particular, are predominant. There is a danger that the pluralism promised in Armitage's reflections on global pre-history may be subsumed in a new master narrative in which the revolution of 1776 comes to occupy a similar status to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia in the historiography of IR.